

The Twenty-four Teachers (from the Uddhava Gita of the Bhagavantam)

The blessed Lord said, "The destruction of the Yadavas has begun. When it is finished I shall return to My region." Uddhava noticed the evil portents and heard what Sri Krishna had said. He implored Krishna, "O Lord! You shall leave this earth soon. I cannot bear to leave Your Lotus Feet even for a moment. Take me also to your abode."

Sri Krishna replied, "I accomplished the purpose for which I have incarnated. As soon as I leave this earth, Kali will overtake it and men will become unrighteous.. Do not dwell in any given place here. Free yourself from all your attachments. Give up your affection for your friends, family and wealth. Fix your mind firmly on Me and roam over this earth, seeing Me in all beings, looking on all beings with equal eyes.

"Know that everything you see or grasp with the senses, or understand with your mind is unreal. It is all the creation of your mind and Maya. Therefore, control your mind and behold everything in the universe as your own Self. Realize the essence of your own nature, which is bliss and in harmony with the entire universe. See the whole universe in your Self and yourself in Me, the Supreme Lord.

"When you have detached yourself from the things of the world, when you have destroyed all egoism and risen above good and bad, the laws of the world will no longer affect you. The sense of right and wrong will then be natural to you, not dictated by something outside of you, whether scriptural or man-made. Karma cannot touch you then; you will have risen above it. For the good of the world, for the instruction of others you may perform or refrain from forbidden acts, but you will not be affected."

Uddhava, eager to be instructed by the blessed Lord, asked, "How is it possible to renounce desire and see the world as transitory for people like me who are still so immersed in worldliness.?"

Krishna replied by giving him a story. "In olden times, there once was a conversation between an Avadhuta and a king, who was sincere in his search for spiritual knowledge. The king saw the young Sanyasin, full of wisdom, wandering about fearlessly and put to him the following question:

'O Sage. How did you get this clear wisdom and light by which you were able to give up all attachments and roam fearlessly like a child, in perfect bliss? Generally in this world people exert themselves greatly for acquiring virtue or wealth or other desires, and will exert themselves to gain spiritual knowledge in order to free themselves from pain or obtain some personal gain. You are of sound body and mind, your speech is sweet and full of wisdom, and yet you neither work nor exert yourself in the least. People in this world are scorched by the fire of lust and greed. You seem to want nothing and are not affected by that fire. You live a solitary life, free of the objects of the world; you have neither family nor sensual enjoyment. What is the source of your joy?'

The young Sanyasin said, "Many are my preceptors. With the wisdom I have imbibed from them I roam about on this earth free from attachments. Listen who they are:

The earth, the wind, the sky, the water, the fire, the moon, the sun, the pigeon, the python, the sea, the moth, the bee, the elephant, the honey-gatherer, the deer, the fish, the prostitute, the crow, the child,

the maiden, the arrow-maker, the serpent, the spider and the beetle... all these are my gurus whom I have resorted to. I have learned all my lessons from their characteristic traits. Let me narrate to you what I have learned from each of them.

A wise man should not swerve from the Dharma even though he is oppressed by those who are themselves under the direction of providence. This forbearance I have learned from the earth, which is rarely appreciated for itself. It is trampled over and treated as dirt but it continues to be the source of life and nourishment. Although all its treasures may be taken from it, it continues to give, never thinking of itself but only of the good of others.

Like the wind, the Yogi should not be attached to objects, although he resides in a physical body and they may be all around him. His mind should remain unaffected by the good and evil consequences of objects just as the wind remains unaffected by the good or bad odor of objects over which it blows. The wind may be charged with odor but the odor is not the attribute of the wind. The soul enters the body and the attributes of the body seem to be its own, but it is not so.

I have learned from the sky that I am all-pervading, that I am not limited by the body, just as clouds cannot affect the sky. The sky is not touched by anything. It pervades everywhere and is independent of limitations due to time and place. Such is the case for the sage, as well.

Naturally pure and sweet water purifies whatever it comes in contact with. So is the sage among men. Like the holy water he purifies others by the mere sight and nearness to him. He eats the food offered by pious devotees and thereby, burns up their past and future evils.

