

## Exercise Sheet 7.4.1b (2): Dashavatara Stories

### 3. Varaha – The Boar

Hiranyaksha was a powerful demon. At the time of his birth unlucky omens appeared everywhere. Violent winds uprooted trees, volcanoes erupted and inky clouds rained endlessly as lightning slashed the sky. Owls screeched fiercely, wolves howled at the moon and trembling cows gave blood instead of milk.

Hiranyaksha grew to be as large as a mountain. His golden crown appeared to kiss the sky. The earth quaked as he walked. Greater than his height was his pride, but even greater was his greed. He mined so much gold from the Earth that the planet lost its balance, fell out of orbit and plunged into the ocean at the bottom of the Universe.

The proud Hiranyaksha dived into the ocean, terrifying all the sea creatures as he whirled his golden club. He was eager to fight and looked for Varuna, the lord of the waters. Coming face-to-face with Varuna, he challenged him to combat.

“I have stopped fighting now due to old age,” said Varuna. “However, you are so expert in fighting that the only person equal to you is Lord Vishnu himself. When you meet him, he will destroy your pride and you will lie down to sleep on the battlefield.”

Not caring for the words of Varuna, Hiranyaksha left in search for his enemy. Meanwhile, Lord Vishnu, in His form as a huge red boar, entered the cosmic ocean. Sniffing through the mud at the bottom, He found the earth planet. Then, lifting it on His two white tusks, He rose out of the water.

Hiranyaksha was waiting, very angry. “Oh amphibious beast,” he cried, “this Earth is mine. Today I will please my demon friends by smashing your skull.”

Lord Varaha was concerned to protect Mother Earth and so raced through space with the planet on His tusks.

Hiranyaksha followed him shouting “Coward! Come back! Come back!”

Lord Varaha is in charge of the law of gravity. Making the Earth very light, he gently placed her on the surface of the sea where she floated like a turquoise ball.

With the earth now safe, Varaha turned to Hiranyaksha and laughed mockingly, “I am indeed the beast out to kill dogs like you. I am not afraid for you are a mortal, bound by the laws of death. Give up your foolish talk and fight.

Hiranyaksha, trembling with anger and hissing like a cobra, sprang at the Lord with his golden club. Varaha dodged the blow and struck out with His own mace. As the fight raged on, both were injured and the smell of blood increased their fury.

From up on high the residents of the heavens watched this terrible fight. They begged Lord Varaha “please, do not play any longer with this wicked demon. Finish him off quickly.”

Lord Varaha glanced lovingly at His devotees, then sprang at Hiranyaksha, aiming His mace at the demon's chin. But Hiranyaksha knocked the mace from Varaha's hand and sent it spinning deep into space.

The demigods cried in alarm, 'Alas! Alas! What will happen now?'

Lord Varaha called for His famous disc weapon and it appeared in the sky, razor-sharp and whirling like a circular saw.

Seeing this, Hiranyaksha exploded with fury. Glaring at the Lord with burning eyes, he hurled his mace, screaming "Now you are slain!"

The Lord deftly knocked it away with His left foot. Then coolly and calmly He said, "Pick up your weapon and try again?"

Roaring like a lion, the demon again hurled his mace. But the divine boar easily caught it just like a hawk catches a mouse. He offered it to the demon. "Why don't you try again?" He asked.

Hiranyaksha became ashamed and angry. Taking instead a flaming trident, he hurled it with all his might towards the Lord.

Varaha easily cut it into seven pieces with His razor-sharp disc.

Using his magical powers the demon became invisible. Fierce winds blew from all directions: stones dropped out of the sky; angry clouds poured down blood, urine, hair and bones; armies of fierce demons appeared as if from nowhere riding on phantom horses and elephants.

Using His own mystical powers, the Lord dispelled the demon's magic. Still Hiranyaksha did not give up. He ran up to the lord, embraced Him and tried to crush Him with his powerful arms.

The demigods watched in horror. Seeing their forlorn faces, Lord Varaha decided; "I've played with this demon long enough."

Casually, He slapped Hiranyaksha at the base of his ear. Hiranyaksha's body quivered; his eyeballs bulged out of their sockets; and he fell down dead like a huge tree cut down by a hurricane.

Lord Varaha placed the earth back into its correct orbit. The demigods were overjoyed and praised the Lord, "You are not forced like us to take your birth but you do so by your own free will. You appear in a form just suitable to perform your mission of rescuing the Earth from a dirty place."

### Questions:

1. Who or what does Lord Varaha protect?
2. Who did he punish?
3. What does he teach, through this story, do you think?

## 4. Narasingha – The Man-Lion

When Hiranyakashipu heard of the death of his twin brother Hiranyaksha, he became enraged. Staring up into the sky with blazing eyes, he clenched his fists. “Fellow demons,” he cried out, “I will defeat the demigods and conquer the entire universe. I will destroy Vishnu by slicing His head from His body.”

Afraid, though, of meeting the same fate as his brother, Hiranyakashipu decided to become immortal. He went to a quiet and lonely valley where he performed austerities. He stood on tiptoe, raising his arms above his heads and fixing his gaze on the top of the sky. He did not eat, drink or sleep. He remained fixed in that position for a hundred and twenty five years – so long that the ants built a nest around him and devoured his flesh. Blazing fire issued from his hair, drying up the seas and scorching the entire universe.

Lord Brahma, the creator of the world, became alarmed. Riding on his swan, he appeared before the demon. “Oh king of the Asuras,” Brahma said, “I am astonished at your determination. Please tell me, what is it that you want so badly?” He sprinkled holy water on the skeleton, which immediately changed it into the body of a muscular, young man.

Bowing down respectfully to Lord Brahma, Hiranyakashipu requested, “My desire is to become immortal. I wish to live forever.”

