

Incarnation Two

Kurma – The Turtle

Once, the saint Durvasa was walking down the road and he saw the king of the demigods, Indra, on the back of his white elephant. He smiled and taking a garland of marigolds from around his own neck, offered it to the king.

Indra, however, was too proud of his wealth and power. He took the garland, and without respect for the sage, placed it on the trunk of his elephant. The creature immediately dashed the garland to the ground.

His face red with anger, Durvasa cursed the king, “Because of your arrogance you will lose all of your opulence”.

Shortly afterwards the demons launched a powerful attack on the heavenly kingdom. Because of the curse, the demigods suffered heavy casualties. They feared total defeat at the hands of their enemies.

In desperation, their generals consulted Lord Vishnu who lives on an island within the ocean of milk. Standing on the jewelled shore of that ocean, they prayed to the Lord and received the following message, “My dear demigods, the demons have become too powerful for you. You must make a truce with them and offer to work together.” Vishnu then explained his plan of action.

Following this advice, King Indra approached the king of the demons. “My dear King Bali, I have plans to produce the most valuable medicine, the nectar of immortality. By drinking this anyone can live forever.”

Bali was interested and agreed to help. He thought “Once we’ve helped produce the nectar, we demons can easily steal it from the weakened demigods.” So he and Indra signed a truce.

With great effort the demigods and demons carried the golden mountain called Mandara to the ocean, to use as a churning rod. Together they requested the giant serpent Vashuki to serve as a rope for turning the rod. Vashuki reluctantly agreed.

Curling him round the mountain, the demons took hold of his head as they desired, leaving the demigods to hold his tail. First the demigods pulled, and the mountain turned one way. Then the demons pulled, and the mountain turned the other. After spinning only three or four times, the mountain sank deep into the mud at the bottom of the ocean. It needed a pivot on which to rest.

Both parties were frustrated and annoyed. As they pondered the problem, Lord Vishnu took the form of a gigantic turtle and lifted the golden mountain on his back. The demigods and the demons resumed their churning. This time the mountain turned smoothly on top of the turtle who enjoyed having his back scratched.

At first the churning produced a deadly black poison which floated over the waves, threatening to pollute the entire universe. The demigods were highly alarmed. They went to seek the help of Lord Shiva, the greatest of the demigods, who was sitting in meditation in the Himalayas. He agreed to help and by magic, he condensed all the poison into the palm of his hand. As he drank it, a few drops spilt and were drunk by scorpions, snakes and other poisonous creatures. The poison turned Lord Shiva's neck blue, and since then he has been known as "Nilakanta".

The demigods and demons continued to pull on the huge snake, churning the milky waters. Out of the ocean rose magical animals, sparkling gems, fragrant flowers and medicinal herbs.

At last, a beautiful blackish figure emerged from the waves. Dressed in yellow garments and decorated with red, green and blue gems, He carried a golden pot filled to the brim with nectar.

The demons immediately snatched the pot and ran off. They began to argue amongst themselves, "Hey! Why should you drink it first? What about me?"

The demigods were disappointed and prayed to Lord Vishnu for help. The Lord assumed the form of Mohini, an exquisitely beautiful woman. She had a darkish complexion, was dressed in a crimson sari and wore golden bangles. Her eyes moved restlessly, glancing over the demons.

The Asuras were enamoured by her feminine movements. Handing over the jug of nectar, they asked her to settle their dispute.

Mohini then seated them in a row and asked the demigods to do the same, some distance away. Sweetly addressing the demons, she said, "The demigods are very greedy to taste the nectar, so let me just give them a little. You are all great heroes. Because you are very patient, I know you won't mind waiting a little longer."

The demons were flattered and didn't dare say a word. They remained silent as Mohini served the nectar to their enemies – not just a little but every last drop.

Mohini then turned herself back into her original form of Vishnu. The demons' jaws dropped open; they had been tricked! They had worked so hard but achieved nothing.

The demigods had also worked very hard, but they had depended on God. Now they were freed from the miseries of old age, disease and death.