

## **Midnight – An Offering for Janmashtami**

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*Mukam karoti vachalam  
pangum langhayate girim  
yat krupa tam aham vande  
param ananda Madhavam*

*(My obeisance to the highest ananda, Madhava, the ocean of mercy,  
who can make a dumb person speak and a lame person climb a mountain)*

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Narayana stirred. He could feel blue all around him, the milky blue of the ocean with unfathomable depths beneath him—the Ksheera Sagara—the pale blue glow of the sky that stretched above him in all directions, unblemished by cloud or constellation. In this realm, he was the only star, shining with the splendor of a million suns. His lower back flexed, and he felt the shifting coils of Ananta Shesha, the serpentine bed on which he reclined, whose thousand hoods provided him shade and shelter, stretching to accommodate him. At his feet, he sensed Lakshmi’s expectant smile, the slowing of the whisk of her fan over his body, as she waited for him to open his eyes. In the unending vastness of blue, she was a flashing flame of red, the point of all auspiciousness and beauty in his world.

In these few moments, in this half breath of his, countless worlds in the material universe had arisen and expired. As he lay in yoga nidra, this form of divine “sleep”, without any conscious intent, simply by the power of his being, he created, sustained and annihilated planets, galaxies, entire universes without number. He was at his most powerful as he rested, in a slumber that was not sleep, working His will through all worlds, without any action, without any effort, without any thought, without any intention. This is why he was named Narayana—he whose resting place is on the water. When he took action, when he moved, when he spoke, he operated at a level several orders of magnitude lower in power.

But he had stirred for a reason. The time was approaching. He could feel a momentum gathering, the coalescence of various causes and conditions, the weaving together of so many strands of karma, all leading to His descending to Earth, once again, and living for a time in the world of the mortals.

*Paritraanaaya saadhoonaam vinaashaaya cha dushkritaam;  
Dharma samsthaapanaarthaaya sambhavaami yuge yuge*

(For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of Dharma, I manifest myself in age after age.) (Bhagavad Gita, 4:8).

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All across the land, there was terror. The land was being taken over by asuric (demonic) forces. Asuras (demons) were usurping kingdoms, hunting down and killing those who dared to defy them. There was darkness all around—the light of yajna, the sacrificial fire ceremony, was snuffed out all across Bharata. The bright flames only invited the wrath of the asuras and their defilement of the sacred alters. This caused even greater distress among the people, bereft of the blessings and succor of their worship.

Instead of the mellifluous chanting of the Vedas, the air was rent by the piercing cries of terrified men, women and children. The crops withered and died. The flowers shriveled and dried up. The ocean churned wildly—tsunamis and mass floods battered the shores of Bharata. Always, there was hail and rain. But it was not just water and ice that fell from the skies—the precipitation carried muddy, rotten substances that smelled of feces and blood and death.

The Earth groaned and whimpered with suffering, suffocating under the weight of burdens too heavy for her to bear. It was too much destruction, too much death, too much violence, too much darkness. The balance had gone awry—the balance between the asuras and the devas, between sattva and tamas, between light and darkness. The Earth reshaped itself and took the form of Bhū Devi (Goddess of the Earth; the Earth in Goddess form). Once Bhū Devi had been young and nubile but now she looked like a wizened, weak crone. Her limbs were so ravaged and weak that she could not support herself or stand, so racked was she by tremors. She cursed herself for having waited too long to seek help from the celestial realms. It was long past time to approach Vishnu for help.

Bhū Devi looked down at her bodily appearance and decided she could not present herself to Vishnu, the Lord of Vaikuntha, in this sorry form. She changed form again and again, but each time, she looked old, weak and sick. There was no masking it. She closed her eyes and thought of all those who stood upon her and wept and suffered and died; she had become soaked with their tears and blood. She surveyed herself and saw the humans starving, the vegetation rotting and dying, animals wounded and whimpering—and she paused upon a lone calf whose mother had died. The little calf was mewling with such sorrow and pain that it was almost unbearable for Bhū Devi.