“I can’t help you,” Lord Brahma replied, “for though I live for millions of years, even I must die one day. How can I give you something which I myself do not have?”

Hiranyakashipu was disappointed. After all these years of hardship, he was not going to give up his life’s ambition. His eyes lit up with an idea. “Then let me not be killed by any creature created by you – by any demigod, human being or animal,” he requested.

“That benediction I can grant,” replied Lord Brahma.

“And let me die neither inside nor outside any building.”

“That’s fine,” agreed Lord Brahma.

“And let me die neither during the day nor during the night. Let me not be killed either in the sky, or on the land, or in the sea. And let me not be killed by any weapon.”

“Yes, those wishes I grant you,” said Lord Brahma. And smiling, he mounted his swan aeroplane and left for his heavenly home.

Hiranyakashipu laughed, believing himself now to be immortal. Travelling throughout the universe, he defeated the rulers of each planet, until he conquered Indra, King of the demigods. Living in Indra’s palace, Hiranyakashipu enjoyed a life of great luxury. He was very proud of his wealth, his huge army and his beautiful wife. He took even greater pride in his young son, called Prahlaad, hoping he would grow up to be a powerful demon.

Though constantly drunk with wine, Hiranyakashipu never forgot his vow to kill Lord Vishnu. When Prahlad was five years old his father began to notice there was something strange about the boy. He was neither proud nor greedy. Indeed, he was quite calm and kind-hearted. Hiranyakashipu was concerned. Taking his son onto his lap he said: “You are very intelligent. But tell me, what is the most important thing you have learned at school?”

The small boy replied “Studying about politics and the art of war is a waste of time. Those who are really intelligent have no enemies because they understand that they are servants of Lord Vishnu, who lives in everyone’s heart.”

“You fool!” Hiranyakashipu bellowed, thrusting his son to the floor. “Guards! This boy serves my enemy. Take him and kill him!”

The king’s servants were frightful, with long sharp teeth and twisted faces. Prahlad, however, remained calm as they surrounded him. Though they attacked him viciously with spears, swords and tridents, they failed to pierce his tender skin.

Hiranyakashipu ordered them to hurl the child from the top of a cliff. But, protected by the Lord, Prahlad floated like a feather to the ground. They threw him before a charging elephant, which came to a sudden halt just short of the boy. They cast him into a pit of seething snakes that refused to bite him. They tried everything to kill Prahlad – poisoning him, starving him, freezing him, burning him, and frying him in a cauldron of oil. None of these had even the slightest effect on the boy, who remained smiling as he prayed to his Lord.

The servants defeated, dragged Prahlad again before his ferocious father. “How dare you defy me,” Hiranyakashipu demanded, “for I control the entire universe. But tell me, where do you get this power of yours that you cannot be killed?”

“Dear father”, Prahlad replied “the source of my strength is also source of yours – Vishnu Himself.”

“What? You dare to say there is someone greater than me? You must wish to die by my hands. You speak of a god, but tell me Prahlad, where is this god of yours?”

“He is everywhere, father.”

“Is He here? Is he in this pillar?” the demon taunted. “Then let me see him protect you now.” Drawing his sword, Hiranyakashipu struck its hilt against the pillar.

As it crumbled in a cloud of dust, a deafening roar reverberated throughout the palace. The earth trembled. Hiranyakashipu watched with wide eyes as an enormous creature emerged from the remains of the pillar. Though walking on two legs, he had the head of a lion. His eyes blazed like fire, his golden mane shook like a million snakes and his long tongue flicked about like a duelling sword. “Who is this strange creature?” Hiranyakashipu thought, “Is this Lord Vishnu, my arch-enemy?”

Never before had he seen such awesome anger. But remembering that he, the king of the demons, was immortal, he was unafraid. Flashing his razor-sharp sword, Hiranyakashipu charged the creature.

And so they fought, sometimes on the ground, and sometimes in the sky. Lord Narasingha was playing with the demon as an eagle plays with a mouse. Sometimes He caught him, sometimes He let him escape. Finally, in the doorway of the palace, the Lord seized Hiranyakashipu. He placed him on His lap and with His lion claws, ripped open the demon's belly.

The demon king was killed neither in the day nor at night, but at dusk as the sun touched the horizon. He was not killed in the air, nor on the land, nor in the sea, but on the lap of Lord Vishnu. He was not killed inside a building or outside, but in the porch of the palace. He was not killed by any weapon, but by the nails of the Lord Himself. Not was he killed by any creature, be it be demigod, human or animal, but by the Lord in His form as half man and half lion.

In this way, Lord Vishnu protected His dear devotee, Prahlad, and at the same time ensured that Lord Brahma's promises were not broken. Hiranyakashipu had failed to outwit the lord.

Pacified by the selfless prayers of the gentle Prahlad, Narasingha said "Mr dear Prahlad, best of the Asuras, all good fortune to you! You may ask Me any benediction you may desire."

"My Lord," the boy replied, "please do not tempt me. I am not a businessman, serving You only to meet my own ends. I am happy simply to remain Your servant, life after life."

Narasingha, however, insisted.

"Then I ask You only one benediction," Prahlad consented. "That You please excuse my father for all his sinful activities."

"My dear Prahlad," The Lord replied "because your unflinching devotion your father and twenty one generations of your family have already been liberated from the endless cycle of birth and death."

To this day, whenever there is danger from enemies, the devotees of Vishnu remember how Narasingha rescued Prahlad, and they pray for His protection.

### Questions:

1. Who does Lord Narasimha protect?
2. So which section of society does he (answer to question 1) represent?
3. Who did Narasimha punish, and why?
4. What does Narasimha teach, through this story, do you think? Clue: think about all those benedictions given by Brahman