

Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is new serial article based on the document transcribed and edited by Sri. John Warne. The material in this document was presented by Swami Dayananda Saraswati at the three year course on Vedanta and Sanskrit at Sandeepany, California, 1979-1981.

शुक्लाम्बरधरं विष्णुं शशिवर्णं चतुर्भुजं । प्रसन्नवदनं ध्यायेत् सर्वविघ्नोपशान्तये ॥
कूजन्तं राम रामेति मधुरं मधुराक्षरम् । आरुह्य कविताशाखाम् वन्दे वाल्मीकिकोकिलम् ॥

*śuklāmbaradharaṁ viṣṇuṁ śaśivarnaṁ caturbhujam ।
prasannavadanaṁ dhyāyet sarvaviḡhnopaśāntaye ॥
kūjantaṁ rāma rāmeti madhuraṁ madhurākṣaram ।
āruhya kavitaśākhāṁ vande vālmīkikokilam ॥*

To remove all obstacles one meditates on Lord Vishnu, clad in white, the moon-like splendor, the four wondrous arms, the welcoming smile. I salute Sage Valmiki, the cuckoo perched on the bough of poetry singing sweetly the honeyed syllables Rama Rama.

Ramayana is the story of Rama, the ways of Rama. Properly pronounced, the emphasis is on the second long 'a' of the word *rāmāyaṇa*, Ramayana, not on the third. The life of Rama. The word *rāma* itself was a word even before Rama came. The name was given to him. The Sanskrit word was already available. There are two ways of looking at a word. One way of looking at the word *rāma* is *pratipādkam*: in terms of the root or crude meaning of the word which declines - *rāmaḥ rāmau rāmāḥ*. Then there is *yogikam*, *vyutpattyārtha*, which means you get into the word. You see from where the word has come, how it has come. Many Sanskrit words, especially names, do not have root forms. They are just taken as they are. Most words, though, have an origin, and the origin is from the root. The root is called *dhātu*. The *dhātu*, the root, for the word *rāma* (long first 'a', as in father) is *ram* (short first 'a', like the 'e' in 'the'): *rāma kridayam*.

This root, *ram*, has its meaning in *kridayam*, in reveling, in play. The noun form indicates a certain quality - an action is involved in it. You have to say how

the noun form has come: *ramate iti rāmaḥ*. *Ramate yasmin iti rāmaḥ*, in whom one revels is Rama. The first 'a' becomes *dīrgha*: *ram* becomes *rām*; with the nominal ending *su* it becomes *rāmaḥ* in the nominative singular. The meaning then will be 'in whom the people revel.' That will be the meaning of the word *rāma*, Rama. One thing is clear: you can revel only in that which is a source of happiness. You cannot revel in a source of unhappiness - you can grovel, but not revel. You can revel only in happiness. Rama becomes a source of happiness. His life, his form, his knowledge: at every level he is a source of happiness. You are pleased, and Rama is pleased.

Rama, as it is used, can be taken as *ātmā*. Rama is a name for the *ātmā* because the source of happiness is the self. The source of happiness is the Lord, the one who is full. You dip yourself in that fullness and you are happy. 'You' means the mind. Rama can mean the self, can mean the Lord who is all, can mean the person who is a source of happiness. This meaning is from the standpoint of the etymology of the word.

The story of Rama has mingled with the people of India. It has crossed the shores of India to other countries. In Indonesia it has been altered by the Muslim influence. The story is popular in Thailand and Bali: it is studied and Rama is worshipped. In Iran, Persia, the Ramayana is talked about. Valmiki's story of Rama has spread beyond India. It is an epic poem. In Sanskrit such a composition is called *itihāsa*. *Iti + ha + āsa*: *itihāsa*. *Āsa* means that which was; *ha* means indeed; *iti* means in this manner, *evam*. In this manner it was. *Itihāsa* means history; this was there like this. In Hindi the subject matter History is called *itihās*. That is that word. The meaning of it is 'this is how it was.'

As a poet, Valmiki had the license of adding to and embellishing the canvas, the story of Rama. A poet is given that particular freedom. Therefore the Ramayana is not just a book of history; it is a *mahākāvya*. A *kāvya* means a poetic epic. History means purely factual. A *kāvya* based upon history is something like a historical novel - like Shakespeare writing about Cleopatra. There was a Ulysses,

but the story centered on him may not be all facts. The Ramayana is poetry based upon history. Rama was a person, a most respected and revered person, who moved around India. He was looked upon as an *avatāra*, as the Lord descended. He was looked upon as God incarnate. His exemplary life made him a hero in his own time.

Because of the Ramayana, the story of Rama passed from generation to generation. Rama has come to stay and to continue to influence the lives of people. Whether Rama influences or not, the Ramayana does. Every child in India has this story told to him or her. He or she hears the stories from the Ramayana day after day from a grannie or from an auntie in the hut-home. Every day in the night the story is told. Even today it is a habit. The children love the stories, and who is the grown-up who does not love a story? It is unfolded as a continuous serial, and the children anticipate the next chapter. What is going to happen to Rama? What is going to happen to Rama's wife, Sita? Each day another bit comes.

Later, I studied the Ramayana in a Tamil translation which I found to be true to the Sanskrit original. I studied a number of pages each day until I was done. I found it to be absorbing. I found that all that the elderly woman had told us as children was there. The old ladies know the story very well because it was told to them by their elders. It is the *paurāṇikas* who in fact sing the Ramayana. Rama's sons, Lava and Kusha, sang the story to Rama, not knowing this was their father. Because of certain problems, they had been separated from him, and they lived in the *āśram* of Valmiki. There they learned the story from Valmiki, the author. The two boys go to the court of Rama and they sing. Rama recognizes them by their very singing. It is a very moving story. It first came to the public in the form of that singing. Rama heard it first, and he approved. It had his stamp of approval. By that it gains a certain authenticity. We will see how Valmiki came to write about it.

To be continued...