



JULY 2020 - Volume 18 Number 07

The Vedanta Kyokai Newsletter

NEWS, UPDATES AND MISCELLANY FROM THE VEDANTA SOCIETY OF JAPAN

AUGUST 2020
Calendar

Birthdays

**Swami
Niranjanananda**
Monday, 3 August



**Sri Krishna
Janmashtami**
Tuesday, 11 August

Swami Advaitananda
Tuesday, 18 August

Zushi Events

We are pleased to announce that we have decided to re-open our monthly programmes for participation to all from July.

Details on page 02!



✧ Thus Spake ✧

"We have to surrender ourselves completely to the Lord with faith and devotion in Him, serve others to the best of our capacity, and never be a source of sorrow to anybody."

- Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi

"Let your thoughts be inspired by Mazda Ahura (God); your words dictated by Mazda Ahura; and your deeds guided by Mazda Ahura."

- Zarathushtra

Monthly Zushi Retreat
June 2020

'Lord Buddha and His Teachings' A talk by Swami Medhasananda

The discourse began with readings from 'The Teachings of the Buddha' in Japanese and English:

'My disciples the teachings I have given you are never to be forgotten or abandoned. They are always to be treasured. They are to be thought about, they are to be practiced. If you follow these teachings you will always be happy. The point of the teachings is to

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Vedanta Society of Japan Calendar of Programmes AUGUST 2020

The Society had stopped general participation of its programmes since March of this year because of the state of emergency declared by the Government of Japan, and also to avoid risks of contamination in view of the corona virus pandemic.

Because the situation has improved considerably in Japan, the Government has withdrawn the state of emergency and allowed travelling throughout the country, including in and around the Tokyo and Yokohama regions of the Kanto area. We are glad to announce that we have decided to re-open our monthly programmes for participation to all from July.

However, whether attendees arrive by public transportation or private vehicle, the following precautionary measures need to be followed strictly by attendees:

- 1. If you plan to attend scheduled events, please contact: <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>*
- 2. Wear masks at all times in the Centre*
- 3. Use the hand sanitizer provided at the entrance upon arrival*
- 4. Carefully wash hands with soap and water and gargle with tap water (washrooms)*

*Swami Medhasananda
President
Vedanta Society of Japan*

• ZUSHI CENTRE PROGRAMMES for AUGUST 2020 •

- August 1st (Sat) 2 pm–4 pm

Discourse on the Bhagavad Gita (in Japanese Only)

With Swami Medhasanandaji

Please Note: The Bhagavad Gita study class at the Indian Embassy, Tokyo, suspended since March of this year, will be resumed through livestreaming from the Society until further notice. Also, please have a copy of the Gita at hand to follow the Live Stream.

If you plan to attend, please contact: <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>

- August 9th (Sun) 2pm–4pm

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna Study Class

(in Japanese Only)

- August 16th (Sun) 2 pm–4:30 pm

Monthly Retreat Observing Sri Krishna's Birth

Talk Topic: Sri Krishna

Speaker: Swami Divyanathananda

(in both English & Japanese)

If you plan to attend, please contact: <benkyo.nvk@gmail.com>

- August 23rd (Sun) 2pm–4pm

Half Day Retreat at Zushi Centre

Topical Discourse (in Japanese only)

Lord Buddha and His Teachings (from page 1)

control your own mind. Keep your mind from greed and you will keep your behaviour right, your mind pure, and your words faithful. By always thinking about the transiency of your life you will be able to resist greed and anger, and will be able to avoid all evils. If you find your mind tempted and so entangled in greed, you must suppress and control the temptation.

Be the master of your own mind. A man's mind may make him a Buddha or it may make him a beast. Misled by error one becomes a demon. Enlightened, one becomes a Buddha. Therefore control your mind and do not let it deviate from the right path. You should respect each other, follow my teachings, and refrain from disputes. You should not, like water and oil, repel each other, but should, like milk and water, mingle together, study together, learn together, practice my teachings together. Do not waste your mind and time in idleness and quarrelling.

Enjoy the blossoms of enlightenment in their season and harvest the fruit of the right path. The teachings I have given you I gained by following the path myself. You should follow these teachings and conform to their spirit on every occasion. If you neglect them, it means you have never really met me. It means you are far from me, even if you are actually with me. But if you accept and practice my teachings, then you are very near to me, even though you are far away.'