So identified was she with the plight of that poor calf that she spontaneously assumed the form of a cow. It was in this form that she approached Brahma with her appeal for help. Vishnu was her ultimate refuge, but there was a protocol. She recounted for Brahma the destruction and endless sorrow being heaped upon the sentient beings on earth and his eyes softened in empathy. Brahma knew it was only Vishnu who could save them. He gathered together all of the devas to make the voyage to Ksheera Sagara and seek Vishnu's help. At her beseeching gaze, Brahma brought along Bhū Devi, too.

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There were no footsteps to hear, but Narayana knew the devas were approaching even before the clouds on which they traveled landed lightly on top of the milky ocean. He felt the shifting of energies that told him he was no longer alone with Lakshmi and Ananta. It was time to leave the reverie of his limitless consciousness. He stifled a sigh and allowed himself to regain bodily consciousness.

The host of devas approached him at last, Bhu Devi front and center, and they began chanting sonorously that most beautiful Vedic hymn in his praise: the Purusha Suktam.

*The Purusha (the Supreme Being)  
has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet.  
He is spread all over the universe  
and stands beyond it in the ten directions of space.*

*All this is the Purusha only; all that has been and all that will be.*

...

*This Purusha is much greater, than all his greatness in all that we see.  
All beings make up only one-quarter of Him.  
Three-quarters of Him which are immortal are in Heaven.*

*Above this world is three quarters of Purusha,  
but the quarter which is in this world  
appears again and again.*

...

*From that Purusha was born, the ever-shining universe,  
And from that was born the Purusha called Brahma,  
And he spread himself everywhere,  
And created the earth and then, the bodies of all beings.*

...

*From his mind was born the moon,  
From his eyes was born the sun,  
From his mouth came forth Indra and Agni,  
and from his breath was born the wind.*

*From his navel came the antariksha (the middle region);  
From his head was born the heavens;  
From his feet was born the earth;*

*From his ears was born the directions;  
and thus was made all the worlds, just by his holy wish.*

*I know that great Purusha who is famous,  
who shines like the Sun,  
who is beyond darkness,  
who created all forms,  
who named all of them,  
and who rules over them.<sup>1</sup>*

Narayana was grateful for the chanting of the devas, not that he relished the flattery, but the vibrations of the Vedic chanting were a helpful bridge from the depth of his yoga nidra to the field of action and interaction with others. It brought him back to the world without undue disturbance. They continued their chanting, their voices in beautiful harmony, as sweet as honey, starting softly so as not to startle him and then slowly building into a crescendo, becoming loud and powerful and thunderous so that the entire cosmos began vibrating in rhythm with the chanting. Celestial conches and kettle drums sounded; fragrant flowers began falling on his body. A small smile played over his lips as he allowed himself to be lulled by his favorite Vedic hymns.

His eyes remained closed, but he allowed himself to feel the presence of the devas before him. He took inventory of those who stood arrayed before him. Mahadeva had come, with Parvati and their sons, Ganapati and Karthik. There was Indra, first among the devas, and Brahma, of course. There was Vayu and Varuna and Saraswati. He felt Bhu Devi's presence albeit in a different form. And thousands and thousands of others, along with each of their vahanas—Nandi, the bull, for Mahadeva, Airavata, the celestial elephant for Indra, Saraswati's swan, Karthik's peacock, Ganapati's mouse.

Narayana focused on Bhu Devi and in an instant knew all that she was going to tell him. He saw for himself the fires burning on Earth, the chaos and upheaval, the wholesale destruction of dharmic practices and the oppression of his devotees. *Earth*. It was still a special place for him and the devas. Once, it had been their abode. They had lived and cavorted among the glaciers and icy peaks of the Himalayas and had roamed across the vast Gangetic plains of Bharata. Once, a very, very long time ago.

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1 Translation largely based on the following: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ayvRqxVi4E>

Narayana recognized immediately that the chief asura to be defeated was Kamsa, who had seized the throne of Mathura. While the devas continued eulogizing him with hymns, he transported himself to Mathura to investigate further. It took less than a moment. He passed through Mathura invisibly. He felt the tugging of old vows, old boons, old karmic debts that started weaving themselves into the form of his next avatara (incarnation). It was simple enough. He would be born as a prince in the same line of royalty from which Kamsa and the usurped king hailed. Even so, he felt the pull of different kingdoms around him, sensed that he was needed not just for this kingdom, not just to defeat these asuras, but to intervene in purely human affairs, to rearrange the kingdoms and political structures of Bharata. He felt the pull of the battlefield. This time, like the last time, when he had been Rama, he would wage war, a fierce war that would surpass all wars that had passed before, but this time, he would not be a fighter—he would have to teach others how to fight, how to lead, how to play the game of war. This time, again, he would be here not just for a battle, for the defeat of one or two demons, but to pass an entire lifetime among the mortals.

