

Bhisma - A Sketch

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DESCENT OF DIVINITY IN HEROIC FORM

Only a great spiritual being can guide human life to perfection. The full personality of one who has risen above human limitations while living in the world is expressed in the ancient Hindu ideal of the rishi. Such a one can be found in the manifestation of Bhisma, the peerless son of Shantanu and Ganga, the great grandsire of the Panda va and Kaurava clans, immortalized in the Mahabharata. In the immortal life of Bhisma, thoughtful individuals will find the prototype of the true Indian hero. In the twin realms of thought and action, Bhisma is unquestionably a supreme manifestation, the embodiment of the highest aspiration of Hindu culture. The combined wisdom of balance, serenity and chivalry unified in his character makes him a great exemplar of Hindu spiritual culture.

A study of Bhisma's life in its entirety is not within the scope of this article. However, even the brief details of his illustrious existence reveal his inner spiritual endowments, which are projected in bold and meaningful detail. Upon the dull background of ordinary human existence, the character of Bhisma appears in lustrous relief. Bhisma is the eternal heroic ideal that ever shines in a world of darkness and ignorance.

HIS PURITY

Purity is inseparable from the Hindu concept of dharma, the sum of all our righteous relations to nature, humanity and God. Through dharma we are bound to one another and to God. It is a bond of duty that is cemented with love. Purity and spiritual love bind us to righteous thoughts and actions.

The most noteworthy elements in Bhisma's character are his love of purity and dharma. His fulfillment of the vow of chastity is without precedent. Purity possessed him—it was his sole passion, the mystical bride of his soul. He was equally dedicated to his love of dharma.

HIS RIGHTEOUS LOYALTY TO THE THRONE

On no occasion did Bhisma swerve from the narrow path of virtue that leads to eternal happiness. His loyalty to the throne is an eternal paradigm of righteous loyalty for all thoughtful citizens. He guided the fortunes of the state of Hastinapura under the most



trying circumstances, when it was without a king and when it was ruled by a physically and morally blind king.

Bhisma knew that patriotism was the noblest of virtues. Loyalty is the seed of social and political stability of a nation. He fought for his king until the last atom of strength was gone from his body. Though Bhisma did not have the benefit of serving a righteous king, his loyalty to the king never came into conflict with his loyalty to God. His conscience and discrimination were purified by his devotion to righteousness.

HIS WISE USE OF A TREASURED BOON

Bhisma's father had granted him a treasured boon. "I grant you a boon. You can hold death at arm's length. You can die when you please." After a long life of righteous action and purity in every

aspect of his illustrious life, Bhisma delayed his death until the time of the Mahabharata War. Throughout the battle, Bhisma gave his inner blessing to the virtuous Pandava brothers and told them they would attain victory over the Kauravas. Although he was obliged to fight on the side of the Kauravas, his heart was with the Pandavas.

HIS RESPECT FOR THE ETHICAL RULES OF WAR

The code of ethics for war those bygone days is incomparably superior to the way that wars are administered and fought today. Firstly, both sides of the conflict had to be equal in strength and forces. They both agreed to follow the ethical rules of war and chivalry. The rules dictated that the battle should be fought by representatives of the two armies—by two archers or between two chariots. If one warrior withdrew, the other had to withdraw as well, without harassing his opponent. Wars could be fought not only with weapons; they could be waged with words. If such was the case, neither opponent could use weapons. If cowards emerged in the fight, they were not killed as they ran from the battle in fear for their lives. The fearful and the unprepared soldier could not be attacked. All those who served the warriors or the battle in every capacity except as a soldier—the

flag-bearers, the cymbal and drum-holders, for example—could not be attacked. The war was to be fought in the daylight hours after which both armies would retreat to rest and repair their wounds. During the evening hours, the opponents became friends for the time being and abandoned their enmity. They visited each other's camps to discuss the battle and other matters in a normal manner. War was righteous for a Kshatriya but it could not be motivated by hate or revenge. It could only be motivated by righteousness—war in the interest of righting a wrong.

Respectful to these ethical rules of war, Bhishma had met with the Pandavas and promised them victory. He reassured them, “Where there is dharma, there is victory and you will be victorious.” He then told them how to defeat him in battle. Bhishma's heart was with the Pandavas, who were righteous. His compassion, magnanimity and willing self-sacrifice have singular distinction and signify his moral eminence.

HONORING A VOW WITH HIS LIFE

Bhishma had taken a vow: he would never battle with a woman or with a eunuch. They were both considered to be weaker than other warriors and at a disadvantage in war; therefore, fighting with them was considered unrighteous. Sikhandi, fighting on the side of the Pandavas in the great war, was a eunuch. Bhishma had repeatedly avoided fighting with Sikhandi on the battlefield. Bhishma preferred his own death to the breaking of his noble vow.