Lord Buddha's Birth

According to the Indian Lunar Calendar, Lord Buddha's birthday was on May 6th this year. It was on the day of the full moon of Vaisakha (mid-April), the first lunar calendar month, and according to this same calendar, Lord Buddha (Buddha Deva) was born, got His enlightenment (Nirvana), and also passed away (Mahaparinirvana), all on the same full moon day (Pūrṇimā) of the first Indian month of Vaisākha. Hence, Buddha Purnima, is observed in India as a thrice blessed day. This is indeed very unusual, and I do not know of any other prophet anywhere to have been born, get enlightenment, and pass away on the same day of the year. Buddha Deva was born in 480 B.C., or about two thousand five hundred years ago, and He passed away at the age of eighty. He lived a rather long, fruitful and meaningful life. He was born into an aristocratic family of the Shakya clan, He was of a royal lineage, as His father and his father before him were all kings of a small kingdom. He later renounced this family and took up life as a mendicant monk, practiced spiritual austerities, and reached enlightenment.

As a monk He would beg for His food on some occasions, and once He visited His birthplace at Kapilavastu where He begged for food. His father, King Suddhodana, learned that his son was there and sent a message objecting to His begging, explaining that it was not the custom of one born of royal lineage to beg for one's food. Buddha's answer to this was very significant. He told the messenger to inform the king that 'Buddha' was born in a different lineage, the lineage of Buddha, and according to this Buddha lineage, He was obliged to beg for His food.

Did Buddha Deva, born so long ago, really die? Did Jesus Christ die with His crucifixion? Did Sri Ramakrishna die of cancer? The answer to all these is, 'Actually, no!' Not only do they live through their teachings and followers, inspiring and guiding millions of people, they live on in a subtle plane guiding and inspiring aspirants. They still appear before those devotees who sincerely aspire and prepare to have their vision. In Bengali there is a couplet sang that says '*The divine play of Sri Chaitanya continues even now; only the fortunate can witness it.*' The same may be said of the play of Sri Krishna, Lord Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Sri Ramakrishna as well. Once Swami Saradanandaji, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, was asked, "Maharaj, do you still have communion with Sri Ramakrishna?" Saradanandaji answered, "When I want to communicate with Sri Ramakrishna, I have to raise my mind to a higher level where I can have communion with Him, as they live in a very subtle and high plane."

Lord Buddha and His Teachings (from page 3)

Why did Buddha renounce family and worldly life? When He was born, an astrologer made a prophesy to His father, King Suddhodana, that if this new-born baby, Siddhartha, continues to live life as a prince, he will conquer the whole world as a great emperor. However, if he gives up the world, He will be a saviour of all humanity. Of course, the king did not want his son to renounce the world, but instead to become his successor to the throne. So the king made special arrangements for the prince to live in a garden of pleasure full of all types of merriment, music and dance. All opportunities to observe suffering of any kind were eliminated from the palace grounds. Even when the prince went out to enjoy charioting around the city, all aged, sick and otherwise distraught persons along the pathway of the chariot and His entourage, were to be removed from sight.

Siddhartha Learns of Old Age, Disease and Death

Prince Siddhartha, also known as Gautama, was married to a beautiful girl and passed his days in enjoyments and great affluence. Siddhartha's destiny, however, was to be the saviour of humanity, and all the king's careful arrangements and diversions could not redirect His destiny. One day while out riding in his chariot, Siddhartha happened upon a man who was quite clearly suffering, and not the figure of health and happiness. He asked his loyal charioteer, Chhandaka, about it, as it was his first encounter with such a scene. He asked, "Chhandaka, what happened to that man, why is he suffering like that?"

Chhandaka answered, "Because he is suffering from a serious disease."

"Is this suffering from disease something quite exceptional?" the prince then asked.

"No, my Prince! It is quite common," Chhandaka answered.

"Can it happen to me?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"Can it happen to my wife, Yaśodharā?"

"Yes, sir."

Siddhartha was shocked upon hearing this ...

