

8. Prahlada

Punya Phalamu Cheta Puttenu Manujudai

Dushta Vaanchala Cheta Dushtudai

Jnaana Maargamu Maanavatvamu Veede

Intakanna Raakshasatvamedi Kaladu?

One is born a human by the fruit of meritorious deeds.

By cultivating unholy desire, one becomes wicked,

And abandons the path of wisdom and human values.

Indeed, what else is demonic behavior?

Embodiments of divine love!

Lord Vishnu assumed the *Varaha* (Boar) *Avatar* to destroy the demon Hiranyaksha. Hiranya Kashyapa, the brother of Hiranyaksha, witnessed his brother's death at the hands of the Lord. As a result, he developed anger and hatred toward the Lord. He considered Narayana not as God but as a man, and decided to destroy Him by any means.

Hiranya Kashyapa, hater of the Lord

Hiranya Kashyapa ordered all devotees and *Vedic* priests to be killed. He destroyed *Brahmins* on sight. The kingdom fell into chaos. Not able to bear the separation from his brother, Hiranya developed many weaknesses. He gave up food, drink and sleep and questioned all the time, "Where is this Narayana?" The Lord exists for one who accepts Him but not for atheists. Yet, He is present in everyone equally. The believer is like a blooming flower while the atheist is a bud. The bud of today is the flower of tomorrow. But if an insect destroys the bud, it cannot become a flower.

Hiranya desired immortality. To this end, he left his kingdom and began performing arduous penance on Mount

Mandara. He had three sons: Samhridaya, Nayahridaya and Hridaya. When he left his kingdom, his fourth son was in the womb of his wife, Queen Leelavati. Taking advantage of Hiranya's absence, the Gods attacked his kingdom. They wanted to eradicate demons in the interest of world peace and the establishment of human values. At this point, Sage Narada came and took Leelavati to the safety of his hermitage.

Narada taught Leelavati at length about Lord Narayana. Leelavati pretended to listen to Narada by nodding her head, but inwardly she was worried about her husband's welfare and constantly thought of him. However, Leelavati's child absorbed Narada's teachings and began to repeat *Om Namō Narayanaya*, even inside the womb! At birth, this child, Prahlada, had great effulgence and a cheerful smile.

Soon Hiranya returned from Mandara after propitiating Lord Brahma. He had obtained a boon whereby he couldn't be killed by any man or animal, on earth or in the sky, by anything living or non-living during the day or the night. Hiranya believed that he had tricked Brahma into granting him immortality by the peculiar conditions of the boon. He began considering himself God and forced everyone to adore him by chanting *Om Namō Hiranya Kashyapa Namah!*

Prahlada's education

Prahlada was old enough to be sent to school. Chanda and Amarka were the gurus assigned to teach him. They taught him that only *artha* (wealth) and *kama* (desire) were important, not *dharma* (righteousness) and *moksha* (liberation).¹ They also taught that Hiranya was God. Collecting many other

children of demons in their school, Chanda and Amarka taught them demonic qualities. Day and night, they rained upon them teachings opposed to Lord Narayana.

Empty brains can be filled with anything. But Prahlada's heart was full of contemplation on Narayana. He did not imbibe any demonic teachings. Still, he pretended to listen, and that made the gurus happy. After a few days, the gurus took Prahlada to his father.

Taking Prahlada in his lap with affection, Hiranya asked while patting his head, "Son, what did the gurus teach you?"

Prahlada said, "Father, I have learnt teachings from the scriptures. I know the nine kinds of devotion:² *sravanam, keerthanam, Vishnu smaranam, padasevanam, vandanam, archanam, dasyam, sakhyam, Atma nivedanam.*"

Hiranya said, "Indeed, you may reach me by any of these paths." "Not you, father. These are meant for reaching Lord Narayana," replied Prahlada.

Hiding his displeasure, Hiranya asked again, "Let me hear you summarize the essence of all scriptures in one sentence."

"*Om Namo Narayanaya,*" said Prahlada.