By the tenth day of the Mahabharata War, Bhishma had killed ten thousand valiant warriors in the army of the Pandavas. Bhishma had previously set this number as the limit of soldiers he would destroy. Beyond this number, he vowed, he would kill no others of the Pandava army. On the tenth day, Shri Krishna gave an order to the Pandavas. They were to place Sikhandi at the head of the Pandava army as they went to do battle that morning.

Bhishma had foretold that when Sikhandi would lead the battle, Bhishma would be subdued. Therefore, on the tenth day of the gory river of battle submerging the two armies, Sikhandi was at the front; Arjuna held the rear. The divine plan rapidly unfolded to the amazement of all on both sides. None of Sikhandi's arrows reached Bhishma.

Faced with Sikhandi and overwhelmed by the horrible toll of the war on both sides, Bhishma was overwhelmed with guilt and repulsed by the war. He felt that he was the cause of the destruction of the noble kshatriyas, what to speak of his own relatives on both sides. Now, he said to himself, “I can die when I please. I have decided. I want to die. I will welcome death now, at this very moment.” His intuition affirmed this thought to be correct. Thus it came to pass that at the appropriate opportunity Bhishma was struck by a shower of Arjuna's arrows and felled from his chariot. Bhishma, who delayed his death by his own will, now waited for the auspicious time, when the sun turns northward, to depart from the world.

HIS MILITARY GENIUS

Shri Krishna referred to Bhishma's military genius in the Shanti Parva (Mahabharata, Chapter 49, verse 24). "We have never heard of another like you—merciful, pure, self-controlled, seeking the welfare of all, and supreme in military skill. Ferocity and brute force and terror-inspiring cruelty are not real elements of military prowess at all. They belong to the law of the jungle and not to the realm of humanity." Perhaps his most heroic trait is the love of purity, truth and righteousness that compelled him to reveal to Yudhishtira at the right time of battle the means by which he could be disabled. Following Bhishma's advice, the Pandavas defeated the undefeatable warrior-leader of the Kauravas. Bhishma's self-denial is even more remarkable than his self-realization. He had faced every event in his life with equanimity, discrimination and dispassion. He was unaffected by the opposing emotions of elation and humiliation. He was one of the greatest soldier-generals of all time. Moreover, he was the noblest, purest, and most compassionate chivalrous warrior the world has ever known.

HIS STATESMANSHIP

Bhishma was adept in the science and art of governing for the good of the world and for establishing and propagating Dharma, Artha and kama, with the assistance of righteous chastisement (Dandaniti). The quintessence of human wisdom in civil authority is found in the Shanti Parva and Anusasana Parva of the Mahabharata. In these Parvas, his description of the essence of the state comprises one of the finest portions of this sacred literature. Bhishma taught that a righteous government is the root of all national and individual righteousness. While Bhishma did not advocate the use of a popular vote, he emphasized that the popular will be ascertained in important matters of state. It was Bhishma's conviction that political wisdom was to be found with age, that pure living, experience and learning led to sound judgment, rather than the ephemeral effects of franchise, which might be exposed to corrupt practices.

His statesmanship was expressed through his teachings to Yudhishtira from his bed of arrows. Bhishma's devotion to Shri Krishna brought the Lord near to him during the weeks and hours before his death. To encourage him as he lay in the throes of unendurable pain, Shri Krishna told him, "Bhishma, you have sixty-five days more left to live on in this world. I will be by your side when you give up this bondage to reach your home. When you go, all that immense knowledge will go with you and no one will be able to get it. I want you to talk to Yudhishtira about all that you know. You can do it. You must now pacify Yudhishtira who is grieved because he was the cause of the death of his cousins. He has been pacified by Vyasa himself, and he wants to rule the kingdom as well as his ancestors did. You must make him shake off this sorrow and rule the kingdom properly. You are the only person who can help him."

Then Shri Krishna gave Bhishma a special boon. "I will grant you a boon. This pain and this weakness will not be there till you die. Your memory will be unclouded. Your

perception will be as keen as the blade of a sword. You will be able to unravel the most intricate knots of the mysteries of the universe. You will know all that there is to know.” Whereupon He removed all of Bhishma’s pain and distress, that his faithful devotee might perform his final righteous duty to Him.

Still, Bhishma wanted to know the reason Shri Krishna wanted him to impart this knowledge, since Shri Krishna was the embodiment of all knowledge and could have done it Himself. But he told Bhishma that though He could give these teachings to Yudhishtira, He wanted Bhishma’s name and righteousness to be remembered forever. “Your utterances will be on a par with the Vedas and will bring undying glory to you. So speak on.”

