



Krishna and the Serpent Kaliya

Hinduism - India

Krishna, the eighth incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu and the supreme god of Krishnaism, loved his job as a cowherd, as it allowed him to roam the forests with his cows. He was greatly attracted to trees for, growing up as the adopted son of Nanda and Yashoda, he had never ceased to enjoy the forests of Vrindavan.

However, Krishna had descended from the spirit world with the specific mission of subduing the envious demons. And so, on many occasions, he had to leave his beloved cows to graze alone while he dealt with those beings who were doing so much harm.

One day he heard of the mischief that a black snake, the serpent Kaliya, was doing in a lake which was the source of the River Yamuna on its passage through Vrindavan. With his fiery poison Kaliya had caused the waters of the lake to boil, killing all the fish and aquatic plants. At the same time, the vapour emanating from the lake was so poisonous that the birds, that unfortunately passed over it, had fallen into its waters. Moreover, the wind had carried tiny poisonous droplets from the lake to the shores, causing all the surrounding vegetation and creatures to wither and die.

Seeing the devastation and grief that Kaliya had brought to the region with his poison, Lord Krishna climbed to the top of a towering kadam tree and prepared for combat. He tightened his belt, warmed his arms by slapping them and jumped into the poisonous water of the lake.

The moment Krishna plunged into the waters, the snakes within it stirred nervously and began to breathe heavily, further polluting the lake. Unfortunately, Krishna's plunge caused a tidal wave that spread the poisonous waters up to a hundred arcs away. Such was the strength of the Supreme Lord.

To catch Kaliya's attention, Krishna began to play around in the water, twirling his powerful arms to make it swirl in different ways, until the serpent heard the sound and came up to see who it was that dared to interfere in his lake.

When Kaliya saw Lord Krishna, dressed in yellow silks and smiling like a lotus on the waters, he pounced on him and bit him on the chest and then he wrapped him in his deadly embrace.

When the members of the cowherd community, who had accepted Krishna as a dear friend, saw him from afar, motionless among Kaliya's embrace, they were plunged into despair and fell to their knees on the ground. Even the cows, bulls and calves called piteously to him, in anguish and fearing the worst. For it was a fact that no one in the community, not even his adoptive parents, were yet aware of who they had been living with all that time. With no knowledge of Krishna's immense power, everyone thought that the Supreme Lord was going to be another victim of the evil serpent.

However, his elder brother, the Supreme Lord Balarama, son of Nanda and Yashoda, master of all transcendental knowledge, smiled and said nothing when he saw everyone terrified by what had happened. He was well aware of his younger brother's extraordinary power. In fact, he restrained Nanda and the rest of the herdsmen when they tried to enter the poisonous lake in their attempt to help their dear friend.

Krishna still remained for some time caught up in Kaliya's strong constraints, pretending to be a mere mortal. But when he saw the anguish reflected in the eyes of all his friends in the village of Gokula, he decided, out of love for them, to release himself from the serpent's deadly trap.

Krishna expanded his body mightily under the snake's embrace so that Kaliya, suffering from intense pain, was compelled to release him. The serpent then rose high above the waters with his many heads, full of

anger, breathing heavily. His nostrils resembled pots of boiling poison. His forked tongues probed the air in preparation for attack, while his eyes, like blazing lights, rested fiercely on the figure of Lord Krishna. But the latter, amused, began to whirl around him swiftly, just as Garuda would have done while playing with a snake.

Kaliya began to spin around with his heads, looking for an opportunity to throw a bite at the Supreme Lord, but he began to get dizzy and exhausted with all the spinning. At that moment, Krishna seized the opportunity and, with a mighty leap, landed on the large heads of the venomous being. Without giving him time to realise what had happened, the lord of fine arts began to dance on the jewelled heads of Kaliya.

The evil Kaliya had 101 heads and, if any one of them did not bow down, Krishna would jump on it and inflict the harsh punishment of his dancing feet.

