

Indian tales and epics, the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*.

The point of this story about Jaya and Vijaya is that the brothers Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu were Jaya and Vijaya reborn. Both grew up into very powerful warriors and lived for the sole desire of destroying the Lord. Hiranyaksha eventually challenged the Lord when the latter lifted the Earth from the bottom of the primordial ocean, assuming his mighty Varaha (celestial boar) *avatara*.⁹ After an arduous fight, Hiranyaksha met his end at the tusks of the Varaha.

Hiranyakashipu did not take very well to the news of his brother being killed by his archenemy. His hatred grew even stronger. He performed intense austerities to such an extent that eventually Lord Brahma had to descend from heaven and ask him which boon he wanted to obtain.¹⁰ Like every true demon before him, Hiranyakashipu asked for his present body to be immortal, since identification with the body is known as the demonic teaching.¹¹ Significantly, Lord Brahma answered that he could not bestow this boon since even he himself was not immortal.

Hiranyakashipu then asked for the second best boon he could think of: to be killable neither by man nor by beast, neither during day nor at night, neither in a house nor outside a dwelling, neither on the ground nor up in the air, and by no weapon of any kind. Brahma happily granted this boon, since although quite comprehensive it was still finite.

With renewed vigor, Hiranyakashipu then tackled the pursuit of the Lord's peril. Since he was

invincible, he easily became the king of the *asuras* and amassed a mighty army. He soon embarked on his various campaigns of looting and ransacking the three worlds (earth, heavens, and netherworld) with the aim of finally meeting and challenging his chosen enemy, Lord Vishnu.

One day when Hiranyakashipu was away, his own city was attacked and looted by Lord Indra and his army of *devas* (the Indian *devas* are not averse to the pastime of ransacking and pillaging). Hiranyakashipu's wife, Kayadhu, was dragged away as booty but subsequently rescued from Indra's humiliation by the celestial Rishi Narada. Narada is described as having the gifts of eternal youth and flattering speech and being most handsome and a great musician and singer. It is said that by the time Kayadhu left Narada's *ashrama* and returned to Hiranyakashipu, the love-smitten demon queen was pregnant.

Hiranyakashipu was too engaged in wreaking destruction to notice that his first son, Prahlada, who was none other than a reincarnation of the *asura* Shalabha, nevertheless had many traits unworthy of a demon and was rather like a celestial. While Hiranyakashipu was abroad to practice pillaging and ransacking, Prahlada was trained in the demonic arts to be a worthy successor to the demon king. On returning, Hiranyakashipu inquired about Prahlada's progress, only to find his son spontaneously bursting into praises of the much-despised Lord Vishnu. Hiranyakashipu at this point developed serious stomach ulcers. After several attempts to retrain Prahlada in the demonic arts failed — he tried to get him to devour pious devotees of the Lord, roast people on spits, and defile sacred sites through strategic placement of chunks of roasted meat — he decided to have his son killed.

He first ordered his palace guards to chop him to bits. But the guards found their blades went right through Prahlada with no effect. Hiranyakashipu then had him bitten by venomous cobras, trampled on by his biggest elephants, thrown into a furnace, attacked by his most terrible demon warrior, submerged in the ocean, and finally thrown off the highest peak in his empire, all to no avail. While

9 The Supreme Being in the form of the Lord Vishnu comes down to Earth in the form of eight *avatars*. Varaha is the Lord Vishnu's third *avatara*. The others are Matsya (fish), Kurma (turtle), Narasimha (man-lion), Parushurama (Rama with the axe), Lord Rama (from the *Ramayana* epos), Lord Krishna (from the *Mahabharata* epos), and Lord Kalki (yet to come). Lord Buddha is also sometimes listed as an *avatara* of Lord Vishnu; so is Dattatreya.

10 Do not mistake Lord Brahma, a finite being, with the *Brahman* of the *Upanishads*, which is thought to be infinite, eternal, unmanifest consciousness.

