

Minister to seat themselves on raised seats covered with deerskin. Dasaratha began conversing with the teacher in order to find out how far the children had advanced in studies. Rama signed to his brothers that they should not overhear their talk. He left the room with the permission of the guru, carrying his books with him and calling on the others to follow him. The brothers took the cue from Rama in all matters and so they silently obeyed his merest gesture.

Vashishta and Dasaratha noted this incident. They appreciated the upright conduct of Rama, his understanding of the trend of the teacher's conversation and the immediate reaction of humility and the way in which he was an example and ideal for the three brothers. They were glad that they had learnt so much discipline.

Vashishta could not contain himself. He said, "Maharaja! Your sons have mastered all the arts. Rama has mastered all the Sastras. He is no ordinary mortal. As soon as I began teaching him to recite the Vedas, he used to repeat them as if he knew them already. Only He who has inspired the hymns can repeat them so, not any other. The Vedas are not 'books' which he could have perused while at leisure! They have come down from guru and disciple, through recitation and listening only. They are not available anywhere, except from the preceptor! That is the reason why it is referred to as *Sruthi* (That which is heard). It is the Divine breath of God that has shaped itself into these Manthras. I have not seen so far anyone who has mastered

THE GURU AND THE PUPILS

The brothers lived in the preceptor's house and served him with devotion. They renounced the comforts of the palace and gladly underwent the hardships. They carried out the wishes of the master in humility and with loyalty. They finished their studies in a very short period and mastered the subjects they were taught. One day Emperor Dasaratha proceeded with his Minister to the home of their teacher. He was beside himself with joy when he saw them reciting Vedic hymns and heard the sacred formulae rolling out of their tongues, clear and fast, like a cascade of bright pearls. He was happy that his sons had learnt so much.

Rama rose and fell at the feet of his father. Seeing this, the three brothers too came forward and prostrated before him. The teacher invited the Emperor and the

them as Rama has done. Why should I say, ‘seen’? I have not even ‘heard’ of anyone who has accomplished this remarkable feat!

“I can tell you of many more superhuman achievements of your son Maharaja! When I think of my good fortune in securing these boys as my pupils, I feel it is the reward for the asceticism I practised so long. They need learn nothing further. They have now to be trained in bowmanship and archery, and similar skills appropriate for royal princes. They have completed their studies under me and become efficient in all that I can teach. The day too is very auspicious. Take them back with you to the Palace.”

At this, Dasaratha, who was afflicted for months with the pain of separation, shed tears of joy. He could not contain his delight. He turned towards the Minister by his side, and directed him to convey the good news to the Queens and ask them to come over to the hermitage with the offerings that the pupils have to present to the preceptor while leaving his custody. Sumantra proceeded very fast to the Palace, and communicated the news. He got ready the gifts and returned quicker than anticipated.

Meanwhile the boys had their belongings packed at the suggestion of Vashishta and the articles were loaded into the chariot. As directed by their father, the children worshipped the Guru according to prescribed ceremonial, gave him the gifts, and fell at his feet, asking his permission to leave for home.

Vashishta drew the boys to his side, pressed their hands and patted them on their heads. He blessed them and most unwillingly allowed them to leave. The pang of separation brought tears in his eyes. He walked up to the chariot with his pupils. The boys ascended the vehicle, and it moved away. They turned back towards the Guru and looked in his direction with folded palms, for a long distance. The preceptor, too, stood at that place, his cheeks wet with tears. Dasaratha noticed this bond between the teacher and the pupils. He was greatly pleased.

They reached home. The guru entered the hermitage with a heavy heart. Wherever his eyes were turned, he noticed darkness and no light. He feared that the attachment he had developed might confirm itself as a shackle. He decided to sit in Dhyana in order to suppress the rising tides of memory. Soon, he overcame the outer illusion and merged himself in inner Ananda. He realised that the boys were embodiments of Dharma, *Artha*, *Kama*, *Moksha*—the Four Goals of Human life (Righteousness, Welfare, Endeavour and Liberation) and that they had taken human form in order to re-establish on earth these grand ideals of gracious living. This gave him unruffled peace.