Bhishma could only marvel at the mysterious ways of the Divine. His spiritual radiance and teachings now obliterated all else as he imparted his knowledge to Yudhishtira from his bed of arrows. All he then did was in accordance with Shri Krishna’s sublime command.

Bhishma’s very first action was to bless Yudhishtira. He consoled and renewed his drooping, guilt-laden spirit with the sweetest tenderness: “My child, the duty of a kshatriya is to fight and kill. You had to kill. You have been a real kshatriya. You must not grieve for having done your duty.” Bhishma’s great compassion relieved Yudhishtira of his guilt consciousness regarding all the sins of commission and omission of the Pandavas. Whereupon the humble Yudhishtira received from Bhishma’s lips all his knowledge. Bhishma’s concise teachings on the highest science of ruling a kingdom fully satisfied Yudhishtira.

Bhishma’s lengthy illumined discourse spoke of the necessity of a king’s devotion to God, to Truth, to behavior that is above reproach, to straightforwardness and firmness combined with compassion. He taught Yudhishtira how to guard his own safety as well as the safety of his subjects, to conceal his innermost thoughts and place implicit confidence in himself alone and to surround himself with like-minded noble persons in his court. He spoke to him of pleasantness in speech, purity of action and proficiency in all matters related to the kingdom and its service to the people. He spoke to him about every aspect of dharma:

Destiny is powerful, but self-effort can modify it. Truth is all-powerful. The adherence to truth can never fail in life. One should practice self-control, humility, and righteousness. One should be neither too soft nor too stern. One should be able to adjust to the circumstances. Weakness is not a virtue and it breeds many evils. Compassion should be combined with stern discipline. Tolerance of irregularity and adharma leads to downfall. Life rusts in indolence; it shines in industry. Hatred is the most terrible poison. Love is the one constructive force and is all-powerful. It can reclaim even a sinner. Dharma is one’s only friend, for it follows the body that has been abandoned by all.

Finally, Bhishma told Yudhishtira how to transcend all sorrow by meditating on God and all His glories. Bhishma left his body at the auspicious time as he willed it, at the

beginning of the summer solstice when the sun begins its northward journey. Shri Krishna told him, “Death is waiting at your doorstep, waiting like a servant for your summons. You have my permission to summon him.”

HIS PHILOSOPHY

The supreme extent of Bhishma’s greatness is found in his wisdom and saintly life as they relate to the highest verities of existence. The whole of Anusasana Parva is devoted to an exposition of the vital aspects of ethical life. In Indian thought, the purity of individual ethics forms the spiritual edifice of social life. Without this foundation, the welfare of entire nations tumble down like a falling house of cards, as history repeatedly demonstrates.

Lakshmi’s declaration in the Anusasana Parva contains the quintessence of practical thinking and wisdom as it relates to the individual and social welfare of a nation (Chapter XXX). Lakshmi dwells as the goddess of happiness in the hearts of pious, merciful, vigorous and self-controlled individuals. Lakshmi scorns the idle, licentious and impure.

Yudhishtira asked Bhishma a very important question: “What should one who seeks auspiciousness in life do during the journey of life?” Bhishma gives his glorious reply:

He must have a deep faith in God. He must be full of meditation and purity of mind. In his physical relations he must avoid three things: cruelty, theft and immorality. In his speech he must avoid four things: improper talk, cruel speech, tale-bearing and lying. In his mental relations he must realize three assets: exclusion of thought of others’ affluence, friendliness to all beings, and a strong conviction of the truth that “as we sow so we reap.”

Individual ethical life forms the foundation of the sovereign edifice of enriching social life. Bhishma emphasized what he called our common duties. They include compassion, truth, purity, passionlessness, detachment and honesty among others. His exposition of the four ashramas reveals his strong emphasis on our ascent through study, service, meditation and renunciation to the highest elevated state of spiritual realization. Shri Krishna praised Bhishma’s wisdom, goodness and devotion when he said to him, “There are none like you. You have been purity itself. Your wisdom is unmatched among men.”

The cherished crown of the fullness of knowledge so abundant in Bhishma is God-realization. Shri Krishna granted him spiritual victory and ever-lasting illustriousness. It was Bhishma’s reward for his complete, perfect, immaculate, intuitive and unwavering spirituality—which dwelled in him as an ever-present radiance, an ever-kindled rapture. When Bhishma departed from the world in purest splendor, Krishna’s prediction about the impact of his glorious personality was verified: “After the demise of this supreme soldier, saint and sage, the world will be like a dark, moonless night.”