He was about to go back to Ksheera Sagara, the Milky Ocean, but something kept him on Earth. He felt sadness at how far this planet had fallen, how deeply the humans suffered, how low and animalistic they had become. Was there nothing left of the beautiful Earth he had once known, had once roamed across, taken pleasure in?

On a whim, he began to wander the lands surrounding Mathura. He soon found himself in the countryside dotted with a few small villages, surrounded by several forests. It was nighttime, but the full moon was so strong and powerful that everything was alit in a silvery glow. As was the case elsewhere, the vegetation was in sad shape—the branches on the trees drooped, the flowers were wilted, the fields barren. Wherever his feet touched the ground, life returned. The grass grew soft and green, flowers blossomed, branches suddenly became laden with leaves. There was a lovely, wide river wending its winding way nearby. The very waves of the water seemed to pull themselves towards him, to come as close to him as possible.

There was a sweet fragrance here, a hint of the peace and tranquility he remembered from his earlier travels on Earth. He slowed and bent to pick some blades of grass, sniffing them delicately. He saw a deer, a young doe, standing at a distance and he stilled to avoid startling her. The doe stared at him with widened eyes, attracted towards him yet frightened, too. She took one small step towards him and then suddenly darted away in shyness. He sensed the presence of thousands of cows, deer, birds and squirrels scattered in the countryside around him. He felt a rush of tenderness for them, thinking of Bhu Devi and how she had approached him in the pathetic form of an emaciated cow.

The sound of a baby crying some distance away filtered through to his consciousness. He did not know why, but suddenly he was drawn there. He appeared in the baby's room and

approached the bassinet softly. It was a baby girl, only a few months old, but already she had a full head of thick black hair that curled sweetly into her soft, dimpled cheeks. As soon as he stood before her, her crying stopped. She was golden. He had seen gold before—his consort, Lakshmi, was golden, too, but that was the shiny gold of celestial gems and costly jewels, the glittering gold that was the wealth of all the worlds. This gold was the gold of butter, of cream, a streak of lightning at midnight. He watched her contentedly and thought only one thing: *Sweet. So sweet.*

He saw that she was blind. Something about that caught at his heart. If he were to come down to this earth, he could not bear the thought that she would not have the eyes to see him. He gently placed his right hand over her eyes briefly. He removed his hand, and she had sight. She gazed at him with her baby eyes, as wide and shy, as round as the doe eyes that had gazed upon him earlier

He heard approaching footsteps, her mother rushing to check on her, and he moved away. She started crying again as soon as he left and he stayed close to her house to offer her comfort, so that she would feel his presence nearby. He turned towards the river and the most beautiful sight awaited him. Millions of cows and deer had amassed along the banks of that gorgeous river, and they stood there silently, simply gazing at him with adoration. They were so still that they looked like statues. The moon shone even more brightly, permeating the scene with a bright white light. The fragrance of hundreds of varieties of flowers wafted on the breeze that stirred through the newly verdant trees of the surrounding forests. The waves of the river crashed against her banks, leaping higher and higher, as if trying to touch him, capture him, keep him here.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Something about this place, something about the gentleness of the cows and the deer, the beauty of the flowers and the trees, the melody hummed by the waves of the river, the laughter of young boys from a distance, the tinkling anklets of young women as they churned butter and did their daily chores, the sweet visage of the baby girl inside the house, moved him deeply, and he was rarely moved. He felt their longing for him, and immediately he felt the same longing for them. This was something he had not accounted for, something that took him by surprise, unexpected yet delightful in its way.

