

Incarnation Five

Vamana – The Dwarf

Millions of years ago, the head of the demons, King Bali, attacked the demigods. With hordes of elephants, cavalry, chariots and footmen, they fought for control of the universe.

After being heavily defeated, Indra, the king of the demigods, consulted his spiritual teacher. “Even those who are evil may achieve temporary success,” said his guru. “Because of his penances and charity, Bali has become extremely powerful. Don’t try to resist him at the moment.” Taking their guru’s advice, the demigods retreated, giving up their kingdoms and taking refuge in the lower planets. Bali moved into Indra’s palace and began to rule the universe.

Indra’s mother felt sorry for her son and appealed to Lord Vishnu for help. In response, the lord agreed to become her son. He entered her womb and in due course took birth, appearing in his blackish form, with four arms and dressed in yellow garments. Soon after this, he changed his form into that of a dwarf, called Vamana. He appeared to be student priest, wearing a deerskin and a sacred thread and carrying a staff, umbrella and a water-pot

He made his way to the palace of Bali. Just at that moment, the king was preparing for a religious ceremony. Lord Vamana shone so brilliantly as he entered the arena that the priests thought that the sun-god himself had arrived.

King Bali became jubilant upon the sight of the beautiful boy. He welcomed him and offered him a seat. Having worshipped him by bathing his feet, he said, “It is customary that a king give charity to the brahmins. What may I give you? You can take anything you want. Food, cows, horses, elephants, chariots, houses, villages, gold – whatever your heart may desire.”

“O King of demons,” Vamana replied, “I ask only for three paces of your majesty’s land, measured by my own footsteps.”

King Bali was taken aback. “Is that all you want?”

“A brahmin should not ask more than what he needs,” replied Vamana. “I require only enough land upon which to sleep.”

The king shook his head in disbelief. “My dear Vamana, although you are very learned, you are only a boy. Therefore, you are not so intelligent and don’t know what’s best for you. Take this opportunity; I could easily give you an entire planet.”

“Thank you.” Lord Vamana replied. “However, only one who is not greedy, and is content with whatever God provides, is truly happy. If I were not happy with three paces of land, I’d also be dissatisfied with an entire planet. And if I did own a planet, then surely I’d want another, and another. A person unable to control his greed cannot be happy even if he owns the universe. Therefore, all I ask of you is three paces of land.”

“All right,” the king reluctantly agreed. “Take whatever you like. Go ahead, pace out your three steps of land.”

Lord Vamana, the dwarf, began to grow, and grow. With his first step he covered half the universe. As his second step crossed beyond the heavenly planets, his big toe pierced the covering at the edge of the universe. Not a square inch of land remained for his third step.

Returning to his original size, Vamana, said “ Oh King, you owned all land throughout the universe as far as the sun, moon and stars. With two paces I’ve taken it all from you. But remember, you promised me three steps of land.

Bali was perplexed. How could he keep his promise? He realised that it was Lord Vishnu Himself who had appeared as a dwarf simply to cheat him. The king replied, “Oh Lord, You are always good, whether You punish or reward. You appear to be my enemy, for You side with the demigods. But actually You are my true friend, helping me understand how this life and any possessions are temporary. Nothing in this world escapes the ravages of time. You have taken all my wealth, but I still have myself. Please place Your third step on my head.”

At that moment Bali’s wife stepped forward and addressed the Brahmin boy, “Lord Vamana, foolish men think they own something. But, in reality, everything belongs to you. Though my husband is offering you his body, he does not realise that it is on loan from you. Please forgive his foolishness.”

Lord Vamana was gently smiling and replied, “My dear queen, your husband has greatly pleased me. Determined to give me everything, he kept nothing for himself. By his full surrender he has proven to be my true devotee. For this you shall both live on the subterranean planet called Sitala; it is more opulent than even the celestial realms.”

After this incident, the demigods defeated the demons and recaptured their heavenly planets. Since that time King Bali has become famous as one who surrendered everything, including himself, to the service of the lord.