On another ride into the city, Siddhartha spotted a man with thinning white hair apparently having trouble walking upright, as he needed the support of a stick and gasped for air. Again, Siddhartha asked Chhandaka, "What has happened to this man? Why is this man so thin and needs to support himself with a stick just to walk? Is this unusual?" He asked this because all of the staff and servants and guests of the palace were young and beautiful. No elderly men or women were allowed on the palace grounds and Siddhartha had never witnessed an aged person. The charioteer then explained that such a condition is common to all, as all are born and grow old with time.

"Will I experience old age like this man?" he asked. "Will I suffer this as well? Will it happen to my wife, Yaśodharā?"

Chhandaka answered to all these, "Yes, my Prince, it is the natural state of human beings."

Lord Buddha and His Teachings (from page 4)

On the third chariot ride the prince saw that someone was lying on a stretcher borne by four people, while several other people surrounding the stretcher were crying and lamenting. Again, Siddhartha asked his charioteer what had happened to the person on the stretcher, why was he being carried like that, and why were all the people around him crying. Chhandaka explained that the person lying on the stretcher had died and that they were carrying the corpse to the funeral pyre to be burnt. Again, Siddhartha asked the charioteer if this was something unusual, to which Chhandaka explained that people are born, they grow up, they grow old and then they die.

“Will I have to die?”

“Yes!”

“Will my dear wife, Yaśodharā, also die?”

“Yes, sir, everyone without exception dies.”

This shocked Siddhartha terribly.

The Prince Renounces the World

Seeing these three; the sick, the old, and the dead, made Siddhartha very pensive and thoughtful. Gradually a distaste for the atmosphere of enjoyment of life in the palace began to grow in him, but the new experiences he had in travelling by chariot did not end there. On another occasion he saw a man dressed in an unusual colour of cloth with a shaved head, looking bright, joyful and peaceful. Yet, this man was obviously begging. Siddhartha asked his charioteer who this person dressed so unusually and appearing so peaceful might be, “I have never encountered such a person,” He said.

“My Prince, he is a mendicant monk” said the charioteer. “He has given up his family and a worldly life in search of eternal peace and joy.”

This answer sparked a glimmer of hope in Siddhartha’s mind, while he constantly pondered the truths of life. His conclusion was as Chhandaka had already pointed out, that suffering is universal, and that old age, disease and death befall everyone. He wondered if there was any way to rid people of this suffering, since it was universal. How could one help humanity and stop this suffering? How, in spite of these sufferings, could one get peace and joy? He was constantly deliberating on this. Finally, he concluded that the remedy to this problem would be impossible to find living in the palace the life of a prince. A son had already been born to him, but he decided to give up his family, his wife and son, and his kingdom, to find a solution to suffering for all of humanity.

His renunciation was not a quest for personal freedom or even realization of God, but a devoted search for a way to remove the suffering of humanity as a whole, and to bring peace and joy to all. This shows the heart of Buddha, His tremendous compassion for all. It is for this reason He gave up a worldly life and embraced a life of a renunciate. Then began his long, hard term of

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• Thought of the Month •

"Do not dwell in the past,
do not dream of the future,
concentrate the mind
on the present moment."

- The Buddha

Lord Buddha and His Teachings (from page 5)

spiritual practices; His practice of austerity and concentration in search of an answer to universal sufferings. Finally, after years of hard struggle He did find the way when He attained Enlightenment in a place called Buddhagaya, near the famous place of Hindu pilgrimage, Gaya.

Four Noble Truths

Buddha found the sources for our sufferings revealed in the 'Four Noble Truths' and how our sufferings can be remitted by following the 'Noble Eightfold Path' found in the Fourth Noble Truths. Realising these truths through great effort and several years, He began His career as a teacher of others. I have observed in this country that many believe Buddhism is a completely independent religion absolutely separate from Hinduism, and Lord Buddha's teachings are all original ideas. Actually, this is not so. Buddha had a sharp intellect along with many other excellent qualities, and it is quite natural that He had studied Hindu scripture, including the Upanishads, deeply. In this sense it is not at all unusual that His many great teachings are influenced by Upanishadic teachings. As in the case of Jesus, who of course, was brought up with Jewish traditions, knew Hebrew scripture, though He had His own way of understanding God, and teaching this to His disciples. Buddha, too, though influenced by Hindu philosophical thought, had His own ideas and a unique way of presenting that philosophy, which was well organised, precise and practical.

