

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT

Lord Śiva Saved from Vṛkāsura

This chapter describes how it is that the devotees of Viṣṇu obtain liberation, while the devotees of other deities obtain material opulences.

Lord Viṣṇu possesses all opulences, while Lord Śiva lives in poverty. Yet the devotees of Viṣṇu are generally poverty-stricken, while Śiva's attain abundant wealth. When Mahārāja Parīkṣit asked Śukadeva Gosvāmī to explain this puzzling fact, the sage replied as follows: “Lord Śiva manifests as false ego in three varieties, according to the three modes of nature. From this false ego arise the five physical elements and the other transformations of material nature, totaling sixteen. When a devotee of Lord Śiva worships his manifestation in any of these elements, the devotee obtains all sorts of corresponding enjoyable opulences. But because Lord Śrī Hari is transcendental to the modes of material nature, His devotees also become transcendental.”

At the end of the performance of his Aśvamedha sacrifices, King Yudhiṣṭhira had asked this same question of Lord Kṛṣṇa, who replied, “When I feel special compassion for someone, I gradually deprive him of his wealth. Then the poverty-stricken man's children, wife and other relations all abandon him. When he again tries to acquire wealth in order to win back his family's favor, I mercifully frustrate him so that he becomes disgusted with fruitive work and befriends My devotees. And at that time I bestow upon him My extraordinary grace; then he can become freed from the bondage of material life and attain to the kingdom of God, Vaikuṇṭha.”

Lord Brahmā, Lord Viṣṇu and Lord Śiva can each bestow or withhold favors, but whereas Lord Brahmā and Lord Śiva are satisfied or angered very quickly, Lord Viṣṇu is not. In this regard the Vedic literature relates the following account: Once the demon Vṛka asked Nārada which god was most quickly pleased, and Nārada answered that Lord Śiva was. Thus Vṛkāsura went to the holy place of Kedāranātha and began worshiping Lord Śiva by offering pieces of his own flesh as oblations into the fire. But Śiva did not appear. So Vṛka decided to commit suicide by cutting off his head. Just at the critical moment, Lord Śiva appeared from the sacrificial fire and stopped him, offering the demon whatever boon he chose. Vṛka

said, “May death come to whomever I touch upon the head with my hand.” Lord Śiva was obliged to fulfill this request, and at once the wicked Vṛka tried to test the benediction by putting his hand on the lord’s head. Terrified, Śiva fled for his life, running as far as heaven and the outer limits of the mortal world. Finally the lord reached the planet of Śvetadvīpa, where Lord Viṣṇu resides. Seeing the desperate Śiva from afar, the Lord disguised Himself as a young student and went before Vṛkāśura. In a sweet voice he addressed the demon: “My dear Vṛka, please rest awhile and tell Us what you intend to do.” Vṛka was charmed by the Lord’s words and revealed everything that had happened. The Lord said, “Ever since Lord Śiva was cursed by Prajāpati Dakṣa, he has become just like a carnivorous hobgoblin. So you shouldn’t trust his word. Better to test his benediction by putting your hand on your own head.” Bewildered by these words, the foolish demon touched his own head, which immediately shattered and fell to the ground. Cries of “Victory!” “Obeisances!” and “Well done!” were heard from the sky, and the demigods, sages, celestial forefathers and Gandharvas all congratulated the Supreme Lord by raining down flowers upon Him.

Text 1:

King Parīkṣit said: Those demigods, demons and humans who worship Lord Śiva, a strict renunciant, usually enjoy wealth and sense gratification, while the worshipers of the Supreme Lord Hari, the husband of the goddess of fortune, do not.

Text 2:

We wish to properly understand this matter, which greatly puzzles us. Indeed, the results attained by the worshipers of these two lords of opposite characters are contrary to what one would expect.

Text 3:

Śrī Śukadeva said: Lord Śiva is always united with his personal energy, the material nature. Manifesting himself in three features in response to the entreaties of nature’s three modes, he thus embodies the threefold principle of material ego in goodness, passion and ignorance.

Text 4:

The sixteen elements have evolved as transformations of that false ego. When a devotee of Lord Śiva worships his manifestation in any one of

these elements, the devotee obtains all sorts of corresponding enjoyable opulences.

Text 5:

Lord Hari, however, has no connection with the material modes. He is the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the all-seeing eternal witness, who is transcendental to material nature. One who worships Him becomes similarly free from the material modes.

Text 6:

Your grandfather, King Yudhiṣṭhira, after completing his Aśvamedha sacrifices, asked Lord Acyuta this very same question while hearing the Lord's explanation of religious principles.

Text 7:

This question pleased Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the King's Lord and master, who had descended into the family of Yadu for the purpose of bestowing the highest good on all men. The Lord replied as follows as the King eagerly listened.

Text 8:

The Personality of Godhead said: If I especially favor someone, I gradually deprive him of his wealth. Then the relatives and friends of such a poverty-stricken man abandon him. In this way he suffers one distress after another.

Text 9:

When he becomes frustrated in his attempts to make money and instead befriends My devotees, I bestow My special mercy upon him.

Text 10:

A person who has thus become sober fully realizes the Absolute as the highest truth, the most subtle and perfect manifestation of spirit, the transcendental existence without end. In this way realizing that the Supreme Truth is the foundation of his own existence, he is freed from the cycle of material life.

Text 11:

Because I am difficult to worship, people generally avoid Me and instead worship other deities, who are quickly satisfied. When people

receive kingly opulences from these deities, they become arrogant, intoxicated with pride and neglectful of their duties. They dare to offend even the demigods who have bestowed benedictions upon them.

