

Sage Viswamitra

Sai Ram. We have been enjoying the wonderful, educating and entertaining stories of Sages and let us continue with the same this month too. This month of April (Chaitra) is special because of Sri Rama Navami (this year it is being celebrated on 3rd April) and when we remember Sri Rama and His many deeds of valor, we recall the great role played by sages Vasishtha and Viswamitra. We have already mentioned that sage Viswamitra was born to Gadhi, son of Kusika (also known as Kusinabha), when we were learning about sage Chyavana Maharshi and Jamadagni Maharshi. So, this month, we will take up the wonderful story of sage Viswamitra. Sai Ram.

The birth of Viswamitra

Sage Rucheeka (son of sage Chyavana) married Satyavathi, daughter of Gadhi, son of Kusika and went to his ashram. When Satyavathi wanted children, sage Rucheeka told her that he would create a divine rice pudding, which would give her a child. Satyavathi requested her husband to help her mother too (Gadhi did not have a son and the life and marriage is considered incomplete without a male child). So, Rucheeka meditated on Para Brahma (The Ultimate Principle) and created two vessels with divine rice preparation. He showed her the two vessels and told her that one of them is brahmyam (full of the brahminic energies, Satv guna) and the second Kshatram (full of the fighting warrior clan's energies, Rajo guna). He told her that after bath, she and her mother should hug a fig tree and an Aswattha tree respectively and then they should consume the respective rice puddings.

However, due to destiny, the two vessels got interchanged and Satyavathi ate the pudding bearing Kshatriya energies and her mother the Brahminic one. There is another variant to the story that the mother of Satyavathi interchanged the vessels deliberately because she felt that Sage Rucheeka would give the 'better' child to his own wife. Thus jealousy played the part of destiny! Rucheeka saw with his divine vision about the mix up and told his wife that she was bearing a cruel Kshatriya fetus in her womb and not a Brahminic one. Satyavathi was saddened and prayed to her husband to prevent the calamity through his yogic powers. He agreed and with his yogic powers transferred the change to his grandson (to the next generation). Satyavathi's mother carried the Brahminic fetus and Viswamitra, also known as Gadheya and Kausika was born. Thus, though born to a Kshatriya King, the soul inhabiting that body was that of a satvik brahmarshi. Let us see how the transformation took place in the physical plane too. This story has some important lessons to all Sadhakas on the spiritual path. Sai Ram.

Viswamitra's fight with Vasishtha

Born and brought up in a royal family, he learnt all the skills of a warrior from a Brahmin called Kusasana and earned a good name as a king after he succeeded his father Gadhi. He had four sons, who were well versed in dharma. Their names were: Havichhandra, Dridhanethra, Maharadha and Madhuchhanda. This Madhuchhanda became a rishi (his name is found in Rigveda). Another version of the story has it that he had a hundred sons just as sage Vasishtha.

In the course of his numerous forays into forest for hunting, Viswamitra reached the ashram of sage Vasishtha and was received well by the sage and was given good food, thanks to

Nandini, the Kama Dhenu (wish fulfilling cow – the one in Indra's heaven is the most well known of the divine cows and all such cows were called Kama Dhenus but each had a separate name). Viswamitra saw this and wanted to take away the cow. Vasishtha declined saying that his ashram was under the protection of Nandini and he treated her like a family member and he had no right to part with her. Viswamitra offered a lakh cows and a lot of money in return but to no avail. He tried to take it away by force but Nandini created an army from its face and the army destroyed the army of Viswamitra. Viswamitra had a hundred sons and they came again with a big army to try and take away Nandini and they too got killed in the battle. Viswamitra felt humiliated and went to the forest and did great tapas to Lord Siva. Lord Siva was pleased with his tapas and gave him a number of divine astras and also gave him the knowledge befitting a rajarshi (because he was still not free of rajo guna). Viswamitra came back to Vasishtha and used these divine astras to try and defeat Vasishtha. Vasishtha did not retaliate with any weapon but simply put his Brahma Danda in front and Viswamitra was astonished to see that all the divine astras and sastras were simply absorbed into that. Brahma Danda is representing the Nirguna Para Brahma and all Saguna things that arise have to perish (get absorbed) into the Nirguna. The three gunas, Satva, Rajo and Tamo guna are part of the Nirguna just as the colors of light are part of the whole and the whole is white. Thus Nirguna is absence of gunas as well as the presence (sum) of all gunas. It is possible to approach the source through any of the parts, just as one gets a taste of sugar from any sweet preparation. Thus Viswamitra became a Brahmarshi through the fight with a Brahmarshi. The path taken by each river is different but the destination of all rivers is the same and that is the sea. We will trace the course of this particular river as it reaches the sea, and the scenery is quite interesting as can be seen below. Sai Ram.