Not only that, some of the Hindu practices of Buddha's day were abominable, such as the slaughter of animals in the name of pleasing the Lord. Such abhorrent practices in Hinduism were subject to criticism by the compassionate Buddha, who advocated for the elimination of such cruel practices altogether. If we look at the present state of Buddhism in many countries, we find lots of interpretations of Buddha's teachings, some diluted and some distorted as well. It is difficult to know, by studying some popularised teachings of present day Buddhism, what Lord Buddha actually taught; hence, we need go to original sources of such teachings. There are books that contain Buddha's actual teachings, such as *The Teachings of the Buddha*, that we (Vedanta Society) use for our weekly Sunday reading. One of the benefits of using *The Teachings of the Buddha* is that it contains many stories and parables that He used to teach. This is the usual practice of many great spiritual teachers.

In the Upanishads as well, we find examples and stories. Jesus taught with lots of parables, too. Sri Ramakrishna, as well, used examples and parables. Why? Because the highest spiritual truths are so subtle, that unless they are explained in this way, the people cannot understand them. These words are so different from ordinary, secular teachings, because of their uncommonness and subtlety, teachers enlist the help of stories and parables so that truth can be more easily understood by aspirants. This will help them in their spiritual practice as well.

Simple Tales / Subtle Content.

Let us quote now some examples that the Buddha used followed by commentary:

- *"Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared."*

Our experience is that if we have money and share it with others our money supply is decreased, so we are afraid of sharing. If we share food with others, our supply of food is decreased. This is the reason we are afraid of sharing with others, because we will have less and less to enjoy for ourselves. There are certain things, however, that are increased in sharing. One is learning—the more you share learning, the more learning increases. Happiness, too, is never

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Lord Buddha and His Teachings (from page 6)

decreased by being shared. If you show a smiling face to others, there is little danger you will lose your smile to others. In fact, showing a smile to others increases your smile. A beautiful example of this is candlelight—from one candle thousands of candles can be lit and that same candle is not extinguished.

- *"Those who seek Enlightenment must be careful of each of their steps. No matter how high one's aspiration may be, it must be attained step by step. The steps of the path to Enlightenment must be taken in our everyday life."*

He then gives an example of a very foolish rich man. This man happens to see a three storey building and the 3rd storey was especially beautiful and magnificent. He thought, 'I, too, am a rich man, and I want such a beautiful 3rd storey for myself.' So he asks a carpenter if he can build him a 3rd storey as fine as that one. The carpenter answered that indeed he could, and soon the foundation was in and work on the ground floor began. Seeing this the rich man became angry and asked why the carpenter was wasting time on a foundation and ground floor when all he wanted was the 3rd storey!

Is it possible to build a 3rd storey alone without a foundation, a ground floor and a 1st floor? Are our spiritual desires not like this foolish rich man's? We want the result without preparing and paying the price for it. With regard to secular matters, everyone understands that any great achievement is not possible overnight. If one wants to be rich, just think how difficult it is to earn money—how much striving is necessary—or if one wants to excel in sports and games and win an Olympic medal, or to become an accomplished musician, or a great scholar. Everyone understands that by a mere wish we cannot achieve such goals, success requires long and hard striving.

It is truly a great irony that in spiritual matters everyone wants control of the mind and to enjoy peace of mind overnight! Such people do a little practice, and what they do is mostly in a casual way, and then approach the spiritual teacher saying they have done this and that practice, and ask why they have not yet realised God:

"Why doesn't Sri Ramakrishna appear before me?"

"Why can I still not control my passions and emotions?"

"Why can I still not control my mind?"

After doing only a little practice we expect great results, like the foolish man who wanted just the 3rd storey. Just the success without undergoing the preparation of hard practice. If we practice sincerely with faith on our part, some progress will surely come, but the grace of God is also necessary, and if we do not strive, we can be certain God's grace will not come. In fact, a desire to strive for the highest, is in itself by God's grace. More grace will not come unless we utilise the grace God has already given to us.