Fire is one and the same although it may have entered different fuels where it may burn in a rectangular, circular or angular shape, where it may have a red or blue or white flame, where it may be gentle or raging and give warmth or destruction; but despite all these various forms the fire does not change. It remains the same. The Lord of the universe enters all the various objects, high and low, created by His own Maya, and appears to be like everyone of these objects, just as fire does in different fuels. Flames are subject to change but not fire; so also the body undergoes birth and death but not the Atma.

The waning and waxing of the moon is not due to any condition of the moon or any change in its substance; it is due only to the changing angle of the sun, whose rays get reflected by the moon. Birth, growth, decay, death are states of the body but not of Atma. The Atma remains ever as it is, although it seems to undergo change, just as the moon appears to change owing to astronomical motions.

The sun draws water by its rays but then gives it all away in time. So also, the sage takes in but only in order to give, not to add to his own possessions.

Too much attachment and infatuation, too much affection towards anything will cause your own destruction. This I learned from a pair of pigeons who were very devoted to each other and their family. When they were away from the nest gathering food for their young a fowler came and caught the little ones in his net. When the mother returned she had so much affection for her young she voluntarily entered the net to be with them. The male pigeon returning with food and seeing his whole family trapped in the net also entered the net. The hunter went home very satisfied. Thus the miserable family man who finds delight only in the married life and has not controlled his intense

attachment, comes to grief with all his relations, just like the pigeons. To be merely attached to the householder life like a bird, after having attained this rarest of births, which is the direct gateway to Moksha, is the height of folly and ignorance.

The python remains where he is and is content with whatever food comes to him. Like the python one should not make constant effort to fill his belly, but just swallow the morsels that are brought to him, delicious or distasteful, much or little. If no food reaches him he should lie quiet even for a long time subsisting on what destiny decrees and providence brings.

The sage should be calm, profound and deep, difficult to fathom, unperturbed by worldly circumstances, just like the tranquil ocean remains ever full within itself. Sometimes the ocean may receive volumes of water from the rivers, in other seasons there may be hardly any; but the ocean remains the same. Similarly, the sage who has set his heart on the Lord neither swells with joy when he has an abundance of enjoyable objects coming to him, nor shrinks with sorrow when he has none.

The man of uncontrolled senses, seeing a woman who is the enchantment created by the Lord, and is attracted by her behavior and feelings, falls into the blinding darkness of attachment and comes to grief. Allured by her, he loses his correct vision and perishes just as the moth is allured by the flame and falls into the fire.

The sage should wander from house to house, taking handfuls from each house until he gets just enough food for his sustenance, without making any house feel burdened, like the bee which gathers honey from many flowers. He should extract the essence from all scriptures, great or small, just as the bee does from the flowers. But there is another lesson from the bee. The sage should not store food for the evening or the next day. His hands or his stomach should be his only vessel. He should not hoard like the bee. He who stores food is destroyed with his store, just like the bee.

The Sanyasin should not touch even the wooden figure of a young woman, or even with his feet. If he does so, he would be caught like the elephant who is caught through his attachment for the touch of the she-elephant. The wise man should shun the company of women as if it were death to him; for he will come to destruction just like a weak elephant is killed by other elephants.

The miser who hoards wealth neither gives nor enjoys his riches. Whatever he collects with difficulty is carried away by some one else, just as the collector of honey carries away the honey collected by the bees. Like the collector of honey, the Sannyasin enjoys the good things which householders collect through hard-earned wealth.

The ascetic should not listen to sensuous music. He should learn a lesson from the deer which, enamoured by the hunters' music, gets ensnared. A sage born of a deer, listened to the sensuous music played by women and was easily entrapped by them. He became a toy and playmate in their hands.

Just as a fish that is attracted by the bait falls an easy victim to the hook, so also the foolish man who allows his sense of taste to overpower him and who is stupefied with the charms of taste and delicacies by the turbulent and greedy tongue, meets with destruction. The tongue and the love of taste are most difficult to conquer. If the sense of taste is controlled, all other senses are controlled. One cannot become master of his organs until he controls the organ of taste.

