

“The Dance of Love”

Lord Krishna promised the young female cowherds, or *gopis*, that he would dance with them when autumn came. The *gopis* eagerly waited for the time to come. When it did, Krishna went out to the forest on a delightful full-moon night and played his flute. The *gopis* heard the flute and felt it calling them away from home, and after some time they threw off their family responsibilities and ran off to find Krishna. They knew the consequence of running off: to their husbands they were now as good as dead.

The *gopis* followed the sound of the flute and found Krishna in the forest. They stood and gazed at him, astonished by his loveliness. Krishna asked about their well-being and chastised them for leaving their husbands and families. Then he said: “You have seen the lush forest and the moonlit night and the beautiful riverbanks. Now go home to your husbands.” These cruel words struck the *gopis* hard. Not knowing what to say, they sank into their own endless thoughts, while tears, like pearls from a broken necklace, fell from their eyes. Finally they discovered the words to reproach him: “Krishna, you are a bold deceiver. With your flute you led us away. You took our hearts, our minds, and our wealth. And now you strike us with cold unkindness that will be the death of us. We have abandoned our families and homes and husbands; we ignored the world’s call for us to remain in our places. Now there is only one who can protect us, and that is you. Where else can we call home now that we are fully wrapped up in love of you?”

Krishna smiled and called them to come closer. He asked them to dance, and they were glad. With his special skill, he made a golden terrace on the riverbank, and the *gopis* dressed themselves up in long robes and jewels. They were intoxicated with love for Krishna, and began to think that he belonged only to them.

Krishna sensed that they were becoming filled with pride, so he took Radha, one of the *gopis*, and vanished. The rest of the *gopis* were frightened and sad, and they searched for him, calling, “Oh, Lord, why have you left us behind when we have given ourselves to you?” After a while they found his footprints, with Radha’s beside them, and followed them, feeling miserable as they searched.

Meanwhile, alone with Krishna, Radha was thinking very highly of herself. She thought she must be the greatest of all, and became so proud that she asked Krishna to carry her on his shoulders. Just as she was about to climb up, Krishna disappeared, leaving her standing alone with her arms stretched out. Her radiant beauty made the ground around her shine, but Radha wept, and all the birds and animals and trees wept with her.

The other *gopis* found her there, embraced her joyously, and then continued their search for Krishna. Finally they sat down on the riverbank and cried for him until they were exhausted. But he did not appear.

Krishna saw that the *gopis* were dying for his love, so he came again into their midst. When he did, their loneliness disappeared and they were glad again. Krishna said: “I have tested you in this way, and you have not abandoned me but have given me your hearts. I cannot reward you enough.”

So Krishna played and danced with the *gopis*. He multiplied himself and danced in a ring, each *gopi* thinking Krishna was by her side and holding her hand alone. They whirled around; they played their lutes and sang. Rapt in love of Krishna, mind and body were forgotten. Even the gods came down from the heavens to watch, and the wind and water stood still to listen.



But as morning approached, Krishna told the *gopis* it was time to go home. He said, “Meditate upon me always, and I will always be near you.” The *gopis* were pleased, and returned safely to their homes, for no one knew they had been away.

(Based on Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita, *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* [London: George G. Harrap and Company, 1913], pages 232–235.)