Sending Trishanku to Swarga

Trishanku was a king of the Ikshvaku dynasty (Rama also belongs to the same dynasty) and he wanted to perform a yaga which would enable him to go to heaven in his physical body (which is not done – the sukshma sareera, the causal body goes to heaven or hell depending on the satkarma or dushkarma). He asked his Kula Guru Sage Vasishtha to help him but Vasishtha, knowing the dharma refused. Then Trishanku approached Sage Viswamitra and he agreed partly because of his running rivalry with sage Vasishtha. His ego was still rajasic at that stage and he wanted to show his superiority. Vasishtha was capable of performing such a yaga but declined because he did not want to disturb the balance of nature (dharma is all about the balance of nature in perfect harmony).

Viswamitra agreed to preside over the yaga and ordered Indra and other gods to receive the havis, but they didn't appear because if they accepted it, they were bound to give the yaga phala. He then offered the havis to the fire god and asked Trishanku to follow the same to heaven, which he did. The gods consulted Brihaspati, their Guru and threw Trishanku down from heaven. As he was falling from there, Viswamitra stopped him in mid air and created a heaven, with stars, Indra and other dikpalakas etc., in fact an exact replica. Brahmaji appeared to sage Viswamitra and praised him and asked him not to proceed further and create a whole universe. Such was the power obtained by sage Viswamitra because of his great tapas. The heaven created by sage Viswamitra for Trishanku is called Trishanku Swarga. King Trishanku, thus became ever famous. The creator of that heaven, sage Viswamitra of course attained a great fame and let us relish his other great deeds too.

His saving of a Brahmin boy from being offered in sacrifice (The story of Sunassepha) When King Ambareesha was performing a great yagna, the gods* felt threatened (it is interesting to see that the gods too are subject to many failings of human nature such as fear and jealousy – these stories are in a way similar to Greek literature) that the King would

surpass them in glory once the yagna is completed and he may usurp the heaven. It may be mentioned that Indra is a post and is obtained by performing a specific number of yagnas, yagas etc. Whenever another person performed greater sacrifices, his punya became more and he would displace the existing Indra. Indra stands for the enjoyer of the sensual pleasures and the person occupying that position gets attached to the pleasures. So, Indra always tries to break up the tapas and yagna etc. when he feels threatened by the performance of such tapas and yagna etc. From another angle, it may be understood that these obstructions are created to test the sadhaka's will power and the obstructions actually help to strengthen the sadhaka to rise higher in the spiritual planes beyond the sensual pleasures.

In this case too, Indra abducted the yagna pasu (the animal reserved to be sacrificed for the yagna). The king consulted the Purohita and it was decided that a human being would be sacrificed instead of an animal (strange are the ways of destiny) and a search started for a suitable Brahmin boy for the sacrifice. Since the animal proposed for the sacrifice had to be perfect in body, they had to make an extensive search and another important condition was that the family had to give up the boy willingly, not under duress from the king. Unlike an animal, a human being has will power and the ability to express his mind and so express agreement was needed. They located a family that had 3 sons. The mother was fond of the youngest and the father Rucheeeka (not sage Rucheeeka) was fond of the eldest and so they decided to part with the middle boy for an equivalent of one lakh cows. As the boy was being brought to be tied to the post just as an animal would be, he was anguished at being disowned by his parents and as luck would have it, he met sage Viswamitra, who assured the boy that he would protect him.

