

Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 1 Chapter 5: Narada Instructs Vyasa

11 September 2026



A note before you read

These chapter-by-chapter summaries of the **Srimad Bhagwat Mahapurāṇa** are prepared with the **Gita Press Bhagwat** as the primary reference. They are meant to support your study of the Bhagwat, not to replace the original scripture.

The primary and recommended way to study is to read directly from the physical Gita Press Bhagwat. When you are travelling, away from home, or the book is not at hand, these summaries may be used as a companion for continued study, revision and understanding.



On the holy bank of the Sarasvatī, the celestial sage Nārada, lute in hand, gently smiles and begins to instruct the disconsolate Vedavyāsa in the one thing his great work still lacked.

Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

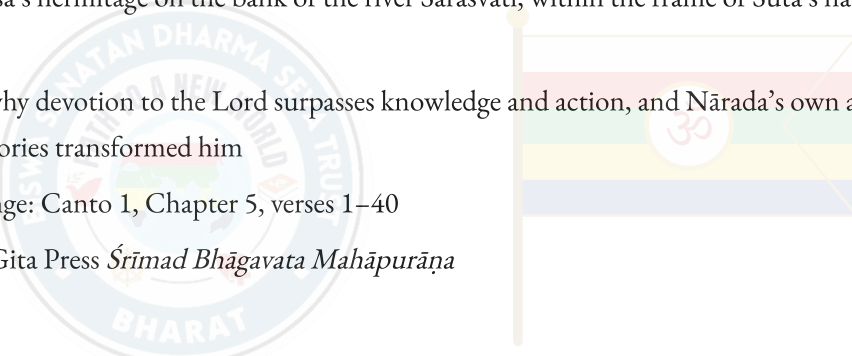
Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

Welcome to *Srimad Bhagavatam Wisdom*, a devotional journey through the sacred histories and teachings of the Srimad Bhagavat Mahapurana. In the previous chapter we left the sage Vedavyāsa sorrowing on the bank of the Sarasvatī, sure that something was missing from his life’s labour even after he had given the world the Vedas and the Mahābhārata. Now his divine visitor speaks. In this fifth discourse the celestial sage Nārada lays his finger upon the one thing that was wanting, points Vyāsa toward the work he was born to compose, and — most tenderly of all — tells the story of his own former life, when a servant-boy’s heart was won forever by simply hearing the glories of Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

Chapter Information

- Scripture: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa
- Canto: 1 (Book One)
- Chapter: 5 (Discourse 5)
- Chapter title: Nārada’s Instructions to Vyāsadeva on Śrīmad Bhāgavatam
- Principal speaker: the celestial sage Nārada (Devarṣi Nārada)
- Principal listener: the sage Vedavyāsa, Kṛṣṇa-dvaipāyana, son of Parāśara
- Main setting: Vyāsa’s hermitage on the bank of the river Sarasvatī, within the frame of Sūta’s narration to the sages of Naimiṣāranya
- Central subject: why devotion to the Lord surpasses knowledge and action, and Nārada’s own account of how hearing Kṛṣṇa’s glories transformed him
- Principal verse range: Canto 1, Chapter 5, verses 1–40
- Primary edition: Gita Press *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*



What Came Before

At the close of the fourth discourse, the sage Vedavyāsa sat troubled on the holy bank of the Sarasvatī. He had observed his vows, studied and arranged the Vedas, and revealed their purport through the Mahābhārata so that all people might find their way. Yet his heart felt strangely empty, as though his soul had not yet realized its true nature. As he brooded over what might still be lacking, the celestial sage Nārada arrived at his hermitage, and Vyāsa rose at once to receive and worship him. It is here, with the two sages seated together, that our chapter begins.

Nārada’s Gentle Question

When Nārada was comfortably seated, lute in hand, the celebrated celestial sage turned to Vedavyāsa beside him and spoke — smiling a little, as if at his friend’s needless sorrow.

Most blessed son of Parāśara, he asked, is your body content, and is your mind at peace? Surely everything you sought to know has been fully attained, for you have produced the wonderful Mahābhārata, which deals with every object of human striving. You have investigated and realized the eternal Absolute — and yet, my lord, you grieve as though you had not yet reached the goal of your life.