Dasaratha resolved to supplement the education the boys had received, by training them in the use of arms; so, he called in expert archers and others and made arrangements to teach them the science of attack and defence. But who can claim to be the teachers of these boys

who were already pastmasters in every field of study? They were only “acting” the roles of humans and pretending to learn.

To Him who holds the strings of this puppet show, who can teach to pull the string? Men who could not recognise their Reality underneath the camouflage of Maya sought to train them and teach them the objective skills useful for external living. They have come to save the world from disaster; so, they have to be in the world and of the world, respecting the conventions of the world, so far as they subserve their purpose. Men could not understand their acts, for, they are beyond human intellect or imagination. They will be helpless if asked to explain them. But people must learn the ideals they put into practice. So, Rama was presenting himself as a cinder covered with ash, or a lake with a thick float of moss or the moon hidden by a curtain of cloud. The brothers were following the footsteps of Rama.

Rama and Lakshmana were revealing knowledge of stratagems and skills which even expert instructors did not know about. They were wonder-struck and were even a little fear stricken. But the four Princes never shot an arrow at an animal or bird. They never broke the vow taken solemnly by them that they will use arms only on occasions of great urgency, not for the pleasure of killing or wounding. The trainers took them often to the forest for hikes and game shooting; but when they spotted animals or birds and

invited them to shoot, they remonstrated and said, “These arrows are not to be used against innocent targets. They are to be used for the protection of the good, the welfare of the world, and the service of the people. That is the purpose for which they are with us. We shall not insult them, using them for these silly pastimes,” they averred and desisted. The teachers had to accept their arguments. Every word, every deed of Rama demonstrated his compassion. Sometimes, when Lakshmana aimed his arrow at a bird or animal, Rama came in between and protested, “Lakshmana! What harm has it done to you or the world? Why do you long to shoot it? It is quite against the code of prescribed morals for kings to punish innocent beings; don’t you know?”

The Emperor often sat among his ministers with the princes near him, and discussed with those around him the problems of political administration, judicial trials and the application of moral principles in the governance of the state. He related stories of their grandparents and others of the royal line, how they earned the love and loyalty of their subjects, how they fought wars with “demons” and for “gods” and how they won the Grace and support of God in their endeavours. The father and the sons were both exhilarated when these tales were told. Many a day, the ministers took turns in this pleasant task.

As they grew with the passage of years, the ministers became confident that they could be entrusted with some

fields of governmental activity. The people dreamt that when they came of age and took hold of the reins of government, the earth will be transmuted into heaven. When people saw the princes they felt a bond of affectionate attachment springing between them. The conversation that ensued among them was marked by sweet concord. The city of Ayodhya had no one who did not love those simple, humble, virtuous, selfless Princes, or who did not evince a desire to watch them. They were as dear to the children of Ayodhya as their own bodies, as precious to the city as its own heart.

When they were in their eleventh or twelfth year, one day, Dasaratha called to his presence the minister Sumantra, who was the repository of virtue, and commissioned him to arrange for teaching the princes the spiritual Science of Liberation (the *Para Vidya*). He said that however proficient a person may be in secular sciences (*Apara Vidya*), *Para Vidya* alone can give him the strength to carry out his Dharma (Rightful duties). The highest moral culture must be imparted to them at this tender age itself.

Success or failure in later life was built upon the impressions and experiences gained in the early stages of life. The early years are the foundations for the mansion of later years. Therefore he said, "Take the princes around the kingdom and let them learn not only the condition of the people but also the holiness of sacred places. Describe to them the sanctity of holy places, the history of the temples

and of the saints and sages who have consecrated them, and let them drink deep the springs of divinity that are hallowing those spots. I feel it will be good if they do so. As they grow, they will be prone to sensual desires and urges. Ere they fall a prey to such tendencies, it is best to implant in them reverence and awe, and devotion to the Divine, that is immanent in the Universe. That is the only means to save their humanness from demeaning itself into animality. And for rulers of kingdoms, it is essential. Consult the Guru and the preceptors and arrange the tour without delay."