Parables and Fables

Here is an abbreviated parable:

- *On a mountain in the Himalayas lived a parrot with other animals. Then lightning ignited a great fire and the parrot thought, 'This forest and its trees have given me refuge, so I must do something to extinguish the fire to save these trees.' With this in mind the parrot dipped itself into a pond and flew to the flames shaking droplets of water onto the flames again and again. He*

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Lord Buddha and His Teachings (from page 7)

repeated this act diligently with a heart of compassion and out of gratitude to the trees. A great god of the mountains witnessed the act of the parrot and was very impressed. The god then appeared before the parrot and asked, 'What are you doing? Your wings carry such a small quantity of water, how can you hope to extinguish the fire?'

The parrot answered, 'Never you mind, I shall continue even unto my next life!'

The god was so impressed with this dedication, that he joined the parrot and used his great powers to help, and together they extinguished the flames.

We see in this parable how the striving and the show of compassion of the little bird so impressed a god, that he appeared before the bird and helped it extinguish the forest fire. This is an example of how God's grace helps the spiritual aspirant, provided we strive like that bird.

Lord Buddha also taught from ancient fables, and I am sure each of you will enjoy this one. I am also inserting a quiz into this fable, and I don't think the answer will come very easily for most. There is a great teaching behind this story of a country where it was the peculiar and inhuman custom for their aged people to be abandoned in a remote and inaccessible mountainous area. Where, obviously, for lack of food and shelter, they would die in the most miserable condition. When the father of a minister of that kingdom became old, the time drew near for the minister to abandon his father too. The minister, however, struggled with the idea of leaving his father to die in such a state. So instead, he secretly hid his father and cared for him.

• One day a powerful god appeared before the king of that country and posed a puzzling problem, saying that if the king could not solve the problem satisfactorily, the kingdom would be destroyed. "Here are two serpents (snakes)," the god continued, "tell me the sex of each." Knowing little about snakes, neither the king nor anyone in the palace could solve the problem, so the king offered a great reward to anyone in the kingdom who could answer the question. Hearing this, the minister went to visit his wise father he had hidden and asked him the answer to the problem. 'It is an easy solution,' the old man exclaimed. 'Place the two serpents on a soft carpet and the one that moves around is the male, and the other that keeps quiet is the female.' The minister then brought that answer to king and that problem was solved.

• With this answer the god asked another question: *Who is the one being asleep is called the Awakened One, and being awake is called the Sleeping One?* Again the correct answer came from the minister's old father: *'It is the one who is under training for Enlightenment, for he is awake compared to those who are not at all interested in Enlightenment. Again, he is also asleep compared to those who have already attained Enlightenment.'*

What is the meaning of Buddha in English? - The Awakened One. He is Eternally Awakened, and we are the Eternally Sleeping! Sleeping in this instance is ignorance, and being awakened is knowledge! What is night to one (the ignorant) is day to another (the Enlightened) and what is day to one (the ignorant) is night to another (the Enlightened). Ordinary people have full interest in all manner of secular matters and little or no interest in spiritual matters at all. So in secular matters most people are quite awake, but in spiritual matters they are fast asleep. Souls like Sri Ramakrishna are just the opposite! He is completely awakened in spiritual matters and asleep regarding secular matters.

In this context I quote one relevant verse from the Bhagavad Gita:

*yā niśhā sarva-bhūtānāṃ tasyāṃ jāgati sanyamī
yasyāṃ jāgrati bhūtāni sā niśhā paśhyato muneḥ*

(con't page 9)

*What is night to all ignorant beings,
to that Atman-Consciousness the self-controlled sage is awake;
and the sensate life to which all ignorant beings are awake,
that is like night to this illumined sage.*

But let us take an ordinary example without quoting Sri Ramakrishna, for instance, the best time for meditation is from about 4am to 6am, and is called Brahma-muhurtha (two hours before sunrise). Yogis who take up spiritual life very seriously meditate during these hours. In modern times many people find the hours of 4am to 6am most suitable for deep sleep, as they stay awake and go to bed quite late.

- The god then asked the king the meaning of another riddle: *"When is a cupful of water more than the water of an ocean?"* The minister's father also answered this saying, *"A cupful of water given in a pure and compassionate spirit to one's parents or to a sick person has an eternal merit, but the water of an ocean will some day come to an end."*

This next story teaches how one side of the coin comes with the other.