Hiranya Kashyapa became silent. He turned and glared at the gurus, who looked at each other in bafflement. They thought, "This boy is a big danger to us," and felt afraid for

their lives. Hiranya roared, "Take him away and teach him demonic qualities!" This was the first time that he didn't show anger toward Prahlada directly.

But the gurus were not able to change Prahlada. After a few months, they brought him to the King again. As before, Prahlada repeated, "*Om Namo Narayanaya*" in answer to his father's questions. Hiranya Kashyapa became furious and threw Prahlada aside.

Hiranya Kashyapa was the greatest scientist. He had explored Nature, seasons and the solar system. He once noticed that the Earth's axis was tilted at 23.5 degrees. With his *yogic* powers, he changed the tilt out of curiosity. He returned it to normal when large-scale destruction resulted. With his will power, he had control over the orbits of the Sun and the Moon as well. That is why he thought of himself as Divine.

He thought, "School is not doing any good to my son. I shall teach him." He said, "Son, no Narayana or any other imaginary being has my powers. The five elements are under my control, as are the orbits of the Sun and the Moon. I am the undisputed Master."

Prahlada burst out laughing, "Father, you have conquered everything, but not your senses! One who bows to inner enemies can never subdue external ones. First of all, reduce your ego and cultivate Love for God. Then your kingdom will grow, and you will prosper."

Flying into a rage, Hiranya caught Prahlada by his neck and held him down. “You are teaching ME?” he roared. Despite the best efforts of gurus, no one could change Prahlada. Teachings learnt later in life or from others’ experiences can be changed. But the Lord’s Name was imprinted in Prahlada’s heart at a tender age—it was impossible to erase it. Realizing that such a boy would pose danger to his authority in the future, Hiranya decided to kill his own son!

Prahlada’s travails

Hiranya Kashyapa summoned his men and had them stab Prahlada with their swords. But Prahlada was unshaken by this torture. “What is this body worth, composed of the five elements? You are punishing only my body. I’m not related to it. It is only a garment, to which I have no attachment. Father! You have body-consciousness, which is the root cause of ‘I’ and ‘mine.’ You trust the perishable body to be permanent and forget the eternal Atma.” Leelavati could not watch the atrocities. She fell at her husband’s feet and prayed for him to stop. Not able to assuage her grief, Hiranya Kashyapa instructed his men to take Prahlada away and kill him elsewhere.

Even the demons did not have the heart to harm the innocent child. But the King’s command had to be followed. The boy was taken outside and tied to the ground. Elephants were made to walk over him. Why would one without attachment to his body experience any pain? Moreover, Prahlada believed in Narayana and hence, there was no question of suffering for him. He remained unharmed.

Then poisonous serpents were brought and let loose on him. The only words he uttered incessantly were, *Om Namō Narayanaya*. Nothing happened to him. They threw him off a cliff, in vain. The demons, along with Chanda and Amarka, returned to the king and reported the miraculous events. “O King! When we attack your son, he only called on Narayana. He has no trace of fear, anger or hatred. With a charming smile, he repeats, *Om Namō Narayanaya*. His face shows no pain or sorrow. There is some unknown Power protecting him. To harm Prahlada is a task beyond us.”

Hiranya Kashyapa now doubted if the demons were carrying out his orders or lying to him. He decided that the boy be put to death in front of his eyes! He had a bowl of deadly poison brought, called Prahlada near and instructed him to drink it. Smiling all the while and chanting *Om Namō Narayanaya*, Prahlada calmly quaffed it. Hiranya Kashyapa glared at him, expecting him to collapse. All the demons watched with bated breath. But Prahlada didn't die. Hiranya thought, “Chanda and Amarka were right. Maybe there is some spirit or ghost in Prahlada. It cannot be Divine power because only my power is Divine”! Then he called for experts in mantras and other sciences to rid Prahlada of the “evil spirit”. Nothing seemed to work. Frustrated and dispirited, Hiranya Kashyapa addressed Prahlada, “You say ‘Narayana, Narayana’ all the time. Where is this Narayana?”

