

ॐ The Intersection of Karma, Bhakti, and Wisdom: Lessons from Bhishma's Deathbed

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Description: A profound exploration of devotion, duty, and wisdom through the story of Bhishma's final moments on the battlefield of Kurukshetra



Tags: bhishma, mahabharata, bhakti, karma, vishnu-sahasranamam, krishna, dharma, devotion, indian-philosophy

The battlefield of Kurukshetra did not merely witness a war of cousins; it hosted a profound philosophical seminar culminating in the Bhishma Stuti and the immortal gift of the Vishnu Sahasranamam. Lying on his bed of arrows (Sharathalpa), Bhishma achieved a unique synthesis of knowledge (Jnana), duty (Karma), and transcendent devotion (Bhakti).

The Divine Paradox: The Vow Broken for Devotion

The immediate catalyst for Bhishma's final moments of devotion was the dramatic spectacle of Lord Krishna breaking his solemn vow. Krishna, serving as Arjuna's charioteer (Sarathi), had sworn not to lift a weapon during the war. Bhishma, determined to make Krishna abandon this promise, directed arrows first at Krishna, and then at his beloved devotee, Arjuna.

Incensed by the attack on Arjuna, Krishna leaped from the chariot seat, leaving his upper garment (uttariyam) behind, his eyes reddened in fury (raktankalochana). He ran toward Bhishma, rolling a broken chariot wheel as if it were his Sudarshana Chakra.

Bhishma rejoiced, having successfully made Krishna lift a weapon, thus proving the truth: **A devotee's victory is the Lord's highest principle**. Krishna's action affirmed that he is subservient to his devotees (Aham bhakta paradhinah).

Suffering and the Gift of Vishnu Sahasranamam

Despite his wisdom and unparalleled devotion, Bhishma's suffering on the bed of arrows was mandatory, as karma must be suffered. Though atonement (prayaschittam) can mitigate the intensity of suffering, it cannot eradicate the suffering itself.

Acharyas attribute Bhishma's inability to act decisively during Draupadi's humiliation to the fact that his body was nourished by the food (paraanam) provided by Duryodhana, who conducted illegal acts. Partaking in such food meant Bhishma also partook in that negative karma, which clouded his judgment regarding the interpretation of conflicting shastras.

The Lord vowed not to accept Bhishma's prayers or Namavali until the "flattened flesh and blood nourished because of Duryodhana" was completely purged from his body. Only after lying on the bed of arrows, purging the corrupted remnants, did Bhishma recite the Vishnu Sahasranamam.

It was on the Sharathalpa that the tormented Yudhishtira sought Bhishma's counsel. Bhishma answered the seminal questions (kimekam daivatam loke, kimbapekam parayanam) before delivering the Sahasranamam.

The Pursuit of Clarity: A Lesson from Harsha's Genius

The path of wisdom often involves navigating the complexities of knowledge and language, a challenge exemplified by the great poet Sri Harsha.

Sri Harsha, a Mahakavi from Kashmir who sought work in Varanasi, authored the beautiful but intricate treatise Khandana Khanda Kadyam. Harsha was renowned for his intelligence and his capacity for composing complicated sentences, often making his work inaccessible to the general populace.

His prodigious memory was highlighted when he was brought before the King as a witness to a quarrel between two local women. Although Harsha did not understand the local language, he had the ability—known as eka santagrahi—to

repeat verbatim, with the exact intonation and articulation, everything the women spoke. This led to his appointment as the Kavi of the kingdom.

However, the King later advised Harsha to simplify his genius. Harsha went on a sabbatical and was found intentionally consuming vadas made from urad dal. This seemingly strange practice was based on the belief that consuming urad reduces the sharpness of memory. Harsha sought to intentionally dull his phenomenal memory to simplify his poetry and make his wisdom accessible.

This anecdote underscores a central theme: Bhishma's life transitioned from one where rigid adherence to convoluted shastras caused confusion (hindering his defense of Draupadi) to a state of simple, unwavering Bhakti for Krishna, which granted him ultimate clarity.

The Final Vision of the Devotee

Before his soul departed during the auspicious time of Uttarayanaha, Bhishma described his requested final vision (the Bhishma Stuti), capturing the intimate relationship between the charioteer and the devotee.

Bhishma desired to see Krishna:

- Holding the reins of the horses
- With the striking bluish-green hue of the Tamala tree (Tamala varnam)
- His face adorned with drops of sweat (shramavarya) from the exertion of driving the chariot
- His hair tresses curly and disheveled by the intense battle, rolling near his temple locks (alakakulavritananaabjam)

The Bhishma Stuti remains a potent reminder that the pursuit of the Lord is the ultimate source of solace during suffering. The Lord may break His own promise, but never the promise made to protect His devotees, accepting the ultimate offering of the heart over rigid adherence to law.

The story of Bhishma, the ultimate man of Dharma, teaches us that while the complexities of knowledge (like Sri Harsha's intricate poetry) and the consequences of karma are inevitable, the simplest act of surrender to the Lord (Bhakti) is the path to supreme peace. It is the fan offering solace in the 43-degree heat, mitigating the intensity of suffering, even if the temperature (karma) remains constant.



Reference

This blog post is based on notes taken from the following video : **Video Source:** [Watch on YouTube](#) For a more detailed explanation, I highly recommend watching the original video.



Acknowledgment & Disclaimer

These articles are based on discourses by **Sri Dushyanth Sridhar**, who renders discourses in English & Tamil on Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata, Bhāgavata, Vishnu Purāna, Bhagavad Gitā, Vishnu Sahasranāma, and Divya Prabanda in the upanyāsam, pravachanam, or kālakshepam style. Visit <https://desikadaya.org> for more information. These notes are presented solely for educational purposes to help viewers download and benefit from these teachings. Any incorrect interpretations or inaccuracies are mine and unintentional—please forgive me. For any feedback, please send an [email](#).



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