



OUT OF VISHNU'S MOUTH

Saint Markandeya, the renowned and deeply respected sage, had a prodigious brain, a marvelous mind, great health, and happiness. A thousand years old, he came from a great lineage of wise men who possessed all the secrets of life. Markandeya's greatest revelation, which he propagated and preached far and wide with much success, was that he, and all of us, including all the creatures and the inanimate world—indeed, the entire known universe—exist within Vishnu's body as the god sleeps on the Cosmic Sea. The firmament is the globe of Vishnu's skull, the planets, stars and galaxies his thought, the sun his eye. Markandeya knew that Vishnu's silent mouth was the source of all sound, his throat and lungs the spring of all songs, his arteries and veins our river and streams, and Vishnu's heart the very pulse of the world.

In fact, the word "pulse" sent Markandeya into an ecstatic trance as he contemplated the rhythm of the universe. Everything that he could think of—and he could think of it all: the seasons, night and day, the phases of the moon and the ocean, the diastole and systole of nature—was rhythm regulated to some unheard, but everywhere visible, cosmic beat: the beat of Vishnu's heart.

"What a miraculous universe! How marvelously balanced and proportioned! How mathematically precise its underpinnings! How awesome the physiology of rivers and streams, wind and air! What harmony, from the cells in the body to the planetary spheres in their orbits whirling to the unheard sound of music!" Markandeya would wax poetic as he preached. "And you and I, all of us, are also notes in the

great harmony of life! How stupendous it is, that we have been given the mind, the brain, the consciousness, the vision to see and know the intricacies of this universe's design!"

His devotees clapped and bowed, genuflected and adored him.

One day, as Markandeya was roaming about in Vishnu's mouth, as he was wont to do, contemplating the marvels of language, alphabets, words, and names, he suddenly tripped and found himself falling into a deep, watery abyss. The blue, cloudless sky darkened at noon. It wasn't just the clear darkness of a starless night, but there was a profound matte blackness, cold and frigid, that deeply confused Markandeya. He, who knew all the intricate workings of the universe, had never had such an experience before. He rubbed his eyes and pinched himself, but the void persisted in all directions, colorless, starless, unbounded, trackless abyss.

A violent wave, accompanied by a noisy, cacophonous sound, swept him up and he found himself swirling furiously in a vortex of water so powerful that he was like a twig in a maelstrom. Round and round and up and down he whirled, disoriented and afraid. All his knowledge about Vishnu, geometry, language, number, and image, melted in the waters in which he found himself immersed up to his chin. He was breathing through his mouth, in short, desperate gasps.

Neither Markandeya's intelligence nor his wisdom could help him fathom this experience. Where was he? How did he get here? Why did this happen? What was its meaning? Was he still in Vishnu's body? In his heart? Was Vishnu—oh, terror!—having a heart attack? What happened to the god in whose body he so safely roamed, delighting in its harmony and beauty, feeling the warm, comforting beat of Vishnu's heart in his ears?

And then suddenly his powerful mind sent him the insight that he had fallen out of Vishnu's mouth into the cosmic waters on which the god slept! The notion brought some comfort to Markandeya. But this soon dissipated, for try as he might, he couldn't see even the vague outline of the slumbering god.

Because Markandeya had been suddenly and unexplainably expelled from his home within Vishnu's body, his previous vision of harmony was like a fading dream inside his despairing and doubtful head. Words and thoughts began to fail him, and he seemed on the verge of death, for which he was not ready even after a thousand years of living. How could this be happening to him, Markandeya, the All-Knowing? And

why? Surely there was a reason for it, which he would be able to grasp if only the roaring of this ocean would subside. But he thrashed about in the waters, like a drowning man who sees no shore.

Markandeya concentrated hard, recalling his austerities. He succeeded in clutching the thin straw of his will power, and clambering up on it. He visualized the body of Vishnu, and sure enough, the darkness abated a bit and he perceived the outline of the sleeping god again, half submerged, half floating on the waters. Markandeya concentrated harder, and in the faint light saw Vishnu's hand reach out for him, like a raft. Wet and shivering like a drowned rat, he scrambled up on it, climbed up the pores of Vishnu's cheeks precariously, before sliding into the gaping slit of Vishnu's mouth once again.

Ah! Once again Markandeya was in Vishnu's body and behold, his safe and familiar world was back! The sun shone in his soul, making the inner and outer territory numinous with light and color. His joy, his delight in everything external, and at his own inner mechanisms, the grace of an unclouded consciousness, the clear lens of his senses that allowed him to perceive the purpose of the world and himself in it, returned, anew, fresh, as if for the very first time.

And Markandeya's sermons changed with his new experience, which he incorporated into a slightly amended vision of the universe. From that time on, the sage preached that silence and emptiness, like a blank canvas or parchment, without which no words or forms could exist, were also part of reality; that chaos and cacophony were also part of the song of life. He would tell his followers that even though the world was measured, it wasn't mathematical and entirely predictable; that there were variations within regularity, oscillations in the order. After all, Vishnu did not lock himself within some rigid pattern, but was free to improvise.

But though Markandeya was still healthy and strong, his bliss was edged with doubt. He was no longer a happy man, for he had experienced the great void that surrounded the counterpoint of order and chaos in the cosmos. As he resumed his peregrinations in Vishnu's body, his brain was abuzz with questions. Was there nothing solid and substantial about the world as he knew it? What was it that made his experience oscillate from dark to light, thus? And what was real? This or that? Harmony or cacophony? Peace or that other experience that was not even amenable to or expressible in words? Could he choose to be in "this" which he understood and loved? This was safe, that was

dangerous; this was life, which he loved and was attached to, and that was death, which he feared and never wanted to experience again.