Vyāsa answered with disarming honesty. All that you have said of me is true, he replied, and still my soul finds no satisfaction. I ask you the cause of it, for you are the son of the self-born Brahmā, and your insight is unfathomable. You wander through all the worlds like the sun; you move within all beings like the vital air, and you can read every heart. Though I have realized both the supreme Absolute and the Veda through my vows and yoga, pray point out to me my great deficiency.

The One Thing That Was Missing

Nārada did not soften the truth. You have not sung, as you should, the stainless glory of the Lord, he said. Consider that wisdom deficient which does not please Him. You have dealt fully with religious duty, wealth, pleasure and liberation — the objects of human pursuit — but you have not so fully described the glory of Bhagavān Vāsudeva.

श्रीनारद उवाच

भवतानुदितप्रायं यशो भगवतोऽमलम् ।

येनैवासौ न तुष्येत मन्ये तद्दर्शनं खिलम् ॥ ८ ॥

śrī-nārada uvāca bhavatānudita-prāyaṁ yaśo bhagavato 'malam yenaivāsau na tuṣyeta manye tad darśanaṁ khilam

Meaning: You have not, for the most part, sung the spotless glory of the Lord. That knowledge which does not satisfy Him I consider incomplete. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 8)

Speech that never utters the praises of Śrī Hari, Nārada continued — however ornamented it may be — is like a pond where crows delight, feeding on refuse; the swan-like devotees who abide in the Lord's lotus feet take no pleasure in it. But that composition whose every verse carries the names of the endless Lord, bearing the impress of His glory, wipes out the sins of the world; it is such words that saintly people love to hear, to sing, and to repeat.

तद्वाग्विसर्गो जनताघविप्लवो

यस्मिन् प्रतिश्लोकमबद्धवत्यपि ।

नामान्यनन्तस्य यशोऽङ्कितानि यत्

शृण्वन्ति गायन्ति गृणन्ति साधवः ॥ ११ ॥

tad-vāg-visargo janatāgha-viplavo yasmin prati-ślokaṁ abaddhavyatyapi nāmāny anantasya yaśo 'ṅkitāni yat śṛṇvanti gāyanti grṇanti sādhaḥ

Meaning: That composition, though imperfect in diction, in which each verse bears the names of the infinite Lord and the marks of His glory, destroys the sins of the people; the saints hear it, sing it, and repeat it. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 11)



Like swans dwelling in the lotus-lake, the Lord's devotees delight only in speech that sings His names and glory (verses 10-11).

Devotion Above Knowledge and Action

Now Nārada opened the heart of his teaching. Even flawless knowledge that leads straight to liberation does not truly adorn the soul if it is empty of devotion to the infallible Lord. How much less, then, can action performed for reward — action rooted in sorrow at every stage — or even selfless action that has not been offered to God? Endowed with unfailing vision and steadfast in truth, O Vyāsa, now recall with a concentrated mind the deeds of Śrī Hari, for the liberation of all.

He warned, too, of the restless mind that turns away from the Lord's exploits: like a boat beaten by a gale, it finds no rest anywhere, lost among the endless names and forms of the world. Then Nārada offered a saying that has comforted seekers ever since — that a wise man should strive for that one goal which cannot be gained by wandering from the highest heaven to the lowest region, while the pleasures of the senses come of their own accord, unbidden, like sorrow itself, by the swift and unseen flow of time.

तस्यैव हेतोः प्रयतेत कोविदो
न लभ्यते यद्भ्रमतामुपर्यधः ।
तल्लभ्यते दुःखवदन्यतः सुखं
कालेन सर्वत्र गभीररंहसा ॥ १८ ॥

tasyaiva hetoḥ prayateta kovido na labhyate yad bhramatām upary adhaḥ tal labhyate duḥkhavad anyataḥ sukhaṁ kālena sarvatra gabhīra-ramhasā

Meaning: The wise should strive only for that goal which is not attained by wandering through the worlds from the highest to the lowest; for happiness, like sorrow, comes of its own accord everywhere in due course, by the deep and irresistible movement of time. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 18)

And so, Nārada urged, one who serves the Lord who bestows liberation never returns to this round of birth and death, even if by some accident he should slip; remembering the sweetness of having once embraced the Lord's feet, he would never think of abandoning them.