There was a public woman called Pingala. I have learnt something from her. One day she put on a beautiful dress and waited at the door of her house to receive customers for the night. With this inordinate desire she waited sleeplessly at the door, now going in, now coming out, until midnight. Through this anxious expectation of money, she spent the night in a fever of hope, worry and disappointment. She felt extreme disgust for her life of greed and desire which made her unhappy.

In her utter disappointment she thought to herself. 'Indifference to worldly objects is like a sword for cutting assunder all the cords of desire and expectation. One does not wish to get rid of bondage of the body until one has become disgusted. No man rids himself of the notions of 'mine' or 'I' or the clinging to objects until he gains some insight into the truth and becomes disgusted with the meanness of his life. Pingala said, 'How deluded am I for want of control over my mind! How foolish I have been to seek the satisfaction of desires from such puny creatures as men! Discarding the eternal Atma seated in my heart, who is a fit lover and can satisfy me, who can give me ever-lasting bliss and wealth, I am courting worthless men who cannot satisfy my desires and who cause misery, fear, disease, grief and infatuation. I have been very stupid indeed.

'I have alllicted my soul by this most reproachable mode of living. I have sought wealth and pleasure from pitiable mortals, who are greedy and slaves of women, by selling my body to them. How can I be carried away by living a life catering only to the body which is a house of bones covered with skin, hair and nails and furnished with nine openings for discharging filth, offal and urine?

'In this town full of wise beings, I am the only woman who has tied her hopes, happiness and desire to the body. I have become a silly, wicked woman who seeks enjoyment in the objects of desire instead of in the merciful Lord, who bestows Self-Realization. I will win Him over by giving up the body to Him; then I shall enjoy His company like Lakshmi and find everlasting happiness in Him alone.

'Surely I must have done something in my previous births to propitiate the Lord for it is by His grace alone that this dispassion and disgust, cutting at the very root of all my desires, has arisen in my mind. Through His grace I have attained the way to ever-lasting happiness and peace. If the Lord had not blessed me, such disappointments leading to renunciation and dispassion, would not have arisen; they enable me to abandon all attachments and attain happiness.

'I accept, with humble devotion, this gift of the Lord. I now abandon all evil desires and take refuge in the Supreme Lord. Contented, full of faith in the Lord, living on what chance brings to me, I shall enjoy the eternal bliss of the Paramatman. Who else but the Lord can save this Jiva who has fallen into the deep pit of Samsara with eyes blinded by objects, with the vision robbed by the senses, and who is being swallowed up by the serpent of Time?'

The Sanyasin said, "Pingala having thus fixed her mind on the Lord, gave up all hopes and expectations due to hankering for lovers, and sat on her bed with a serene mind. She abandoned all desires that troubled her and became happy. She slept soundly with a tranquil mind. It is hope that gives us trouble. Without hope we are happy. Desires, hopes and expectations are the source of grief. Abandonment of all expectations and desires is the greatest bliss. It is the happiest state. Vairagya is the source of bliss as can be seen from Pingala who slept happily, casting aside the hankering for lovers.

"The source for affliction and misery is the acquisition of whatsoever men hold dear. That man who knows this truth, gives up all possession and does not think of any acquisition and attains unlimited

happiness. "A crow had a piece of flesh in its mouth. The stronger birds pounced upon it. As soon as the crow dropped the piece of flesh the others left it and it again became happy. Renunciation of objects gives peace.

"I do not care for honor or dishonor. I do not think of house, wife or children. I sport in Atma and take delight in Atma and roam on the earth like a child. There are only two who are free from anxieties and immersed in the highest bliss: The child which knows nothing and the man who has realized the Supreme Being and who has gone beyond the influence of the gunas.