Elated at the prospect of the princes getting this great opportunity Sumantra had all preparations made to his satisfaction. He got ready himself to accompany them. The Queens came to know of the pilgrimage that the Princes were undertaking. They were delighted that the Princes were going on such a holy venture and they made many things ready to render it as happy and useful as possible. They arranged a few nurses for them and some comrades of their own age to accompany them. The Princes too, were beside themselves with joy at the prospect of visiting the sacred places of the land. They enthused their companions and sought from the King equipment and clothes for them also.

The next day, when the auspicious hour specially selected for the journey arrived, the Princes bowed before their parents, touching their feet with their foreheads. They fell at the feet of the Preceptor. The mothers placed holy

dots on their foreheads and cheeks, to ward off the evil eye and to guard them against evil. They discarded royal robes and put on the habiliment of pilgrims, that is to say, silk dhotis round the waist and silk shawls wrapped round the shoulders and taking leave of all, they ascended the chariot. The palace resounded with shouts of victory rising from thousands of citizens who had gathered to see them off. The chariot moved on with guards before and behind.

Days, weeks, even months rolled by! They went to every temple and sacred spot. They imbibed the holiness of each place. They worshipped at each shrine with faith and devotion, they learnt after deep enquiry the history of each place and the antecedents of the shrines. They ignored every other thought or activity during all that long period. Sumantra was describing to them the sanctity of each place so graphically and intimately that their hearts were thrilled. The Princes plied him with questions demanding further and deeper elaboration of his narrations. Sumantra was overjoyed at the insatiable yearning of the boys, and he gave even more information and inspiration.

Thus they journeyed from Kanyakumari to Kashmir, and from the eastern sea to the western, spending more than three months. They had their eyes open to the sufferings of the people and the discomforts of the pilgrims in every region of the empire, and whenever they observed these, they pleaded with Sumantra, the Minister, to set things right and to provide the needed amenities.

They were responsible for the repair and improvement of many temples, the provision of drinking water wells, the planting of avenue trees, the opening of centres for the distribution of water to thirsty wayfarers, the building of caravanserais, and the establishment of health centres. Whenever Rama expressed a desire that such amenities be provided, Sumantra never hesitated to agree. He saw to it that they were immediately provided to his satisfaction. The Princes derived great comfort that the empire had such a loyal and efficient Minister as Sumantra. They said to each other that when they had such ministers, welfare and progress were assured.

Accounts of the pilgrimage of the Princes were conveyed to Ayodhya by special courtiers who ran in relays, forward and backward with news they collected. Whenever delays occurred the Queens were weighed down by anxiety. They prayed to the Preceptor, Vashishta, to give them correct information regarding them. Vashishta had the yogic attainment to discover what was happening to them. So, he used to tell them the reassuring news that they were happy, healthy and hearty and that they would soon be returning to the capital. The mothers derived courage and confidence therefrom. The Preceptor blessed them and repaired to his hermitage.

Meanwhile, the news gatherers brought good tidings. They said that the Princes were nearing Ayodhya; they must be reaching the City within two days! Arrangements were

therefore made at the main Gateway of the City to welcome into the Imperial Capital the four Princes, who had successfully gone through their long and arduous pilgrimage and earned meritorious renown by their devotion and compassion during their triumphal tour. Rosewater was sprinkled on the roads to make them dust-free. Arches and festoons were put up. On both sides of the road, women stood with plates on which they had placed lamps, with bright flames, which they desired to wave before them as they passed along.

The Princes arrived at the Gate, as announced. Lamps were waved before them. They moved along the main highway, which was strewn with petals of fragrant flowers. Parties of musicians and minstrels singing welcome songs proceeded slowly in advance. Brahmins recited hymns invoking the blessings of God upon the distinguished scions of the imperial family. Sumantra came alongside the Princes, who were shining with an ethereal glow on their faces.

