

Incarnation Eight

Balaram – The Cowherd

Five thousand years ago Lord Krishna appeared in India. He and His elder brother Balaram, live in the rural village of Vrindavan on the river Yamuna.

Both brothers were exquisitely beautiful, with black hair like the clusters of crows' feathers and eyes like lotus petals. The only difference between them was in colour. Krishna was bluish black like a thundercloud and Balaram was white like a cloud in autumn. Krishna dressed in yellow and sported a flute, and Balaram wore blue and carried a plough.

Krishna and Balaram's father Nanda was in charge of the farming community. He and his wife, Yashoda, owned thousands of dairy cows, which provided milk, yogurt, cream butter and ghee. The oxen were used for ploughing, milling and transport, helping to provide grains, fruits and vegetables. Any excess produce the villagers traded locally in exchange for clothes, jewellery and other gifts of nature. In this way, life in Vrindavan was simple; everyone was healthy, prosperous and fully satisfied.

More than anything, the residents of Vrindavan loved Krishna. He was the centre of their lives. At the age of six, He and Balaram were given charge of the cows. Along with Their friends, They daily left for the pasturing grounds. As the cows grazed peacefully, Krishna and Balaram, surrounded by Their friends, enjoyed the forest atmosphere. There were blossoming flowers, chirping birds and lakes of crystal clear water. Cool breezes carried the aroma of lotuses and the refreshing spray of waterfalls. The trees, over-laden with fruits, bent to the ground as if to offer respects to the two brothers. The boys danced, played and wrestled. Sometimes they imitated the sounds and movements of animals such as frogs, monkeys and peacocks, or they chased shadows of birds along the ground. They played hide-and-seek and football with ball-shaped fruits.

While Krishna, Balaram and Their friends enjoyed their day in the forest, the other residents of Vrindavan eagerly awaited Their return. More than anyone it was the milkmaids of Vrindavan, the gopis, who would wait for Krishna, hoping to catch His loving glance. The gopis were Krishna's girlfriends and all loved Him dearly. On the warm evenings, when the moon was full, Krishna and the gopis would playfully dance in the groves along the Yamuna River. His sweet smiles and joking words captivated their hearts. Like everyone in Vrindavan, they were happily absorbed in thoughts of Him only.

One day, Krishna and Balaram left for Mathura, the city nearby. They promised to return, but never did. Nanda and Yashoda, the cowherd boys, and especially the gopis were all plunged into an ocean of grief.

Over the years, Krishna and Balaram became famous as royal princes ruling the kingdom of Dwarka. Long gone was the simple village life; they lived in great opulence in huge marble palaces bedecked with jewels. They had Their queens, Their children, Their ministers and Their vast armies.

Once, anxious to see His father and mother again, Balaram left Dwarka by chariot. Upon reaching Vrindavan He was enthusiastically greeted by all the residents. All the cowherd boys

and the gopis had now grown up. They embraced Him with tears and laughter. Nanda and Yashoda asked about the welfare of the two brothers and Their relatives.

The gopis had been heartbroken by Krishna's absence. Now they began to ask questions about Him. "Does He still remember His parents and His friends who loved Him dearly? Has He any plans to come to see us? There are so many sophisticated women in Dwarka and He must be happy in their company; does He still remember us simple village girls?"

As the gopis talked in this way, their feelings for Krishna became intense. Recalling his attractive features and sweet words, they could not check their feelings, and began to cry.

To pacify them, Lord Balaram stayed there for two months, relating the many stories of Krishna. And once again they enjoyed themselves on the banks of the river Yamuna. One evening Balaram had been drinking a beverage made of wild honey and in the silver light of the full moon, was smiling resplendently. He desired to bathe in the waters of the Yamuna, and called the river to come nearby. Yamuna, however, refused thinking Him to be drunk.

Balaram's eyes turned red in anger. Picking up His plough, He threatened to scratch the Yamuna into hundreds of scattered streams. Yamuna, afraid and trembling, appeared in person before Him. With folded hands she bowed before Him and begged His forgiveness. Balaram was pleased with Her and enjoyed bathing with the gopis in Her waters.

The River Yamuna still has many branches due to being scratched by the ploughshare of Balaram.

The two months passed as if they were no more than a day, Balaram and the Gopis so enjoyed themselves. In the company of Lord Balaram, the Gopis and other residents of Vrindavan became as cheerful as they had been before in the presence of both brothers.