So, for another thousand years, Markandeya worked with a great deal of effort and concentration to recreate his world as something more congenial and comprehensible, and succeeded. And once again his happiness was re-established. The sage continued to explore the geography of god's earth, the configurations of Vishnu's mind, wondering and musing, contemplating and meditating, preaching and teaching. Yet, just when he had forgotten his own death and thought he had figured existence out once more—"this" was real and the other just an aberration—Markandeya fell out of Vishnu's mouth again.

The sage went through the same dissolution of form and color, language and image, boundary and shape, the same inner and outer turmoil and agitation as before. But this time his brain and will failed him entirely. Nothing made any sense, his bank of knowledge showed up empty and utterly incapable of rescuing him. Markandeya was sinking rapidly, and was certain this was the end of his life. He was overcome with despair.

"Vishnu, save me, Vithala!" he cried out aloud from the depths of his desolate heart. "Give me your hand and pull me out of these turbulent, churning waters. Rescued me, Lord! Help me swim across this, and return to your safe shores! Markandeya knows nothing. Even his humility is pride!"

In a dim light, as in early dawn, Markandeya saw a child sleeping blissfully on the waves. For a moment he was stunned at the sight. But gradually, as was usual with Markandeya, his brain went rapidly into action. Who was this child? Where did it come from? How did it survive the dangerous ocean, and how could it be so trusting and unafraid?

The child awoke, stretched its luminous limbs, and began to dance within a shower of golden particles. It swam and cavorted in the sea, splashed about in the dark depths, scrambled up on the body, barely perceptible, of the sleeping God, plunged into the roiled waters, leaped into the air, entered and exited Vishnu's mouth at will, leaving a trail of gold dust, swirling and dancing, free and unfettered.

And as Markandeya marveled at the sight before him, his mind so benumbed by the creature's grace and fluidity that not a thought remained in it, the child came near Markandeya, clapped its hands, and said, "You!"

Markandeya, venerated, honored, worshipped sage, swelled in rage

at the child. In the light of his anger, the child appeared to him to be just any rude and ill-mannered child. How dare it insult the honorable sage with this rudeness! No one had ever called him "You!" before. He was always the Ancient One, the Wise One, the Long-Lived One, Saint Markandeya. Frustrated and furious, he gave chase to the child, intending to catch and punish it, but the child, who seemed very close to him, just laughed and remained ever beyond reach. As the little one flicked its hands before Markandeya's face, from them poured a shower of golden particles that enveloped him, coalesced into forms, images, symbols, worlds, and ages, then scattered away like clouds, only to



return again—always changing, and always the same.

Markandeya's anger melted away in the shower of light all around and within him. And when he looked at his hand, that too was insubstantial, pulsing like a formless energy field of light. He looked all around himself and delighted as a child would in the visions before him, mesmerized. But then his overactive brain, full of words and images, began to plague him again, and he felt confused.

"Who are you, O child that plays thus in this terrifying cosmic ocean? Tell me, why do I keep falling out of Vishnu's body?"

"Vishnu's body!" laughed the child. "What body?"

Markandeya looked and the thin outline of the sleeping god vanished as if into thin air. And with its disappearance Markandeya knew with some faculty beyond the intellect that Vishnu's body had been a construct of his own mind; that all his images were for his own comfort, fabrications of the mind, illusions to keep him safe, veils to hide from him the deep and unfathomable mystery of his own being in the world; that the energy whose manifestation was the sleeping god, himself, and the child, was deathless, without limits and dimensions, forms

and features, size or shape; that no name, image or metaphor could contain or explicate it entirely; that all his knowledge amounted to zero in the face of the mystery of the universe and of life.

The child curled up on the waters and fell asleep again. And as Markandeya watched it sleeping, a great love arose in the sage, a love that enveloped the child and himself, womb-like, in a golden glow. He picked up the child in his arms and held it close. He felt as a woman might feel who picks up her newborn, unable to distinguish between herself and it. His heart opened as a flower, unfurling undreamt of spaces, one within the other, endlessly. Markandeya had felt nothing like this before.

Markandeya held the child closer, but as he did, the child's limbs began to transform into wings, white as newly fallen snow, full of light, beating and fluttering against the walls of Markandeya's heart, opening it wider and wider. And there, before Markandeya's eyes, the child turned into a majestic gander, a swan, Parmahansa, Garuda, Vishnu's great bird, flapping its wings to the vibration of the wordless hum of the cosmos that creates, sustains, destroys, and creates ceaselessly.

Markandeya touched the bird, mounted it, and nestled into its feathers. The creature flew into the air, landed on the earth, returned to the ocean, swam on its surface, dived into the waters, reemerged, and flew into the sky, a pilgrim in all the elements, unfettered, homeless, and free.

And in its soft feathers, Markandeya slept a long, deep, and dreamless sleep.

When he awoke, the sage was safe in Vishnu's body once more, and it was morning. Birds were singing melodiously, the brooks were flowing, plants were flowering in all the colors of the rainbow, and clouds were sailing in the azure sky. And this time instead of wandering hither and yon, Markandeya made a small hut for himself on the banks of a stream in the Himalayas, and lived there quietly, resting, grateful for Vishnu's grace that allowed him to exist within the illusion of his dreams.

The saint chose to live out the rest of his life playfully, without being too attached to his ideas about the universe. He lived for many thousands of years in relative peace and harmony, knowing full well that everything was deathless, and love alone can bridge the abysses of the mind.