- *"Once a beautiful and well-dressed woman visited a house. The master of the house asked her who she was; and she replied that she was the goddess of wealth (Lakshmi). The master of the house was delighted and so welcomed her into his house and treated her nicely.*

"Soon after another woman appeared who was ugly looking and poorly dressed. The master asked who she was and the woman replied that she was the goddess of poverty. The master was frightened and tried to drive her out of the house, but the woman refused to depart, saying, 'The goddess of wealth is my sister. There is an agreement between us that we are never to live separately; if you chase me out, she is to go with me.' Sure enough, as soon as the ugly woman went out, the other woman disappeared."

Let me ask those present here: Is there anyone among you who desires suffering? No hands? OK, now is there anyone here who does not want pleasure and enjoyment? Again, no hands. So it is evident that we want to avoid suffering and we only want pleasure. There is a Bengali couplet that translates as: 'Pleasure and pain are twins, if one falls in love with one of these, the other will surely follow.' You need not invite the other—it will come by itself! It is just like the other story of the goddess of wealth and the goddess of poverty.

Obviously we are puzzled and wonder what our ideal course of action should be in such a situation. Our answer regarding the ideal course to be adopted by us involves two attitudes. One attitude is to see both happiness and suffering as nothing special. Meaning I want neither pleasure nor pain, but whatever comes, I will see it as a witness, both as it appears and as it disappears. Come what may, I will not be perturbed and will always remain in peace. In Chapter 13 of the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna says that both pleasure and pain are the consequence of the Three Gunas. So it will come and it will go, appear and disappear, both will pass. Let me just be the witness and observe the play of the three gunas in me, and not be affected by either of them. This is the attitude of jnanis, which one can practice and thus transcend both pleasure and pain and experience an abiding peace.

The other attitude is that of the bhakta, that both pleasure and pain come from God. In that way they bear with them calmly, without being overwhelmed by them, and focus on God. Hence,

the devotee's should pray thus, 'God, I seek neither pleasure nor avoid pain, I only want You and You alone.'

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Lord Buddha and His Teachings (from page 9)

This is also how Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother. This is the devotee's way to transcend both pleasure and pain and enjoy the everlasting peace for which Lord Buddha had always advocated. •



Swami Medhasananda with translator Leonardo Alvarez





Buddha Birth Celebration Bhajans w/ Swami Divyanathananda



Swami Medhasananda Resumes Gita Class at Zushi Centre on July 4th

● A Story to Remember ●

How Lord Krishna Was Born and Survived

Mother Earth, unable to bear the burden of sins committed by evil kings and rulers, appealed to Brahma the creator for help. Brahma, in turn, prayed to the Supreme Lord Vishnu, who assured Brahma that Vishnu would soon return Earth to annihilate tyrannical forces.

Kamsa, the ruler of Mathura (in northern India) was one such tyrant, inspiring fear among all the rulers. On the day Kamsa's sister Devaki was married to Vasudeva, a voice from the sky prophesied that Devaki's eighth son would destroy Kamsa.

Frightened, Kamsa jailed the couple and vowed to kill any child Devaki gave birth to. He made good on his word, killing the first seven infants Devaki bore Vasudeva, and the imprisoned couple feared their eighth child would meet the same fate.

Lord Vishnu appeared before them, telling them he would return to Earth in the guise of their son and rescue them from Kamsa's tyranny. When the divine baby was born, Vasudeva found himself magically freed from prison, and he fled with the infant to a safe house. Along the way, Vishnu removed obstacles like snakes and floods from Vasudeva's path.

Vasudeva gave the infant Krishna to a family of cowherds, exchanging him for a newborn girl. Vasudeva returned to the prison with the girl. When Kamsa learned of the birth, he rushed to the prison to kill the child. But when he arrived, the infant ascended to the heavens and was transformed into Goddess Durga. She warned Kamsa that his nemesis had already been born elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Krishna was being raised as a cowherd, leading an idyllic childhood. As he matured, he became a skillful musician, wooing the women of his village with his flute-playing. Eventually, he returned to Mathura, where he slew Kamsa and his henchmen, restored his father to power, and became friendly with many of Hinduism's heroes, including the warrior Arjuna.

- Summarised by Subhamoy Das

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