"In a certain place, a young maiden had to attend to the comforts of those who visited the house when her relations had gone out. As she was husking the paddy the conch bangles on her wrists made a great noise. The intelligent girl was very much ashamed of her poverty which was indicated by her cheap ornaments. She thought that the visitor might detect her poor condition. She broke the bracelets one by one, leaving only two on each hand. Even those two bracelets produced a sound when she went on husking. So she removed one of these also. Then no sound was produced from the remaining one though she continued husking.

"Wandering over the world in search of truth and experiences, I learnt from the girl's experience the following instructions. Where many dwell together there is likely to be quarrel. Even between two people there will be much occasion for argument and talk. Therefore, one should live alone like the single bangle on the hand of the girl.

"Having controlled the breath and practiced firmness in seat, one should, like the archer taking his aim, fix the mind on the Supreme Self. He should be on the alert to keep the mind steady through renunciation and systematic practice. Just as the fire exhausts itself when the fuel is consumed, so also the mind firmly checked in its outward wanderings, slowly shakes off the bonds of Karma. It becomes freed from Rajas and Tamas through increased Sattva, and attains tranquillity when the fuel of the gunas and sense-impressions, which normally feed it, is withheld. Then the mind becomes entirely absorbed in the object of meditation. Having his mind entirely absorbed in the Atma, the sage does not see anything else, inside or outside, just as the arrow-maker with his mind absorbed in making the arrow, will not see the king passing by his side. I have learned concentration of mind from the arrow-maker.

"The wise man should wander alone. He should be homeless and be ever alert. He should resort to a cave and should not exhibit his real worth. He should remain without friends. He should indulge in as little speech as possible. It is very troublesome and useless for an ascetic to build a house as his body is fleeting and perishable. Just as the serpent enters and makes itself comfortable in any hole dug by others, so also he should make himself comfortable at every chance residence or place that comes in his way. He should have no fixed abode.

"Just as the spider brings the thread out of itself, spreads out the web, sports in it and itself devours it, so also the Lord created the universe out of Himself through His Maya consisting of the three gunas, sports in it, and then takes it back again into Himself.

"Whatever form a man constantly thinks of through love, hatred or fear, that he will attain in course of time through concentration on the form he thinks about, just as the beetle repeatedly stung by the wasp, through its terror is itself transformed into a wasp.

Thus from the above twenty-four preceptors I have learned all my instructions for living a happy, carefree existence. Now listen, O king, to what I have learned from my own body. My body is also my guru. I have learned from it dispassion, discrimination and non-attachment. It is ever undergoing change. It is born only to die. Constant misery is its lot. It becomes the seat of egoism. One has to toil to satisfy its wants. This brings grief and sorrow. But I am able to reflect on Truth with its help. I know the Truth by a discriminative study of the body. I regard it as not mine and so I feel no attachment for it. The body belongs to the dogs and jackals who devour it after death.

"For the sake of the comforts of the body, a person maintains a wife, domestic animals, servants, children, home and relations and amasses wealth with great difficulty. This body perishes in the end like a tree, creating the seed of a fresh body for him.

"The tongue drags him to one side and thirst to another; the organ of reproduction to some other; the skin, stomach and ear in some other direction; the sense of smell in one direction, the fickle eye to something else, the tendency for work draws to something else; every other physical organ in a different direction of activity. The senses suck his very life-blood, even as the many wives dissipate the life-energy of the one husband.

"The Lord created various bodies such as trees, reptiles, beasts, birds, insects and fish but was not satisfied with these. Then He made the human body which is endowed with the intellect for realizing Brahman and He was extremely delighted. The wise man, having obtained after many births this extremely rare human body which, though transient and frail is yet conducive to the attainment of the highest purpose, should quickly endeavor to attain liberation before it falls a prey to death. Sense-enjoyment may be had in any body.

"Thus learning Vairagya from my body, the distaste and aversion towards worldly pleasures and a knowledge of the real bliss of my divine nature, I wander over the world without egoism and attachment, with the light of true wisdom as my guide."

Sri Krishna said, "The Avadhuta having told his story, took leave of the king and went away. Many who have heard this account have taken these wise instructions of the sage to heart, and giving up all attachments have attained tranquility and equanimity of mind."

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