11 Lord Brahma, the present giver of the boon here, is the very same *deva* who, under the name of Prajapati, taught the demon king Vairochana that identification with the body is the true self. Since the demon accepted this corrupt teaching, it became henceforth known as the demonic teaching.

Prahlada remained in *samadhi*, the cobras' fangs fell out, the elephants' tusks broke off, the fire died down, the terrible demon warrior ran away, the ocean spat him out, and from his fall from the highest peak he landed lightly like a feather on a bed of lotus flowers.

Hiranyakashipu finally lost his temper and decided to finish off this unworthy son himself. He committed his final mistake on the stairs at the entrance to his palace when he dared Prahlada to invoke his mighty Lord on the spot and let him burst forth from one of the entrance pillars of the palace to prevent Hiranyakashipu from finally killing his son.

Prahlada only smiled and, closing his eyes, invoked the Lord. At that moment a huge cloud darkened the sky so much that there was hardly any daylight anymore; it was neither day nor night. With a clap of thunder, the huge pillar split apart and the Lord came forth in his terrifying Narasimha man-lion form, his fifth *avatara*. In this form he was neither man nor beast, but in between. He grabbed Hiranyakashipu on the stairs of the entrance to his palace, where he was neither inside nor outside of a dwelling. He lifted him up and placed him on his lap, where he was neither in the air nor on the ground. Without using any weapon at all — thus following the boon granted by Lord Brahma to the letter — the Lord in the form of the terrible Narasimha then tore Hiranyakashipu to shreds. (Here is a frequently occurring theme of Indian mythology: If we are in the position to ask a boon of a celestial, we should choose the wording of this boon very, very carefully.)

Whereas everybody else ran away in terror when Narasimha appeared, Prahlada just looked on, smiling, for he recognized the Lord Vishnu even in this terrifying form. The Lord then reverted to his benevolent four-armed form, placed Prahlada on the throne, and made him emperor of the demons.

Thus ends the story of Prahlada, the incarnation of the demon Shalabha. His father, the demon Hiranyakashipu, formerly Vijaya, the jealous doorkeeper of the Lord, had to go through two more demonic incarnations before becoming one with his master.

BHEKASANA (FROG POSTURE)

The term *bheka* denotes a frog. In Indian mythology, the frog is a metaphor for sweat and its inherent power of creation. We can see the basis for this metaphor in the following myths.

The *Katha Sarit Sagara* informs us how the frogs derived their strange voices and in so doing demonstrates the connection among frogs, water, and Agni, lord of fire.¹² Lord Shiva and his consort Uma were once engaged in love play. Since their activities were extremely long lasting and they were the most powerful beings in the universe, the entire world was excessively heated by the friction they created. The *devas*, led by Lord Brahma, were concerned that the entire world would be destroyed as a result. So they singled out Lord Agni to interrupt Shiva and Uma's love play. Agni became very concerned, for he knew that when Kama (cupid) had dared to disturb the Lord's meditation with his flower arrows, he had been reduced to ashes by a mere glance from the mighty Lord's third eye. Agni therefore resolved to hide underwater in a lake rather than take up his task. But Agni's fire brought the water in the lake close to a boil. The frogs living in the water were in such unbearable pain that they revealed Agni's location to the *devas*. For this treason Agni cursed the frogs, and their voices turned into croaking.

The *Shatapatha Brahmana* also contains a passage that connects Agni to frogs.¹³ It first describes the construction of the fire altar, and then the consecration and oblation thereof. A priest is advised to draw a frog on the central part of the altar. The story goes on to explain that in the beginning the *rishis* sprinkled Agni with water. When the water dripped off him, the drops became frogs. The drawing of the frog on the altar is used to appease Agni, who appears on the altar as fire to consume the oblations.

Agni represents the inner fire in yoga. Accordingly, the *sushumna*, visualized red, is called the fire *nadi*. Inner fire is created through ritualistic

12 C. H. Tawney, trans., *Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagara*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: BRPC, 2001), p. 101.

13 *Shatapatha Brahmana*, ninth Kanda, first Adhyaya, second Brahmana.