You Are a Ray of the Supreme

Then Nārada lifted Vyāsa's gaze to the largest truth of all. This whole universe is none other than the Lord, and yet He stands apart from it, being the cause of its coming into being, its continuance, and its dissolution. You know this yourself, said Nārada; I have only pointed to it by way of a hint.



The whole universe rests in the Supreme Lord, who is yet distinct from it as its source, support and end (verse 20).

इदं हि विश्वं भगवानिवेतरो
यतो जगत्स्थाननिरोधसम्भवाः ।
तद्धि स्वयं वेद भवांस्तथापि ते
प्रादेशमात्रं भवतः प्रदर्शितम् ॥ २० ॥

idaṁ hi viśvaṁ bhagavān ivetaro yato jagat-sthāna-nirodha-sambhavāḥ tad dhi svayaṁ veda bhavāṁs tathāpi te prādeśa-mātram bhavataḥ pradarsitam

Meaning: This universe is indeed the Lord, and yet He is distinct from it, being that from which the world arises, in which it abides, and into which it is dissolved. This you know yourself; still, I have shown it to you here in brief. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 20)

Know for certain, said Nārada, that you are a ray of the Supreme Person; though unborn, you have taken birth for the good of the world. Therefore describe at length the exploits of the Lord of exalted glory. The wise have declared that the true purpose of penance, sacred learning, sacrifice, recitation of the Vedas, enlightenment and charity is nothing other than to recount the virtues of that Lord of excellent fame.

Nārada Tells of His Former Life

Having given his counsel, Nārada now offered Vyāsa the surest proof — the story of his own soul. In a former age, in a previous existence, he said, I was born as the son of a maidservant who waited upon brāhmaṇas learned in the Vedas. While still a boy, I was assigned to serve some wandering ascetics who had halted in one place for the rainy season.



In a former life, the boy who would become Nārada serves wandering sages through the rains and hears the stories of Sri Krishna (verses 23-26).

अहं पुरातीतभवेऽभवं मुने
दास्यास्तु कस्याश्चन वेदवादिनाम् ।
निरूपितो बालक एव योगिनां
शुश्रूषणे प्रावृषि निर्विविक्षताम् ॥ २३ ॥

ahaṁ purātīta-bhave 'bhavaṁ mune dāsyās tu kasyāścana veda-vādinām nirūpito bālaka eva yogināṁ śuśrūṣaṇe prāvṛṣi nirvivikṣatām

Meaning: O sage, in a former life in a past age I was born the son of a certain maidservant of brāhmaṇas versed in the Vedas; while still a boy I was appointed to the service of some yogīs who wished to remain in one place during the rains. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 23)

Though a mere child, said Nārada, I was free from restless play, quiet and obedient, sparing of speech. Seeing this, the sages were kind to me, and with their consent I ate only the remnants left in their dishes once a day, and by this was cleansed of every sin. Serving them so, my mind grew pure and began to love their creed — the creed of devotion. And there, by the grace of those saints who ceaselessly sang the Lord's praises, day by day I heard the soul-ravishing stories of Śrī Kṛṣṇa; and as I listened with reverence, step by step an attraction for the Lord of delightful fame awoke within me.

तत्रान्वहं कृष्णकथाः प्रगायता-
मनुग्रहेणाशृणवं मनोहराः ।
ताः श्रद्धया मेऽनुपदं विशृण्वतः
प्रियश्रवस्यङ्ग ममाभवदुचिः ॥ २६ ॥

tatrānvaham kṛṣṇa-kathāḥ pragāyatām anugraheṇāśṛṇvaṁ manoharāḥ tāḥ śraddhayā me 'nupadam viśṛṇvataḥ priyaśravasy aṅga mamābhavad ruciḥ

Meaning: There, by their grace, each day I heard the enchanting stories of Kṛṣṇa as those sages sang them; and as I listened to them with faith at every step, O dear one, a taste for the Lord of delightful glory arose in me. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 26)

The Sages' Parting Gift

Throughout the rains and the autumn that followed, Nārada heard the holy praises of Śrī Hari sung three times each day, and there sprouted in his heart a devotion that uprooted passion and ignorance. When the time came for the sages to depart, moved by compassion for the humble, faithful child who had served them so well, they graciously imparted to him the most confidential wisdom — the very wisdom revealed by the Lord Himself. Through it, Nārada came to know the glory of the deluding potency, the Māyā, of Lord Vāsudeva, the Maker of the world — that knowledge by which souls attain His supreme Abode.

