

EPICYCLE

# KRISHNA AND RADHA

Retold with commentary by Laura Simms

Anonymous | Hindu

KRISHNA, “THE DARK ONE,” APPEARED IN OUR WORLD as the embodiment of love at the start of the Kali Yuga, the age of strife, in which we are said to live. He was born as the eighth child of Devaki, the sister of an evil king named Kamsa. The king’s astrologers prophesied that her child would kill him. Thus the king ordered each of his sister’s eight children to be destroyed. The first six were murdered. The seventh escaped, and Krishna, the youngest, was hidden in the household of a cowherd.

In a previous lifetime, Krishna, an incarnation of the God Vishnu, was born as King Rama (of the *Ramayana*), famed for his devotion to his wife, Sita. He was so beloved at that time that all the gods desired him. Because he was faithful to his wife in that lifetime, he promised to return as a God of Love in a later era. The gods vowed to return as cowherdesses, *gopis*, and to become his lovers.

In the household of the foster parents of Krishna, there were sixty-four gopis. As a baby, Krishna’s body emanated a charm and beauty that they could not resist. His mischief was legendary. When the evil King Kamsa discovered that his sister’s eighth baby was alive, he commanded a child-murdering *Rakshasa* (demoness) to kill him. Under the king’s command, Putana set out on her deadly mission. In a



IN SANSKRIT KR̥ṢṆA MEANS "BLACK," OR "DARK-BLUE." HIS BELOVED IS THE GOPI [COW HERDESS] RADHA. WOOD CARVING DETAIL OF THE HINDU TEMPLE OF GREATER CHICAGO, ILL., DEPICTING THE GOD KRISHNA

previous life, Putana had longed to have a son as sweet as the god Vishnu, and was promised that she would be reborn as a nursemaid and suckle the reborn god. In that life, she would attain complete liberation from her state as a demoness. Putana did not recall this past life or promise. She disguised herself as a beautiful young woman and was easily hired by the child's mother as a nursemaid.

When Putana took the baby Krishna in her arms, she was startled by a confusion of feelings: Her demon rage was accompanied by a sweet mother's longing. Her breasts swelled with milk and her eyes filled with tears. She forgot her own demon nature. She throbbed with maternal love. Then, recalling her mission, Putana turned away to strengthen her inner feelings of vengeance and ill will. She reached for the baby and shook with rage until her breasts filled with poison.

The baby Krishna pressed his hungry lips around her poisoned nipple. He sucked with divine strength. Putana screamed but could not rip the baby from her body. The infant held fast, and in his holy passion, sucked out the poison from her breasts. The beautiful young woman turned back into a demoness and fell backwards to her death, emptied of rage. The mother took the baby and replaced him in the cradle. The gopis swooned. They felt ashamed and confused to find themselves shaking with sexual desire for an infant.

When the body of the demoness was burned, a sweet smell rose from the pyre. Only Krishna understood that he had liberated her through love and released her from incarnations as a demon.

After that night, the gopis dreamed again and again that the boy took the form of a man and ravished them. One night, when Krishna was grown, he went into the forest holding a lotus in one hand like a scepter and a flute in the other. He played such intoxicating music that the gopis awoke. They threw off their covers and left the beds of their husbands, half dressed, to find him. Each thought that she was the only one. However, the master of desire teased each of them, and their passions were aroused beyond anything they had ever known.

At the moment when each one was consumed with unabashed desire, aroused to exhilaration, Krishna disappeared. They were distraught and sought him in desperation. Then, suddenly, he reappeared.

This time Krishna stood in a clearing in the center of the forest. The gopis, mad with want, further aroused by his presence, surrounded him. Taking hands with one another, music entrancing them, they lifted their skirts, revealed their breasts, and danced, circling and laughing.

It was then that Radha, the daughter of Krishna's foster mother, the one he desired most, the expression of bliss herself, who had resisted his first songs, could no longer remain aloof. She left her husband's bed and raced like a wild deer into the woods.

The sight of Radha caused Krishna to drop the flute and the lotus. She entered the circle, radiant and alive with desire, while he made a bed of flowers on the earth for them to lie on.

Radha (female nature itself) was his beloved. She was the fulfillment of the divine. On the earth, surrounded by the gopis, Radha and Krishna fulfilled all unabashed desire as they made love. While they

engaged in every pleasure, Krishna became a thousand lovers and satisfied each cowherdess in the circle. Radha's passion increased unceasing, causing every flower to blossom. All night they moved in the luxury of delight. Even the gods and goddesses, the trees and the grass, the earth and the sky, found it impossible to resist this dance.

Before the sun rose, their lovemaking ceased. The cowherdresses—with eyes glazed, lips torn, hearts wild, hair unknotted, bodies hot—ran together to the river, singing and laughing. They threw themselves into ice-cold water and played until their hearts were calmed. Then all the women returned home. ¶

#### COMMENTARY

I had resisted telling the stories of Krishna for a long time. I read them too literally. I was like Radha, who resisted his initial seductions and remained asleep in the comfort of her home. But as I came to know more about Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, manifesting for our benefit in the “dark ages”—the time we are living in—the tales woke me up. The dark ages are described as a time of increasing ignorance, violence, and greed. The potency of unceasing, inherent desire as compassion, awakened by the unfolding sequence of stories imagined within each reader, is presented as the antidote for these times.

I chose to tell only a few of the myriad stories of Krishna's adventures. This series of events, gathered for an exploration of desire, unfolds like a secret map within each of us as we imagine and feel within our own bodies what is taking place in the story. In the end, having experienced the power of compassion to transform poison into love, and to call us out of our limitations and conventional ideas, we are opened and ready for the appearance of Radha. Her love awakens the entire universe in a dance of bliss. The mischief of the teller of the story of Krishna and Radha is that she pretends that it is about something taking place a very long time ago, while in actuality it occurs moment by moment within our own hearts. This seduction calls on our innate heart to succumb to love, regardless of circumstance.

Adapted from Laura Simms, *THE ROBE OF LOVE* (Codhill Press, 2002). Reprinted by permission.