The sage thought that since he had so many sons (the version of the story has it that he had a hundred sons), he could persuade one of them to go in place of the Brahmin boy. However, each animal tries to protect itself and values its own life over the words of others. There are a few exceptions in Puranas (Sibi, Bhaktha Siriyala and Dattatreya etc.) but this is the rule. So, all of them refused their father's wish that one of them should go in place of that Brahmin boy. So, Viswamitra gave two mantras to the boy and asked him to chant the same before the moment of sacrifice and the boy followed the instructions carefully. Along with the mantras of course he gave a lot of his power gained through tapas. The gods pleased with the mantras and the offering of the tapo phala released the boy from being sacrificed. This story of King Ambareesha is found in Rig Veda (source – Margadarsakulu Maharshulu by Brahma Sri Sivanandamurthy garu).

A similar story repeated itself later. King Harischandra of Kosala worshipped Varuna and asked for a son. To a query from Varuna about why he was asking for a son, the king replied that as per the shastras, the very sight of the face of a son ensures sadgathi (good way for further progress when the soul leaves the body). Aputrasya gatirnasti is the shashtra. Then Varuna made a strange request that the boy has to be offered to him as yagna pasu immediately after birth. The king agreed. Then after the child was born, Varuna came to collect the child and the king put it off for a few years under one pretext or other. We are reminded of the story of the Vaisya in Sri Satyanarayana Vrata Katha. In this case, Varuna cursed Harischandra to suffer from Ascites (accumulation of fluid in the abdomen), a difficult to cure disease. The king realized his mistake and started the yagna to offer the son in sacrifice. The prince, Lohitha (Rohitha) was about 14 years old at that time and came to know that he was to become a sacrificial animal to Varuna and he ran away to the forest. Then he felt ashamed at his fear of life (after all he was a kshatriya prince and he was a prince of the Ishvaku dynasty known for their adherence to truth). On the way back, he met the family of a poor Brahmin named Ajeegatha and requested him to offer one of his three sons and accept cows in exchange. Though the Brahmin was not greedy for the money, he

agreed to protect the Ishvaku dynasty and offered his second son Sunassepha, who also agreed to become the sacrificial animal.

When the boy was brought, the Brahmins conducting the yagna refused to offer a human being and the father of that boy Ajeegartha himself tied the boy to the post and raised the sword. At that moment, Sunassepha felt sad at his fate and he found his savior in sage Viswamitra. Viswamitra froze the hand of Ajeegartha and gave a mantropadesa to Sunassepha, by the power of which, Varuna was pleased and released Sunassepha. "Imam me Varuna Srudhi..." mantra is the gift of sage Viswamitra. Thus the story had a happy ending but then a dilemma arose. Who will protect the boy? His family already disowned him and he was in no mood to go back to the parents. The king had offered him as sacrifice to Varuna, the lord of the neither world and it was difficult for him to take care of Sunassepha, who got a new name Devaraatha (because he was protected by Varuna Deva). The pandita sabha discussed the matter and decided that since Viswamitra saved the boy, the boy has now become his property and so Viswamitra should now take care of him as a father would take care of a son. Thus the principle of rights and responsibilities going together was already well established by then!

As already mentioned, Viswamitra had a hundred sons already and so probably felt one more would not be a problem. He declared the end of human sacrifice in yagnas and mentioned that the boy Sunassepha, now named Devaraatha was blessed by him and would gain more glory in the years to come. He asked his sons to accept the Brahmin boy as their elder brother. Fifty of his sons agreed and the other fifty refused. They were cursed by the sage to go to south India and live with the tribals, forgetting all their knowledge. They repented and requested forgiveness. Viswamitra gave them back their knowledge but insisted that they had to migrate to South India and mix with the tribals. Thus the curse became a boon to all of us here in South!