Text 12:

Śukadeva Gosvāmī said: Lord Brahmā, Lord Viṣṇu, Lord Śiva and others are able to curse or bless one. Lord Śiva and Lord Brahmā are very quick to curse or bestow benedictions, my dear King, but the infallible Supreme Lord is not.

Text 13:

In this connection, an ancient historical account is related concerning how the Lord of Kailāsa Mountain was put into danger by offering a choice of benedictions to the demon Vṛka.

Text 14:

The demon named Vṛka, a son of Śakuni's, once met Nārada on the road. The wicked fellow asked him which of the three chief gods could be pleased most quickly.

Text 15:

Nārada told him: Worship Lord Śiva and you will soon achieve success. He quickly becomes pleased by seeing his worshiper's slightest good qualities — and quickly angered by seeing his slightest fault.

Text 16:

He became pleased with ten-headed Rāvaṇa, and also with Bāṇa, when they each chanted his glories, like bards in a royal court. Lord Śiva then bestowed unprecedented power upon each of them, but in both cases he was consequently beset with great difficulty.

Text 17:

[Śukadeva Gosvāmī continued:] Thus advised, the demon proceeded to worship Lord Śiva at Kedāranātha by taking pieces of flesh from his own body and offering them as oblations into the sacred fire, which is Lord Śiva's mouth.

Texts 18-19:

Vṛkāśura became frustrated after failing to obtain a vision of the lord. Finally, on the seventh day, after dipping his hair into the holy waters at Kedāranātha and leaving it wet, he took up a hatchet and prepared to cut off his head. But at that very moment the supremely merciful Lord Śiva rose up out of the sacrificial fire, looking like the god of fire himself, and grabbed both arms of the demon to stop him from killing himself, just as we would do. By Lord Śiva's touch, Vṛkāśura once again became whole.

Text 20:

Lord Śiva said to him: My friend, please stop, stop! Ask from me whatever you want, and I will bestow that boon upon you. Alas, you have subjected your body to great torment for no reason, since I am pleased with a simple offering of water from those who approach me for shelter.

Text 21:

[Śukadeva Gosvāmī continued:] The benediction sinful Vṛka chose from the lord would terrify all living beings. Vṛka said, "May death come to whomever I touch upon the head with my hand."

Text 22:

Upon hearing this, Lord Rudra seemed somewhat disturbed. Nonetheless, O descendant of Bharata, he vibrated om to signify his assent, granting Vṛka the benediction with an ironic smile, as if giving milk to a poisonous snake.

Text 23:

To test Lord Śambhu's benediction, the demon then tried to put his hand on the Lord's head. Thus Śiva was frightened because of what he himself had done.

Text 24:

As the demon pursued him, Lord Śiva fled swiftly from his abode in the north, shaking with terror. He ran as far as the limits of the earth, the sky and the corners of the universe.

Texts 25-26:

The great demigods could only remain silent, not knowing how to counteract the benediction. Then Lord Śiva reached the luminous realm of Vaikuṇṭha, beyond all darkness, where the Supreme Lord Nārāyaṇa is

manifest. That realm is the destination of renunciants who have attained peace and given up all violence against other creatures. Going there, one never returns.

Texts 27-28:

The Supreme Lord, who relieves His devotees' distress, had seen from afar that Lord Śiva was in danger. Thus by His mystic Yoga-māyā potency He assumed the form of a brahmacārī student, with the appropriate belt, deerskin, rod and prayer beads, and came before Vṛkāśura. The Lord's effulgence glowed brilliantly like fire. Holding kuśa grass in His hand, He humbly greeted the demon.

Text 29:

The Supreme Lord said: My dear son of Śakuni, you appear tired. Why have you come such a great distance? Please rest for a minute. After all, it is one's body that fulfills all one's desires.

Text 30:

O mighty one, please tell Us what you intend to do, if We are qualified to hear it. Usually one accomplishes his purposes by taking help from others.

Text 31:

Śukadeva Gosvāmī said: Thus questioned by the Personality of Godhead in language that poured down upon him like sweet nectar, Vṛka felt relieved of his fatigue. He described to the Lord everything he had done.

Text 32:

The Supreme Lord said: If this is the case, We cannot believe what Śiva says. Śiva is the same lord of the Pretas and Piśācas whom Dakṣa cursed to become like a carnivorous hobgoblin.

Text 33:

O best of the demons, if you have any faith in him because he is the spiritual master of the universe, then without delay put your hand on your head and see what happens.

Text 34:

If the words of Lord Śambhu prove untrue in any way, O best of the demons, then kill the liar so he may never lie again.

Text 35:

[Śukadeva Gosvāmī continued:] Thus bewildered by the Personality of Godhead's enchanting, artful words, foolish Vṛka, without realizing what he was doing, placed his hand on his head.

Text 36:

Instantly his head shattered as if struck by a lightning bolt, and the demon fell down dead. From the sky were heard cries of "Victory!" "Obeisances!" and "Well done!"

Text 37:

The celestial sages, Pitās and Gandharvas rained down flowers to celebrate the killing of sinful Vṛkāsura. Now Lord Śiva was out of danger.

Texts 38-39:

The Supreme Personality of Godhead then addressed Lord Giriśa, who was now out of danger: "Just see, O Mahādeva, My lord, how this wicked man has been killed by his own sinful reactions. Indeed, what living being can hope for good fortune if he offends exalted saints, what to speak of offending the lord and spiritual master of the universe?"

Text 40:

Lord Hari is the directly manifest Absolute Truth, the Supreme Soul and unlimited ocean of inconceivable energies. Anyone who recites or hears this pastime of His saving Lord Śiva will be freed from all enemies and the repetition of birth and death.