In Mathura, it had become clear to him what was to be done for Dharma. Here, he felt the pull of Leela—the dance of the Divine, the cosmic play, leela for the sake of leela with no utilitarian purpose, no objective or end other than itself, the leela of sristhi (creation), the pure ananda of existence. In this place, he felt, the most beautiful of leelas would unfold. If he were to come to Earth, it would be impossible for him to not live here for at least some time.

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In a flash, he was back in Ksheera Sagara just as the devas finished chanting their hymns. He opened his eyes and began instructing them. They would appear along with him in different manifestations, each playing a unique role. Even as he spoke, he was elsewhere. With every languorous blink of his eye, the patterns and shape of his next incarnation were revealed to him. Boons and promises made so long ago came to fruition within the pattern, extinguishing old karmic debts and creating new ones. Devaki and Vasudeva, after so many thousands of years of penance and asceticism, would finally realize their wish of having him as their son—but for only a fleeting time. So many who had previously been cursed, who were suffering now, would be freed at his touch. So many lives he would have to destroy to pave the way for the new yuga, for a new world, a new order. So many to whom he would have to bring sorrow, so many to whom he was bound to bring ananda.

With every blink of his eye, the scenes of his life to come flashed before him. He, as a young baby, sucking his toe while falling asleep, a tiny peacock feather nestled among the black curls of his hair. He, scampering around with other little boys, causing mischief, being caught and lovingly scolded by his mother, Yashoda. He, playing a flute, leading the cows to pasture under the morning sun. He, walking arm in arm, with his elder brother, Balarama, who was none other than Ananta incarnate.

In a blink, he saw his bride, Lakshmi manifested in human form, the epitome of auspiciousness, radiant with all of the virtues that were the province of Sri Devi, his only equal in beauty and resplendence. *Rukmini*, the name whispered across his skin.

In another blink, he saw the baby girl who had enchanted him come of age. She stood like a streak of lightning against midnight; her face was ever that of a young girl, her eyes round and innocent, full of love and longing, her dimpled cheeks no less sweet all these years later. A deep blue sari was wound about her body, a blue so dark that it matched the color of his skin. She was bedecked in flowers of an infinite variety. Bees drawn hungrily to her beauty hovered around the garlands draped around her neck. *Radha*, the name beat within his heart.

In a blink, he saw dozens of cows pressed lovingly up against his legs as he gently led them home.

In another blink, he saw millions of men marching to battle, stampedes of elephants and masses of chariots moving in intricate war formations and then breaking them in the chaos of war, howling in pain and bloodlust, fighting and dying by the millions, in a war he masterminded, catalyzed and brought to fruition.

In a blink, he saw himself stealing butter, playing pranks, tending cows with his dearest friends, other young cowherd boys.

In another blink, he saw himself with a band of five misfit brothers, princes with no kingdom to call home, friendless and without allies in the world. He was their protector.

He saw himself lifting a mountain with his pinky finger, under which an entire village took shelter and refuge.

He saw himself running away from Mathura to establish a new kingdom on the far western coast of Bharata when he could not hope to defeat the armies of Jarasandha.

He saw himself standing with Radha in a sylvan glade under a full moon night in autumn, his fingers tenderly tracing her cheeks. Loops of gopis were dancing around them in concentric circles, each paired with an identical yet different form of him, in an exquisite formation, in something so beautiful that even the devas came to watch—the *raasa-leela*.

He saw himself standing on the battlefield with Arjuna; Arjuna who was the most valiant archer in the world—not like last time, when as Rama, he had been the strongest warrior of all. Arjuna kneeled before him, despondent and in despair. He could feel the strength and depth of his bond with Arjuna—they were Nara and Narayana. He saw himself talking to Arjuna, words falling unknowingly from his lips, words he did not even know he was uttering, words that wove themselves into a litany of verses, a garland of glittering spiritual gems, that would become the most divine, the most celebrated, the most revered song in all the world, his song—the Bhagavad Gita.

He saw himself playing the flute, a melody so haunting and enchanting that it charmed all living beings, casting a spell over everyone and everything. It maddened all the denizens of Vraja, sent them running towards him, abandoning all duties, abandoning all dharmas, to come to him, the source of all beauty, all attraction, all sweetness in all the worlds.