When they reached the palace gates, many rites were gone through to ward off the effects of the evil eye. They were then led into the inner apartments. The mothers whose eyes were longing to look upon them were awaiting them there. The boys ran towards them and fell at their feet. They were raised up and held fast in close embrace for five or six minutes, during which they lost themselves in the thrill of joy, which enveloped both mother and son in the bliss of Mergence with the Divine! The tears that rolled from the

eyes of the mothers out of the surgence of the love bathed the heads of the boys. They took hold of their sari ends and wiped the heads dry with them. They stroked the hair, they fondled the head, they seated them on their laps, and fed them fondly with sweet rice and curd-mixed rice.

Ah! The excitement, and thrill of the mothers were indescribable. The pang of separation which they had suffered for three long months could be assuaged a little, only by having the children in their care and custody, day and night, for a few days. They wanted them to relate the story of their pilgrimage, and the boys narrated in sweet, simple, sincere style the sacredness of each holy place, as explained to them by Sumantra. The Queens listened to these narratives with such ardour and faith that they too seemed to experience the exhilaration each shrine provides for the earnest pilgrims.

Dasaratha celebrated the return of the young Princes from their holy journey by offering oblations to the Gods, and arranging a magnificent banquet for all Brahmins who had successfully completed the pilgrimage to Kasi and Prayaga. He gave the latter monetary gifts too.

Thus, since the day when the princes were born, it was one continuous round of festival and feast in the capital city and in the kingdom. The city of Ayodhya shone with uninterrupted rejoicing. Feasting and festive entertainment knit the populace into a family, bound by love and gratitude.

Every month, the days on which the children were born (the ninth, tenth and eleventh days of the bright half) were filled with gorgeous ceremony, to mark the happy event. Even when the boys were away on pilgrimage, these days were celebrated as grandly as if they were in the City; except for functions where their physical presence was needed, all else—the feasts, the gifts, the games, the dance—were all gone through with enthusiasm.

The parents noticed a change in the boys as a result of the pilgrimage. The transformation was very surprising and they hoped that the strange ways of life they had assumed might weaken with the passage of days. They watched their behaviour and attitudes with great attention. But they continued, with no sign of diminution.

Rama stayed mostly indoors. He did not bathe at fixed hours as he had been doing so far. He had a dislike to wear royal robes. He desisted from delicacies. He never sat on the golden throne. He appeared as if he was immersed in the contemplation of the Absolute, of something beyond the senses and the mind. Since their brother appeared so morose and was ostensibly sulking, the three younger brothers always kept near him. They never left his presence, for games or for any other reason.

The four used to gather in a room and bolt themselves in. The mothers had to tap the door at intervals to bring in their food! However hard the Mothers tried to discover why

they behaved so, they never revealed the reason! Rama alone deigned to answer their queries thus: “This is my nature; why seek to know the reason for my being so?”

The mothers soon felt that this state of things could no longer be kept away from gaze. They informed Dasaratha. He sent word that the boys be brought to his apartments. But finding that the sons, who previously would have rushed in, took a long time to come, he was filled with wonder and worry. He made ready to proceed to their room himself. Just then, the attendant announced that the princes were approaching! The father was overwhelmed with bliss. He embraced them and held them tight to his breast. He sat, with the sons on both sides. He enquired from them about things, light and serious. Formerly, if he asked just one question, the boys used to reply to ten: but that day, when he asked ten, they scarce replied to one.

Dasaratha drew Rama onto his lap, and pleaded fondly with him, “Son! Why this refusal to talk? Why this silence? What is it that you desire? Tell me what you need? I shall fulfil it immediately, without fail. Since you do not mix with the brothers and play with them as formerly, they too are unhappy.” Though the King lovingly stroked the chin and looked at the face of Rama, Rama did not say anything more than that he was quite content and needed nothing. Watching this strange behaviour, Dasaratha grew anxious and agitated. Tears welled up in his eyes. The boys remained unaffected by his grief. The father spoke some soft words

to them about how sons should conduct themselves and sent them to their apartments in the Palace.