Sunassepha (Devaraatha) became a great sage himself and became the drashta (seer) of many Vedic Mantras. The Gothra Pravara of Viswamitra – Devaraatha has come into existence probably at that time and is live even today.

*We use the word gods to denote Indra and the other celestial gods of heaven and reserve the word God to denote one or all the Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara, Who are three aspects of the Nirguna Para Brahma (that word Para is used to denote the difference between the Saguna and Nirguna Aspects of the Ultimate Creative Principle, the Brahma Tatva).

His testing of Harischandra

Sage Viswamitra made Harischandra immortal by testing his adherence to truth. Thus Harischandra came to be known as Satya Harischandra. The sage knew that the king was wedded to truth, he wanted that to be publicized in all the worlds and thus subjected the king and his family to many hardships, but the king did not budge from the path of truth. Thus even at the risk of being seen as a villain, Viswamitra made Harischandra immortal.

Birth of Sakunthala

During one of the many episodes of his tapas, the gods sent Menaka, one of the celebrated celestial apsaras to test and if possible disturb his tapas. This is a normal practice adopted by the gods and only if the sage (tapasvi) resists the temptations and thus passes the tests,

further progress takes place and the Ishta Devata will manifest before the tapasvi and offers the boons as per the merit of the tapas. Sage Viswamitra got disturbed (or got attracted to her) and as a result of their union, a girl child was born. Another version of the story is that He was favorably disposed to her because of her sincere service and blessed her with a child. Since neither of them was willing to take care of the child, some birds (Sakunthas) took care of her and later Sage Kanva took her and brought her up as his daughter. Because she was taken care by Sakuntha birds, the girl was named as Sakunthala and she married King Dushyantha and gave birth to Bharatha, after whom this country is named. Due to a curse from sage Durvasa, King Dushyantha failed to recognize Sakunthala when she went to his court with Bharatha, and Akashavani came to her rescue (the king failed to recognize her because of the curse by the sage which also made her to lose the signet ring given to her by the king at the time of their Gandharva Marriage at sage Kanva's ashram). During the course of her pleading with the king, Sakuntala touched upon the power of truth (which we briefly mentioned upon in one of the earlier stories).

His cursing of Rambha

After the birth of Sakunthala, sage Viswamitra went back to continue his tapas. Indra sent Rambha and many other Apsaras to disturb Viswamitra's tapas. Viswamitra did not yield the time to the sensory attractions and cursed Rambha to become a stone. She pleaded with the sage that she was simply following the orders of her boss Indra and was performing her duty. She pleaded with him to lift the curse but Viswamitra gave that honor to his arch rival sage Vasishtha!

His becoming Brahmarshi

After repeatedly giving up his powers obtained through great tapas, Viswamitra realized the futility of his ego and went to tapas again with the intention of overcoming the rajasic qualities of his ego. He performed a long and arduous tapas.

Indra came disguised as a Brahmin and tried to provoke Viswamitra through some improper behavior (he was trying to see whether the sage had some anger left in him if not desire). Viswamitra remained calm.

Lord Brahma was pleased with the tapas and manifested Himself before Viswamitra and accepted him as Brahmarshi and gave long life, The Brahminic luster (Satvik qualities) and the ability to bless the whole world. The place where Viswamitra got the siddhi is called Brahmapushkar, Brahmakund and Uttarkund. There is a temple to Lord Brahma (the only one in the country) and there are two important places there, Harischandra and Ambareesh.