Prahlada advises his father

Today's scientists, after many experiments, proclaim that the atom is the basic element in creation. The atom is the basis for the cosmos. It is present everywhere in the Universe.

It took scientists over a thousand years to discover and understand this concept. But Prahlada discovered this principle long before them. He said that God is present everywhere, as scientists talk about the atom. “Do not fall into doubt that He is here but not there. Wherever you look, you will find Him,” he said. Hiranya Kashyapa said, “Really? Is God present everywhere? Fine, show Him to me.”

Prahlada replied, “Father! Steeped in slavery to the senses and in body-consciousness, you want to see God. It is impossible. You struggle hard to earn fame and worldly security but you do not yearn for God. God grants whatever you want. You desire that your power and fame increase. You live under the dominance of ego and attachment. As long as the feelings of ‘I’ and ‘Mine’ prevail, it is impossible for you to grasp the *Atma* principle.”

Even today, men search for God while identifying with the body and reinforcing their feelings of “I” and “Mine”. They will not find God, no matter how long they try. The principle of the non-dual *Atma* must first be understood. You must offer yourself to God! Meaning what? All actions must be performed with divine feelings. In the food he ate, the water he drank, and the difficulties he underwent, in everything, Prahlada saw only Narayana, Narayana, Narayana. This divine principle is unchanging. If you put sugar in coffee, in tea, in water, in anything, it lends sweetness. In the same way, Prahlada introduced the sweetness of Narayana into all his actions.

Sweeter than sugar,
Tastier than curd,

More relishing than honey,
Exuding nectarine taste upon repetition,
Such is the Name of the Lord.

“Father! You are mistaking sugar for nectar. But really, even nectar is tasteless when compared to the sweetness of God’s Name. This sweetness is not present in anything else. Instead of repeating such a sweet Name, you spend life feeding your ego. You are committing crimes against society based on the strength of Brahma’s boons. Your ego will ruin you completely. You need humility to attain God. Father! Education without character, worship without sacrifice, wealth without effort, politics without principles —these sins are the basis for all the misery in the world.”

What are the sins of society? Education without character is one. Wealth without effort is another. We must make effort! Without effort how can you expect anything in return? Next, worship without sacrifice. Yes, you are all praying. But it is prayer without sacrifice. Sacrifice alone grants bliss in worship. Politics without principles and science without human values are on the increase. If science had principles, how would bombs and other means of unrest come about? Human values have become zero in science.

“Father, you are a great scientist, but without human values. Your demonic tendencies show no signs of abating. First, bring your senses under control. Without control over your senses you can never perceive the omnipresent Lord.” Prahlada advised his father in many ways. But no matter how bright a bulb is held in front of a blind man, he cannot see the brightness. Prahlada continued, “You do not have the eyes of

divine love. You are blind in wisdom. How do you expect to see God? Your body is filled with the six enemies: lust, anger, greed, hatred, jealousy and pride.”

As is the color of the eyeglasses, so is the vision. Prahlada said, “When your heart is full of anger, lust, jealousy, attachment and ego, how do you expect to see God? Wherever I look I see Narayana. Inside, outside, above, below... He is present everywhere!

“Father! The whole world is like an iron ball being burnt in fire. Where does this fire reside? The heat is within the ball, outside it, everywhere. *Antar Bahisya Sarvavyaapya Narayanah Sthitah*—Narayana is present inside, outside, everywhere. This world is similarly engulfed in the fire of *jnana*. Father, heat is experienced only by touching. Unless you experience something, you cannot understand it. Your ignorance is the root cause of all this confusion. Listen to my words. God is present wherever you look.”

But this foolish man didn't leave his stubborn stand. “Is God really present everywhere? Is He present in this pillar?” he asked, pointing to a pillar. “Yes,” said Prahlada. “But I cannot see Him. I'm going to destroy this pillar!” thundered Hiranya. He took a heavy mace and smashed the pillar with force. The pillar broke into two pieces.