Actions Offered to the Lord

Then Nārada explained how ordinary deeds themselves may be turned into a path homeward. He gave a physician's image: the very substance that causes an illness cannot as a rule cure it — yet the same substance, properly prepared as medicine, does heal.

आमयो यश्च भूतानां जायते येन सुव्रत ।
तदेव ह्यामयं द्रव्यं न पुनाति चिकित्सितम् ॥ ३३ ॥

āmayo yaś ca bhūtānām jāyate yena suvrata tad eva hy āmayam dravyam na punāti cikitsitam

Meaning: O you of noble vows, the very substance by which a disease arises in living beings does not, in its raw form, cure that disease; yet that same substance, when medicinally prepared, does heal. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 33)

In the same way, all the activities of men ordinarily bind them to the wheel of rebirth; but those same activities, when offered to the Lord, lose their power to bind. Duties performed in this world for the pleasure of the Lord yield wisdom joined with devotion. Those who act in obedience to His will repeatedly utter and meditate upon the names and praises of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. And Nārada gave the very words of adoration by which such a devotee worships.



The devotee worships the Lord by the sacred formula, offering obeisance to Vasudeva, Pradyumna, Aniruddha and Sankarshana (verse 37).

ॐ नमो भगवते तुभ्यं वासुदेवाय धीमहि ।
प्रद्युम्नायानिरुद्धाय नमः सङ्कर्षणाय च ॥ ३७ ॥

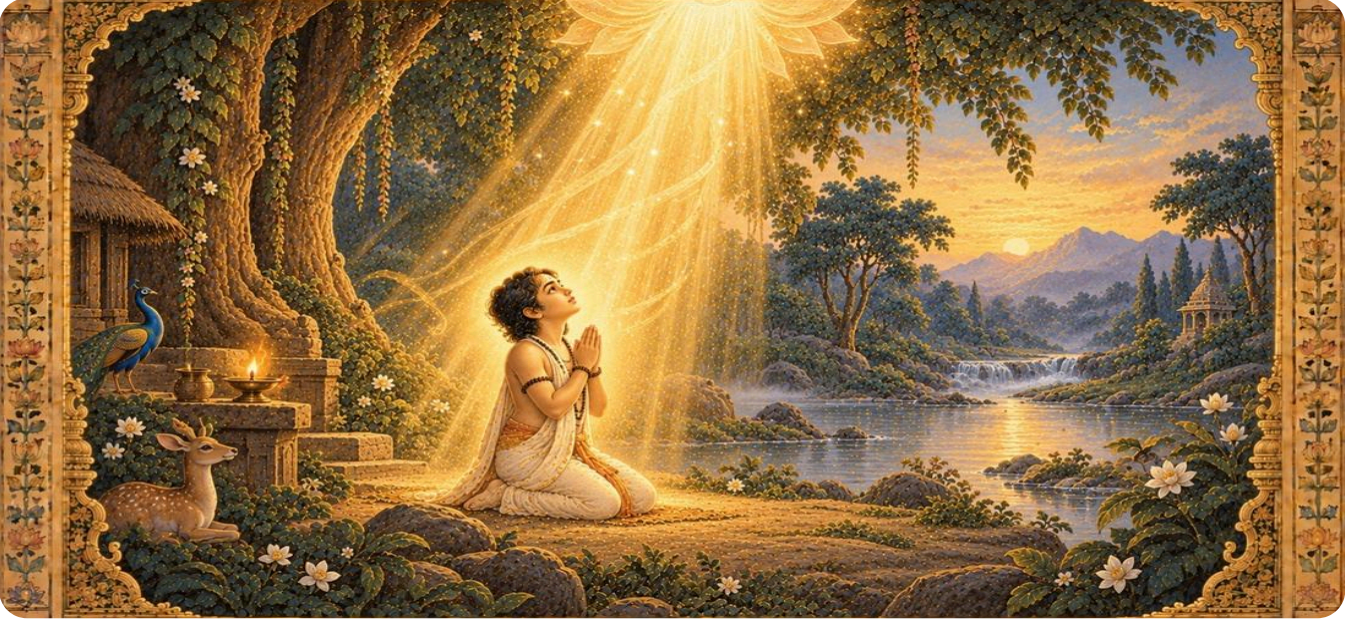
om namo bhagavate tubhyaṁ vāsudevāya dhīmahi pradyumnāyāniruddhāya namaḥ saṅkarṣaṇāya ca