However, Viswamitra was not satisfied and wanted to be accepted as a Brahmarshi by his arch rival sage Vasishtha. When he went to the ashram of sage Vasishtha, he welcomed him by addressing as a Maharshi. Viswamitra was not satisfied and went back for doing more tapas. When he went again, Vasishtha addressed him as a dhoortha (scoundrel). Instead of getting angry and annoyed like the earlier times, Viswamitra smiled and kept quiet and turned to leave. Then Vasishtha called him back as Brahmarshi. He praised Viswamitra for conquering the tiniest traces of the six internal enemies (Kama, Krodha etc.) and thus achieving an almost impossible task. Sage Vasishtha indicated that he was born as a Brahmarshi where as Viswamitra achieved that stage by burning off the ego. Another version of the story has it that Vasishtha advised Viswamitra to burn off the physical body (which was born in a kshatriya family and thus was carrying the rajo guna) and create a new body with his tapasshakti.

In any case, this story is inspiring to all of us who are struggling with our rajo and tamo

gunas. Sai Ram.

Viswamitra blesses Rama with Dhanurvedya

When his yagnas and yaagas were being disturbed by demons Maricha and Subahu (sons of Thataka, a demoness), Viswamitra decided to approach King Dasaratha and was received with honor by the king. When Dasaratha requested the sage to reveal the purpose of his visit, sage Viswamitra mentioned about the yagna being disturbed by the demons and asked the king to send Rama and Lakshmana along with him so that the yagna can be completed without interruption from the demons (it is the duty of king and his representatives to help the sages do their duties without interference from any one). King Dasaratha was fully deluded by Maya and could not think of parting with his dear sons for such a dangerous mission (he could not realize that the sage was fully capable of protecting the princes and was making this request because he did not want to spend the tapas shakti to directly punish the demons). The king also did not realize the true nature of Rama, who was an incarnation of Vishnu! However, sage Vasishtha intervened and assured the king that the princes were perfectly safe with sage Viswamitra and that the mission would be beneficial to the two, words that were prophetic indeed (all the sages were fully aware of the past, present and the future)! So, the king agreed and sent the two princes Rama and Lakshmana with Viswamitra. The princes follow the sage on foot with a lot of reverence and the sage was pleased with the two princes and gave them two powerful mantras Bala and Atibala by which they were forever freed from thirst, hunger and tiredness etc. He also gave them many Astras and Sastras. He addressed Rama thus: "Rama, these are very powerful Astras and you would need only a fraction of the energies invoked by them to take care of the demons." To a query from Rama as to why He did not finish off the demons directly, the sage replied that as a rishi, he should not waste his energies in such activities and he was empowering the prince for his future life mission!

Rama killed Thataka at the behest of sage Viswamitra (Rama was known for obeying the commands of his father and other fatherly figures and Gurus, since He knew that the dharma is very intricate and the nuances are better known by these elders and in any case, the ultimate dharma is to obey the Guru – Father, Mother and Guru are the Three Gurus, representing the Ultimate Guru). Subahu was killed and Maricha was thrown many miles away and ran for his life (later he met his end at the hands of Sri Rama when he was forced to help Ravana in his plan to abduct Sri Sita).

After the completion of the Yaga, Viswamitra decided to go to Mithila and took the two princes with him. On the way, he saw the deserted ashram of sage Gautama and Ahalya in a Samadhi (some people say she was cursed to become a stone) and asked Rama to touch the stone with His foot (Rama is the incarnation of Sri Vishnu and the sage knew that). Ahalya was restored to life and sage Gautama also came there and both bowed to Rama and sage Viswamitra and took leave.

In Mithila, they were received by King Janaka with full honors and Rama was asked by Viswamitra to string the bow of Lord Siva. In that process, the bow broke and King Janaka gave Sita in marriage to Sri Rama. The other brothers of Rama also were married to Sita's sisters. Thus Viswamitra was instrumental in blessing Sri Rama in many ways.

Viswamitra and the Gayatri Mantra

We will be indebted to sage Viswamitra for the gift of Gayatri Mantra. Gayatri Chandah, Viswamitra rushih....goes the mantra.

We will be coming across sage Viswamitra many more times when we take up the stories of

other sages. Let us bow in gratitude to this genuine friend of the universe! Sai Ram.