Narasimha Avatar

Out emerged a most terrifying form: Narasimha (Man-Lion) *Avatar*. It wasn't human, it wasn't animal. The head was a lion's but the body, human. Hiranya immediately recalled

Brahma's boon—"neither by man or by animal." He told himself that his death seemed imminent. After fighting with him for some time, Narasimha pulled Hiranya Kashyapa by his hand and laid him across His thighs.

Hiranya recalled, "I wanted to be killed neither on earth nor in the sky. Now I am on the thighs of this being, above the ground and below the sky. I asked for immunity against the living and the non-living. The nails on this being's claws are neither living nor non-living. It is the hour of twilight, neither day nor night." Hiranya did not have the sense to remember the name of Narayana in his last moments. He only kept remembering Brahma's boon and how all the conditions had been satisfied. The tendencies cultivated through our lifetime predominate during our final moments and form the basis for our next birth. Not having repeated Narayana's name during his lifetime, Hiranya Kashyapa wasn't able to do it at death. Narasimha *Avatar* completed His task.

Prahlada with the Lord

All were terrified by Narasimha's ferocious form. They shivered with fright. Prahlada alone gazed at Him with unblinking eyes, full of tears of joy. Narasimha asked him, "Child, doesn't My form frighten you?" Prahlada said, "Lord Narayana, *Yat Bhaavam Thath Bhavati*—As is one's thought, so is Your Form. Those who think of You as terrible see you as such. To me, You are the very form of Love and Bliss. Why should I be afraid? All forms are Yours. I am not looking at this particular name and form. I am looking at Your Divine Form and repeating your Divine Name. So I have no fear."

Hiranya Kashyapa's body was laid on the floor. Prahlada went close to the body and paid his respects. "For birth and death our own actions are responsible, not God. Each person reaps his own happiness and sorrow. My father brought this death upon himself. This is not God's doing," thought Prahlada. No one can escape the consequences of one's actions. You cannot tell what you might experience and when. So be ever ready. No one is exempt from this vigilance. Even Hiranya's invincibility was won because of past good deeds. But he could not enjoy God's boons because of his wicked actions. In the end, he was destroyed by the destiny he had carved for himself. Prahlada prayed for a good afterlife for his father.

After Prahlada's prayer many gods began arriving there and discussing the events. Before terminating His *Avatar* as Narasimha, the Lord asked Prahlada what he wanted. Prahlada said, "O Lord, I want nothing but You. I should never be distant from You, although You are everywhere. I must live in You, You must live in me, and I must experience this unity. I do not have any other desires. It is meaningless if I waste this life by desiring petty things." Then the Lord appeared in His full glory as Narayana and said, "Prahlada, My child! Children like you are examples to this world. Now take charge of your father's kingdom. Teach human values to these demons and ensure that they come closer to Me."

The distinction between a human and a demon arises only from qualities. Demons do not have any peculiar physical traits as portrayed in cinemas and books. They are humans also. It is only by qualities that a human becomes a demon. In the *Bhagavatham* there is a nice example. Krishna was God

Himself. His parents, Devaki and Vasudeva, were true humans. And Devaki's brother, Kamsa, was a demon. Thus, all three categories—divine, human and demon—can exist even within the same family! Kamsa was a demon because of his anger and cruelty. Devaki and Vasudeva were humans for their kindness and compassion. Possessing Divine traits, which are beyond all attributes, Krishna was God.

The Lord told Prahlada, "I'm keeping you here so that you transform these demons into humans and enable them to recognize Divinity." Prahlada said, "Lord, please don't give me this responsibility. I want only You, nothing else. All these tasks are Yours." He fell at the Lord's feet and pleaded repeatedly. But we must act as per the time, place and situation in which God places us. It is impossible for anyone to disobey God.