He called Sumantra so that he might confer with him. He asked him whether anything had happened during the pilgrimage to put the boys out of gear or whether he had brought them back too soon when they were themselves eager to visit a few more places of interest to them. Dasaratha plied him with so many questions that Sumantra was filled with surprise and apprehension. His lips quivered as he replied: “Nothing happened during the journey to displease the Princes, no difficulty was encountered. Every wish of theirs was honoured and carried through. I gave away in charity as much as they wanted. I got built, wherever they suggested, houses for pilgrims; there was no hesitation or delay. They never told me about any happening which they did not like. Nor did I notice any such. The pilgrimage was one long journey of joy and adoration.”

Dasaratha knew his Minister well. He said at last, “Sumantra! You are a good man. I know full well that you are incapable of neglect or error. But for some inexplicable reason, I find the boys have undergone a transformation after the pilgrimage. They have developed a distaste for food and fun.

“However much the people around persuaded him, Rama did not answer, nor did he indicate the reason for his strange behaviour. He was immersed in his own awareness

of the falsity of things. I am surprised at this. The queens, too, have taken this so much to heart that they are being consumed by anxiety.” When Dasaratha spoke thus to Sumantra, the loyal Minister replied, “If permitted, I shall meet the children and try to diagnose the ailment.” Dasaratha said, “Quite right! Proceed at once. Once we find the cause, the remedy isn’t difficult, the cure isn’t far.”

Sumantra hurried to the children’s apartment, heavy with a load of anxiety in his heart. He found the doors bolted from inside, the guards standing outside them. When Sumantra tapped, Lakshmana opened the door and let him in. He closed the door behind him and conversed with the boys for long on various matters, in order to draw out from them the reason for their malady. But he could not delve into the mystery. He noticed the difference between the confiding spirit of camaraderie which he enjoyed during the months of pilgrimage, and the distance that had grown in recent months. He pleaded with Rama with tears in his eyes, for revealing to him the reasons for his melancholy. Rama smiled and said, “Sumantra! What reason can be given for something which is my very nature? I have no wants. I have no desire. You need have no anxiety on that score.”

Unable to do anything else, Sumantra came to where Dasaratha was and sat beside him. “I feel it will be good to invite the Guru tomorrow and consider which measures are proper,” he said and departed from the presence, after taking the King’s permission to leave.

The King was sad. He neglected everything else. He ignored the demands of empire and spun many stories in his mind to account for the behaviour of the children. They are entering the years of adolescence and so, such temperamental revolutions are natural, he surmised. He shared this opinion with the queens and set his mind at rest, for a little while.

When they learnt that the Preceptor Vashishta was arriving at the Palace, the queens made the preparations necessary, and waited for him at the family altar. Just then, the Guru arrived. All fell at his feet. They showered eager questions on him about the peculiar malady of the boys and the change that had come upon them. They were all in tears. Noticing the agitation of the King and the Queens, Vashishta turned his attention inwards and sought the reason for the sorrow, through inner vision. The truth was quickly revealed to his penetrating purity. Within seconds, he turned towards the queens and assured them, “There is nothing wrong with the boys. These are not just ordinary children. They are free from the least trace of worldly desire. Their minds are untarnished. Do not get anxious. Bring them to me. You can retire now to your apartments.”

The King and Queens were happy at this assurance. They sent for the princes and left. Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna quickly got ready to meet the Guru, when the news that he wanted them reached their ears. But Rama evinced no haste. He was immersed in himself, as usual.

So, Lakshmana touched his feet and prayed. “It is best we go without delay; or else, our parents will grieve that we dared disobey the command of the Preceptor.” Lakshmana pleaded with Rama insistently for a long time, advancing various arguments. Finally, Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna were able to proceed to the altar room, with their eldest brother. There, they fell at the Feet of the Guru and reverentially stood before him.