He would be a prince and a cowherd. He would live in forests, in farms, in the palaces of the greatest kingdoms in all the world. He would be warrior and lover, friend and protector, diplomat and political mastermind. His life would be Dharma inextricably interwoven with Leela. This time, he would manifest with all powers, all opulences, all auspicious qualities. This time, he would play every role there was to play, with consummate skill. He would have to bring war and destruction, but he would also bring joy and love. He had missed Earth, and now he was coming back for a time to a home he had once loved and would love again. This time, no one would shy away from him or be held at arm's length—he would belong to everyone and everything, include in his embrace all who wanted to be with him. This time, he would say no to nobody.

Narayana watched as the devas left. He knew he was to appear on Earth in every age, that each time his form would vary according to the needs of the time and the place. This

would not be his last avatara. But he felt already that there was something special this time, that this would be perhaps his only sampurna (complete) avatara. This time, he was breaking the mold.

He closed his eyes and was again in that sylvan glade he had left such a short time ago. He felt Radha somewhere nearby and all the young girls of Vraja who would soon blossom into gopis. Despite the destructive forces of the asuras, despite the millennia that had passed since he and the devas had once lived here, despite the depths to which humans had sunk into during the intervening years, he felt a great beauty, quietude and contentment while standing there. Here again Dharma would flourish. Here again would the devas walk. Here again would the divine manifest itself. Here would leelas so beautiful and sacred reveal themselves. He felt the universe slowly adjust itself to accommodate him as the new incarnation of Vishnu on Earth.

He stood there as a young boy of sixteen, on the banks of the Yamuna, surrounded by the cows of Vraja. Soft flower petals rustled under his feet. The blue of his skin deepened to blue-black, the color of thunderclouds. His jewel-encrusted crown was replaced by a simple peacock feather, tucked into his thick raven tresses. His ears were adorned with jeweled, shark-shaped earrings. He stood in *tribhanga* form, gracefully bent at the neck, waist and knees. He gazed upon the world with liquid, lotus-shaped eyes. A small tender, mischievous smile played at the corners of his lips, driving mad all those who were graced by the splendor of that smile. On his broad blue chest rested the shining Kaustabha jewel and the mark of Srivatsa. His toenails shone like rubies. From his flute emanated transcendental raagas (sacred, classical musical arrangements), intoxicating the entire cosmos, making the devas themselves drunk with bliss.

As he stood there in that form, flute held to his lips, slowly, the names by which he would be known, remembered and worshipped thereafter manifested themselves in the world:

***Govinda.***

*(He who gives pleasure to the senses; He who is kind to the cows and is their protector; He who is the master of all of the lands and brings pleasure to all the lands.)*

***Damodara.***

*(The Lord who allows himself to be bound out of love; One who is knowable only through a purified mind by means of self-control; the One in whose bosom rests the entire universe.)*

**Madhava.**

*(The bestower and source of all sweetness. The shelter, support and maintainer of Lakshmi. The owner of the six supreme opulences (wealth, beauty, renunciation, knowledge, fame and strength).)*

And finally: **Krishna.**

*(The All-Attractive One. The Dark One.)* He whose lustrous beauty is as black as monsoon clouds about to burst into rain, as dark as the midnight into which he was born, the midnight on the eighth night of the waning moon in the month of Bhadrapada, when Sri Krishna, the sampurna avatara, came into the world and changed it forevermore.

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*Shri Krishna Govinda Hare Murare  
Hey Natha Narayana Vasudeva  
Jihve Pibasvamritam etad eva  
Govinda, Damodara, Madhaveti!*

*(Sri Krishna! Govinda! Hari! Murari!  
O Lord, Narayana! Vasudeva!  
O tongue, please drink only this nectar—  
Govinda, Damodara, Madhava!)  
(Govinda Damodara Stotram, verse 70)*

**Also**

1. Vrindavan pictures <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Vrindavan.aspx>
2. Govardhan Parikrama pictures <http://www.esamskriti.com/photo-detail/Govardhan-Parikrama.aspx>
3. To read chapter wise commentary on The Holy Gita <http://www.esamskriti.com/essay-chapters/Chapter-wise-Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita-in-PDF-format-1.aspx>