Meaning: Obeisance to You, O Lord Vāsudeva; upon You we meditate. Obeisance also to Pradyumna, to Aniruddha, and to Saṅkarṣaṇa. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 37)

The Lord of sacrifice, Nārada explained, has the sacred formula for His very body and wears no material form; only he has true insight who worships Him by the names of these divine forms.

The Lord's Blessing and Nārada's Appeal

When the boy had faithfully carried out this worship, Lord Keśava graciously granted him self-knowledge, mystic power, and loving devotion to His feet.



Lord Keshava graciously grants the boy self-knowledge, divine power and loving devotion at His feet (verse 39).

इमं स्वनिगमं ब्रह्मन्नवेत्य मदनुष्ठितम् ।

अदान्मे ज्ञानमैश्वर्यं स्वस्मिन् भावं च केशवः ॥ ३९ ॥

imaṁ sva-nigamaṁ brahmann avetya mad-anuṣṭhitaṁ adān me jñānam aiśvaryaṁ svasmīn bhāvaṁ ca keśavaḥ

Meaning: O brāhmaṇa, seeing that I had carried out this His own teaching, Lord Keśava granted me knowledge, divine power, and loving devotion unto Himself. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 39)

Having laid bare the secret of his own transformation, Nārada made his loving request to Vyāsa: describe now the glories of the Almighty Lord, for by hearing them even the wise reach the very end of their search. The saints recognize the chanting of that glory, and nothing else, as the one true remedy for those tormented again and again by the sorrows of the world.

Important Verse

The chapter closes upon Nārada's appeal — the request that will soon bring forth the whole Bhāgavata:

त्वमप्यदभ्रश्रुत विश्रुतं विभोः

समाप्यते येन विदां बुभुत्सितम् ।

प्राख्याहि दुःखैर्मुहुर्दितात्मनां

सङ्क्लेशनिर्वाणमुशन्ति नान्यथा ॥ ४० ॥

tvam apy adabhra-śruta viśrutaṁ vibhoḥ samāpyate yena vidāṁ bubhutsitaṁ prākhyāhi duḥkhair muhur arditātmanāṁ saṅkleśa-nirvāṇaṁ uśanti nānyathā

Meaning: O you of vast learning, describe the renowned glories of the almighty Lord, by which the wise complete their quest for knowledge; for the saints hold that there is no other way to end the afflictions of those tormented again and again by sorrow. (Canto 1, Chapter 5, verse 40)

Principal Teachings

1. Knowledge without devotion leaves the heart unsatisfied. Even Vyāsa, master of the Vedas, felt an emptiness until Nārada named its cause — the glory of the Lord had not yet been sung (verse 8). Learning finds its rest only in love of God.
2. The Lord's names sanctify even imperfect words. Speech that carries the names of the infinite Lord purifies the world, however plain its diction, while the most polished words empty of Him are barren (verse 11). It is devotion, not eloquence, that makes speech holy.
3. Devotion completes both knowledge and action. Flawless knowledge does not adorn the soul if it lacks devotion to the Lord, and action offered to Him loses its binding power (verses 12, 34). Bhakti is the missing ingredient that transforms everything else.
4. Strive for the one goal the worlds cannot give. No amount of roaming from the loftiest realm to the deepest can hand a soul life's true purpose, while pleasure and pain both arrive unasked, carried by the relentless passage of time — so the wise direct their whole effort toward the Lord alone (verse 18).
5. Holy company and hearing awaken love of God. A servant-boy became the great sage Nārada simply by serving saints and hearing the stories of Kṛṣṇa with faith (verses 25–26). The path begins within reach of the humblest heart.
6. Every duty can be offered to the Lord. As a harmful substance becomes medicine when properly prepared, so ordinary work becomes liberating when offered to God (verses 33–35). Devotion re-medicates our whole life.