Seeing them, Vashishta asked them with great affection to draw near and sit beside him. They all sat close to him, but Vashishta wanted Rama to come still nearer. He fondled Rama lovingly, playing with his hair and patting his back. He said, “Rama! Why have you thus become quiet and silent? Your mothers and father are suffering from grief and fear, unable to explain this inscrutable change. You have to pay heed to their happiness too, isn’t it? You have to demonstrate the validity of the precious axioms, *Mathru Devo Bhava* (Treat the mother as God) *Pithru Devo Bhava* (Treat the father as God) by your own action, isn’t it?” Vashishta placed before Rama many such lessons and truths for his consideration.

Rama sat smiling, listening to the Guru. When he had finished, he spoke calmly, “Master! You speak of mother; but, who exactly is ‘mother’? Who exactly is ‘son’? Why, what exactly is ‘body’? And what is the ‘*Jivi*’ (the individual)? Is this objective world real? Or is the Supreme Soul real? This body is but the image of the Supreme Soul

isn't it? The five elements that comprise the substance called 'body' are also the substance of the entire Universe. This Universe is but the concatenation of the five elements, isn't it? The elements persist, in spite of all permutations and combinations. They have also a deeper base. Without realising this, if this created Universe is itself assumed to be real, and if one yields to the fascination of this falsehood, if the truth be discarded for the sake of the lie, what are we to say of such colossal ignorance? What can the individual gain by ignoring the Eternal Absolute Real Reality, the *Atma*?"

When Vashishta observed Rama raising such profound philosophical problems, he noticed also a halo of bright rays of spiritual splendour that emanated and surrounded his face! He knew that the Light was an indication of Divinity, attempting to surge outwards! So, he wanted Rama himself to provide the answers to the questions that Rama put forward. And the replies and explanations Rama gave were verily the Voice of God. Vashishta could see this fact clearly. He bowed his head before him, mentally, for fear of being noticed. He said, "Son! I shall see you again in the evening," and left the palace, without even meeting Dasaratha. He was so overcome by the illumination of the occasion. He fondled the children with a joyous sense of gratitude and love.

Dasaratha saw the princes after some time. He too saw the strange Glow of Divine Awareness shining in their

countenances. He could not understand how it happened and he awaited the arrival of Vashishta in the evening. No sooner did he enter the shrine than the children, the mothers and Dasaratha fell at his feet and sat in their places with palms folded in prayerful humility.

All of a sudden, Rama surprised everyone by asking a series of questions: "The *Jiva*, The *Deva*, the *Prakriti* (Soul, God, Nature) what is the interrelation between these? Are these three, One? Or are they distinct entities? If One, how did it become three and for what purpose? What is the unifying principle underlying these? What benefit is gained by recognising them as different, giving up the cognition of the Unity?" The parents were aghast at the profundity of these questions and the tender age of Rama. They became fully merged in that stream of instruction and inquiry, that showered precious axioms which shed light on the problems raised, as if Heaven answered the questions raised by Earth! They forgot that Rama was their own child. The hours of the night rolled by in the analysis and understanding of the great monistic wisdom.

Vashishta saw that the words that flowed from the lips of Rama were indeed drops of the Nectar of Immortality, which can ensure Peace for mankind. He blessed the King and Queens and returned to the hermitage. The dialogues between Rama and the Preceptor form the text of "*Yogavashishta*," a treatise which is meaningful and mellow. It is also referred to as the *Ramagitha*.

Rama spent his days immersed in Vedantha, communing with himself, talking while alone to himself, silent in company, and often laughing at nothing in particular. Dasaratha grew concerned. He was worried what would happen to the brothers. He sought to keep the younger three apart; but, they never agreed to be isolated from Rama. So, they had to be left in his company always.

The King and the Queens were very much depressed, for all their dreams of joy and glory had come to naught. They became desperate, for they saw no signs of recovery or transformation in the sons. They counted hours and minutes, passing the time in anxiety and prayer. Rama had no interest even in food and so with irregular and indifferent meals, he appeared weak and wasted in health.