The Lord called Prahlada near and took him on His lap. Holding him close, He said, "Child! Do you want more than THIS? This is the highest blessing—**There is nothing greater than seeing Me, touching Me, talking to Me.** These are the means to liberation. Think of these moments ceaselessly and rule the world. Follow the divine command," instructed the Lord as He disappeared.

The Lord departed quickly, lest Prahlada ask more desires! No one has the "knack" that God has! He acts in a very guarded and cautious manner. He takes the middle path—He doesn't hurt anyone nor inconvenience Himself! If the Lord remained there longer, Prahlada might have asked Him something else. Without giving that chance, the Lord disappeared

promptly! Prahlada ruled the kingdom, all the while chanting *Om Namō Narayanaya*.

Everything is divine Will

In this manner the son was a highly purified soul even though the father was a demon. Although born to a demonic father, Prahlada had an element of Divinity. But what about his children? Prahlada's children inherited his father's qualities. Prahlada's son, Virochana, was a hater of God, like Hiranya Kashyapa. Recognize these connections between father and son. These relations are based not on chance, but on qualities. This is Divine Will. Everything is Divine Will.

Good, bad, everything is God's Will. We should not differentiate between good and bad. People believe that good events are God's Will and unfortunate ones are not. In this world no one eats only sweet food or only bitter food. Everyone eats both sweet and bitter food. In other words, everyone experiences both good and bad. If we inquire, bitter experiences are necessary! Only then can we appreciate the value of peace, contentment and bliss. Difficulties and joy go together. No one can separate them. Happiness doesn't exist alone anywhere. Happiness results when difficulties are transcended.

A baby gradually becomes a grandparent. But the two are not different. Similarly, the good in us can turn bad and the bad can become good. We should experience the unity of both. That which makes us understand this unity is our Divinity. When we distance ourselves from Divinity, we deteriorate to demonic and animal states.

Attachment causes animal qualities

To keep demonic and animal tendencies at bay we must limit attachment and pride. More attachment means more animal qualities. What is animal nature? The loss of discrimination. Even mistakes are perceived as good deeds when one is blinded by attachment. This was the case with Dhritharashtra. He knew that Duryodhana's actions were sins. But his fatherly attachment repeatedly forgave those sins. As a result, his entire family perished.

No doubt, attachment is necessary, but only within limits. Yes, you may have attachment in certain relations. You may look after your wife and children with care. But while engaged in such duties, the easiest path is to perceive everything as belonging to God. All your actions must be done with this feeling of Divinity. Then your actions will become pleasing to God and earn His love.

The Divine Name

Proceeding on the Divine path in this manner, become like Prahlada and strive for the welfare of your family, country, and the whole world. Even if you do not have Prahlada's ideal qualities, at least never forget God's Name. Whatever difficulties you may encounter, remember God's name ceaselessly. No matter how foolish or demonic a person, it is easy to bring the Lord's name to one's lips during difficulties.

When you see something strange or fearful, you exclaim, "O My God!" This is a reflex action, done without premeditation. You don't say "God" but "My God". This spiritual feeling is present even in a foolish or wicked person. He

may appear to be an atheist, but still he refers to God as “My God”! He admits the truth!

So follow the natural discipline of chanting the Lord’s Name. No matter what difficulties you encounter, even if ridiculed, never forget God’s Name. Prahlada respected his father but disputed with him about the Truth when necessary. You may also explain your faith to your parents, but never yield to pressure from anyone and change your attitude. Faith in God is our life-breath. The *Bhagavatham* lays special emphasis on the constant remembrance of the Name of the Lord.

[Swami sang “*Hari Bhajana Bina Sukha Shanti Nahi*”.]

¹. *Dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha* are the four *purusharthas* (goals) of human life.

². *Sravanam* = listening to the glories of the Lord, *keertanam* = singing His glories, *vishnu smaranam* = remembering the Lord, *padasevanam* = massaging His Feet, *vandanam* = saluting Him, *archanam* = worshipping Him, *dasyam* = serving Him, *sakhyam* = befriending Him, *Atma nivedanam* = total surrender.