So Krishna kept taming the stubborn serpent, until his heads began to whirl about in a faint which made him vomit blood from his mouths and nostrils. From time to time, one of the heads would try to rise in anger against the Supreme Lord, but Krishna would leap upon it and subdue it again with his dance. Finally, Kaliya recognised the power of Krishna as the lord of all beings, the moving and the non-moving ones. The serpent was overcome and took refuge in the Lord.

When Kaliya's wives saw the extraordinary serpent fall under the weight of Lord Krishna, who carried the entire universe on his abdomen, they were terribly anguished. With their clothes, ornaments and hair in disarray, they approached the Supreme Lord and prostrated themselves on the ground, pleading with him for shelter and for the release of their mischievous husband.

'What you have done to him is right,' they said, 'for his sins have been so numerous and so great that he has acquired the body of a serpent. Yet your anger with him must be understood as a great deed of mercy, for you have given him the opportunity to be touched by the dust of your feet of lotus, a privilege which very few attain. We revere you for this.'

‘But at least once,’ continued Kaliya’s wives, ‘every lord must tolerate an offence committed by his son. Therefore we ask you to forgive our foolish husband who did not know who you were. Be merciful and take pity on us. Give us back our husband who is our life and soul.’

After hearing the women, Krishna released the serpent Kaliya, who lay unconscious beneath his feet. Slowly he regained his breath, his life force and his senses. And then, breathing wearily, Kaliya humbly addressed Lord Krishna:

‘I was born envious, ignorant and wrathful. But, O Lord, it’s not easy to renounce one’s own nature, by which one identifies with the unreal. Please, you who have the power to liberate beings from all illusion, do as you see fit, whether or not it brings pain.’

And Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, who was pretending to be a human being, replied:

‘Oh, serpent, you cannot stay here. Return to the ocean at once accompanied by your retinue of children, wives, family and friends. Let cows and humans enjoy this river, forever restrain your horrible venom, and stop poisoning the world around you. If not, I’ll seek you out to make you pay for your misdeeds once and for all.’

After receiving the Lord’s permission, Kaliya offered obeisance and, together with his retinue, left for Ramanaka Island in the sea. And, just as Kaliya was departing, the River Yamuna was restored to its original state, free from all poisons. □

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Comments

This story from the Hindu tradition can be used as a metaphor to illustrate Principle 10d of the Earth Charter, which states: ‘Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities’. In fact, it illustrates this very well

because, in many countries of the Global South, large oil and mining corporations from the Global North are turning vast areas into wastelands due to the environmental destruction and pollution they cause.

On the other hand, fracking and the methods undertaken by mega-mining industries are polluting billions of gallons of water, even in arid regions, where the population's water supply is being cut off for the benefit of transnational corporations. These industries pollute water with more than 600 chemicals, many of them toxic, particularly in the case of fracking, or with mercury or cyanide in the case of mega-mining.

The result of all these industrial activities is what the corporations, and their paid politicians, euphemistically refer to as 'sacrifice zones', i.e. regions where it is decided to slaughter populations and their animal and plant species, supposedly for the economic benefit of the whole country. But, in reality, the data does not support this, since most of the immense profits these activities produce go into the pockets of the large multinational corporations that are in charge of the exploitation.

The 'sacrificial populations' of the Mendoza, Chubut or Vaca Muerta regions in Argentina, of the banks of the Colorado River in Patagonia, and of so many other places in Latin America, Africa and the rest of the Global South witness the current 'Kaliya serpents' of the transnational mining and oil companies of the Global North. And this includes the local politicians paid by these companies in their regions.

Sources

Bhagavata Purana (2010). Krishna chastises the serpent Kaliya. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Chant 10, Ch. 16, 1-67. Retrieved from <http://srimadbhagavatam.com/10/16/en>

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 10d: Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 5: Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.

Principle 5d: Control and eradicate non-native or genetically modified organisms harmful to native species and the environment, and prevent introduction of such harmful organisms.

Principle 6b: Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.

Principle 6d: Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.

