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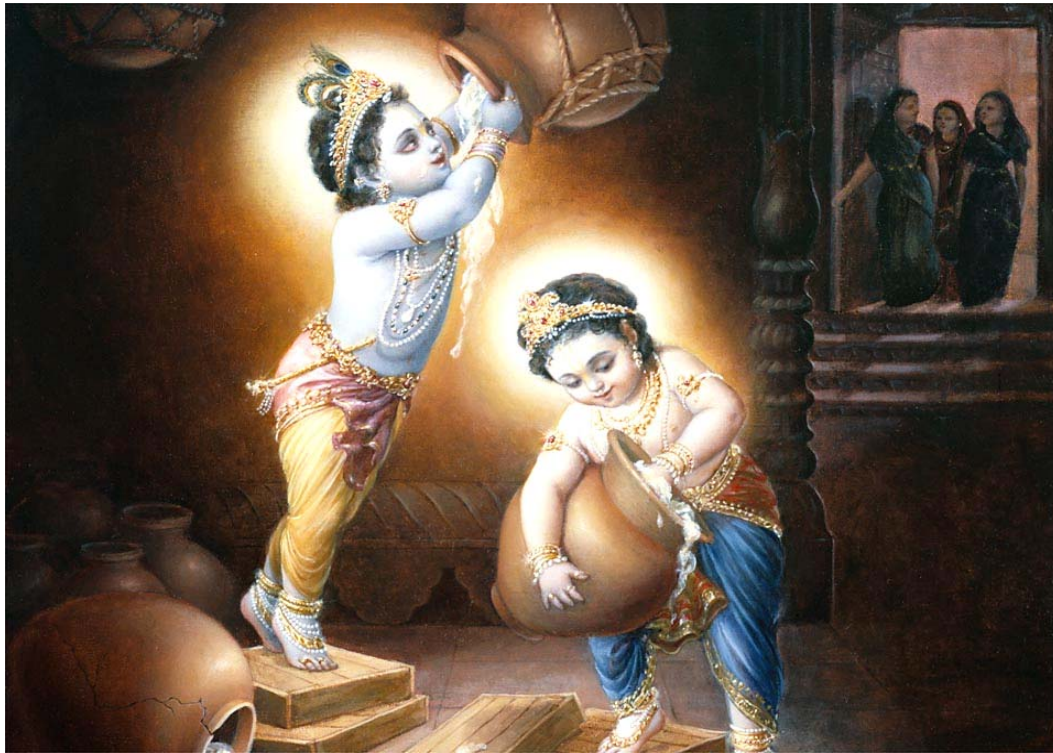
Issue 14

The Ultimate Love-Thief

Janmashtami Special issue

“Maya is one of the most beautiful concepts in the history of religion.” This remark of eminent Indologist Daniel H H Ingalls is intriguing because Maya is generally considered the illusory energy that tempts, misleads and causes suffering. Why then is Maya considered beautiful?

The answer involves unraveling the mystery of the dual aspects of Maya – Yoga-Maya and Maha-Maya – and their Lord, Krishna. Let’s begin with the spiritual aspect of Maya, Yoga-Maya, who facilitates the loving lila of Krishna.



The principle of lila is the unique Vedic contribution to world theology. God is often imagined as a judge who rewards the pious and penalizes the impious. If that’s all that God had to do eternally, God’s personal life would be quite boring. But the devotional Vedic texts like Shrimad Bhagavatam explain that being a judge is only a tiny part of God’s multifaceted, nay omnifaceted, personality. God as Krishna has his own life of eternal love with his devotees in his

kingdom. There, Krishna delights, not in the exhibition of his godhood, but in the reciprocation of love with his devotees.

In Krishna's pastoral paradise, Vrindavana, Yoga-Maya covers the devotees so that they are no longer conscious that Krishna is God; they see him just as the most special, sweet member of their village. Krishna too plays that role to perfection.

For example, with those devotees who love him in *vatsalya-rasa* (parental affection), Krishna becomes an endearing, naughty child, who steals butter from their houses. The elderly gopis complain to Krishna's mother, Yashoda, Krishna artfully feigns innocence and Yashoda is mystified till the telltale butter on Krishna's lips incriminates him.

Lilas like these are so celebrated that hundreds of sweet songs have been composed about them and millions of Krishna devotees delight in singing them. Indeed Bilvamangala Thakura, the great Vaishnava-poet glorifies Lord Krishna as the ultimate thief, "My dear Lord, O best of thieves, you, who are celebrated as butter-thief in the glorious land of Vrindavan, please steal away all my sins that have accumulated over many lifetimes."

Skeptics who ask why God steals miss the essence of the lila – love. Krishna being God owns everything; there's no question of his stealing anything when everything belongs to him. Yet Krishna "steals" to have fun-filled loving exchanges with his devotees.

To appreciate the dynamics of lila, let's compare a lila with a drama. Of course, unlike a drama, Krishna's lila is not unreal; rather it is the highest reality – the reality of the intimate love between the Lord and his devotees.

In the eternally real drama of Krishna-lila, Yoga-Maya is the director and Krishna is the hero. But the special twist is that Krishna is also the scriptwriter, so that Yoga-Maya directs Krishna according to his own script. Thus in his lila, Krishna is simultaneously in control being the scriptwriter, and not in control being the perfect actor who forgets himself while playing his role. This is Krishna's extraordinary world of love. Krishna-lila reveals the import of the saying "God is love" in the personality of Krishna, who is the supremely loving and lovable person.

Just as Yoga-Maya causes forgetfulness of Krishna's divinity among those souls who want to enjoy *with* Krishna, the counterpart of Yoga-Maya in the material world, Maha-Maya causes forgetfulness of Krishna's divinity among those souls who want to enjoy *separate* from Krishna. However, there is a big difference between the two kinds of forgetfulness; Yoga-Maya's forgetfulness furthers the ecstasy of love in the spiritual world, whereas Maha-Maya's forgetfulness perpetuates the agony of repeated birth and death in the material world.

To attract us back from Maha-Maya to Yoga-Maya, Krishna comes on Janmashtami from his kingdom to our world to reveal his loving lila. The same Krishna who appeared on Janmashtami is eternally available to us as his holy names like the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, which purify and soften our hearts and redirect our heart's love back to him. When our heart becomes soft with love for Krishna, soft like butter, then *makhana-cora* Krishna will come and steal our hearts. Devotees pray and long for that ultimate love-theft.