A Devotional Reflection

What is most tender in this chapter is where the great teaching lands. Nārada does not overwhelm Vyāsa with argument; he tells him a childhood story. Before he was the celestial sage who wanders the worlds with his lute, Nārada was a poor woman's son, a serving-boy who ate the leftovers of holy men and listened, evening after evening, as they sang of Kṛṣṇa. He had no learning, no status, no ritual qualification — only a quiet heart and the willingness to hear. And that was enough. The glory of the Lord, once it entered his ears, never left him. When we feel far from the scriptures, unqualified, too ordinary for grace, this chapter answers gently: begin as the boy began. Keep the company of those who love the Lord, hear His stories with faith, and let the hearing do its slow, sure work. The same door that opened for a servant-child stands open for us.

A Daily Devotional Practice

Do today what the boy Narada did: hear the Lord's glory with faith. Set aside a few unhurried minutes to read or listen to the stories of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, and as you go about your ordinary duties, quietly offer them to Him — turning even small tasks into worship. If you wish, repeat the sacred words Nārada gave: *Om Namo Bhagavate Vāsudevāya*. Let devotion, not perfection, be your measure.

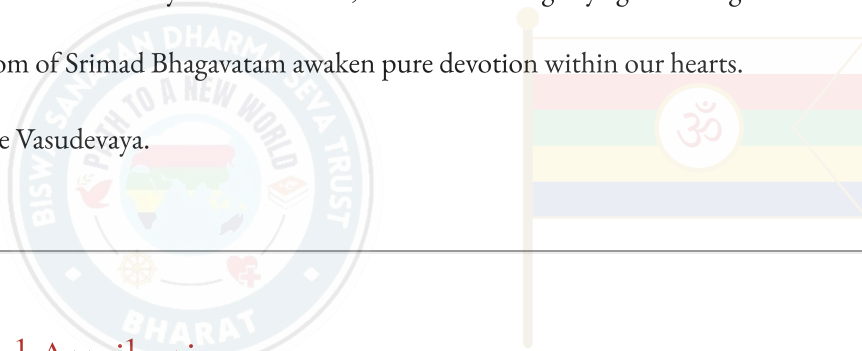
Conclusion

So ends the fifth discourse of the Śrīmad Bhāgavata, the dialogue between Vyāsa and Nārada, in Book One of this great Purāṇa which the perfected souls call the Paramahansa-Saṁhitā. In this chapter, Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 1 Chapter 5, the celestial sage Nārada finds the one thing missing from Vyāsa's mighty work — the full song of the Lord's glory — and shows that devotion is what completes all knowledge and redeems all action. Then, most movingly, he offers his own life as proof, recalling how a maidservant's son was carried to the feet of the Lord by nothing more than the company of saints and the hearing of Kṛṣṇa's stories. His closing appeal — describe the glories of the Almighty Lord — is the seed from which the entire Bhāgavata will grow. May we take Nārada's counsel into our own hearts: to seek the one goal the worlds cannot give, to offer our every act to the Lord, and to hear His glory again and again until love awakens.

May the divine wisdom of Srimad Bhagavatam awaken pure devotion within our hearts.

Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

Jay Shree Madhav.



References and Attribution

Primary edition: Gita Press, Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa (English), Book One (Skandha 1), Discourse 5, book pages 15–18.

Srimad Bhagavatam Wisdom · Biswa Sanatan Dharma Seva Trust. Presented following the spiritual guidance and recommendation of Pandit Dr. Shri Kashinath Mishra.

॥ हरि ॐ तत्सत् ॥

Jay Shree Madhav

Read online: kalkiabatara.org/blog-srimad-bhagavatam-canto-1-chapter-5-narada-instructs-vyasa.html

Srimad Bhagavatam Wisdom · Kalki Avatar International · Biswa Sanatan Dharma Seva Trust