

Chapter 5. The Guru and the Pupils

The brothers lived in the preceptor's house and served him with devotion. They renounced the palace comforts 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, Dasaratha came 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 off their tongues, clear and fast, like a cascade of bright pearls. He was happy that his sons had learned so much.

Rama rose and fell at his father's feet. Seeing this, the three brothers also came forward and prostrated before him. The teacher invited the emperor and minister to sit 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 teacher's permission, carrying his books and calling on the others to follow him. The brothers took the cue from Rama in all matters, so they silently obeyed his merest gesture.

Vasishta and Dasaratha noted this incident; they appreciated Rama's upright conduct, his understanding of the trend of the teacher's conversation, his immediate reaction of humility, and the example and ideal he set for his three brothers. They were glad that the children had learned so much discipline.

Vasishta couldn't contain himself. He said, "*Maharaja!* Your sons have mastered all the arts. Rama has mastered all the scriptures (*sastras*). He is no ordinary mortal. As soon as I began teaching him to recite the *Vedas*, he repeated 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' that he could have perused while at leisure! They have come down from *guru* and disciple, only through recitation and listening. They are not available anywhere, except from the preceptor! That is why they are referred to as that which is heard (*sruthi*). The divine breath of God has shaped itself into these *mantras*. So far, I haven't seen anyone who has mastered them as Rama has done. Why should I say 'seen'? I haven't even heard of anyone who has accomplished this remarkable feat!

"I can tell you of many more of your son's superhuman achievements, *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. Now they have to be trained in bowmanship, archery, and similar skills appropriate for royal princes. They have completed their studies under me and have become efficient in all that I can teach. Today is very auspicious. Take them back with you to the palace."

Dasaratha, who for months was afflicted with the pain of separation, shed tears of joy. He could not contain his delight. He turned toward the minister at 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 pupils have to present to the preceptor when leaving his custody. Sumanthra went very fast to the palace and communicated the news. He got the gifts ready and returned quicker than anticipated.

Meanwhile, at Vasishta's suggestion, the boys had their belongings packed, and the articles were loaded into the chariot. As directed by their father, the children worshiped the *guru* according to prescribed ceremonial, gave him the gifts, and fell at his feet, asking his permission to leave for home.

Vasishta 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 to his eyes. He walked up to the chariot with his pupils. The boys ascended the vehicle, and it moved away. They turned back toward the *guru* and looked in his direction with folded palms, for a long distance. The preceptor also stood there, his cheeks wet with tears. Dasaratha noticed this bond between the teacher and the pupils and was greatly pleased.

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 meditation in order to suppress the rising tides of memory. Soon, he overcame the outer illusion and merged himself in inner spiritual bliss (*ananda*). He realized that the boys were embodiments of righteousness, prosperity, fulfillment, and liberation (*dharmā, artha, kama, moksha*)—the four goals of human life—and that they had taken human form in order to reestablish on earth these grand ideals of gracious living. This gave him unruffled peace.

Dasaratha resolved to supplement the boys' education 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 past masters in every field of study? They were only "acting" the roles of humans and pretending to learn.

Who can teach the One who holds the strings of this puppet show how to pull the string? Men who could not recognise their reality underneath the camouflage of illusion (*maya*) sought to train them and teach them the objective skills useful for external living. They had come to save the world from disaster, so they had to be in and of the world, respecting the conventions of the world as far as they served their purpose. People could not understand their acts, for they were beyond human intellect or imagination; people would 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, on a lake with a thick float of moss or the moon hidden by a curtain of cloud. The brothers were following Rama's footsteps.

Rama and Lakshmana were revealing knowledge of stratagems and skills that even expert instructors did not know. They were wonderstruck and even a little fear-stricken. But the four princes never shot an arrow at an animal or bird. They never broke their vow, taken solemnly, to 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 gameshooting. But when they spotted animals or birds and invited them to shoot, the four children remonstrated and desisted, saying, "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 won't insult them in using them for these silly pastimes."

The teachers had to accept their arguments. Every word and deed of Rama demonstrated his compassion. Sometimes, when Lakshmana aimed his arrow at a bird or animal, Rama came between and protested, "Lakshmana! What harm has it done to you or the world? Why do you long to shoot it? It is 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 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 his sons were exhilarated when these tales were told. Many a day, the ministers took turns in this pleasant task.

As the brothers grew with the passage of years, the ministers became confident that they could be entrusted with some fields of governmental activity. The people dreamed that when they came of age and took hold of the reins of government, the earth would be transmuted into heaven. When people saw the princes, they felt a bond of affectionate attachment springing among 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 people of Ayodhya as their own bodies, as precious to the city as its own heart.

The pilgrimage

One day, when the princes were in their eleventh or twelfth year, Dasaratha commissioned minister Sumanthra, who was the repository of virtue, to arrange for teaching them the spiritual science of liberation (*para-vidya*). He said that however proficient a person might be in secular sciences (*a-para-vidya*), only spiritual science could give the strength to carry out the person’s *dharma* (rightful duties). The highest moral culture must be imparted to them at this tender age.

Success or failure in later life was built upon the impressions and experiences gained in the early stages of life. The early years were 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 the saints and sages who have consecrated them, and let them drink deep the springs of divinity that hallow those spots.

“I feel it will be good for them. As they grow, they will be prone to sensual desires and urges. Before they fall prey to such tendencies, it is best to implant in them reverence, 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, Sumanthra had all preparations made to his satisfaction and got ready himself to accompany them. The queens came to know of this pilgrimage. 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 equipment and clothes for them from the king.

The next day, when the auspicious hour selected for the journey had come, the princes bowed before their parents, touching their feet with their foreheads, and fell at the preceptor’s feet. The mothers placed holy dots on their foreheads and cheeks to ward off the evil eye and guard them against evil. The princes discarded royal robes and put on the dresses of pilgrims, that is to say, a silk skirt (*dhoti*) around the waist and a silk shawl wrapped around 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 worshiped at each shrine with faith and devotion, they learned, 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. Sumanthra described 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. Sumanthra 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 Sumanthra, 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, Sumanthra 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; they said to each other that when they had such ministers, welfare and progress were assured.

Accounts of the princes' pilgrimage were conveyed to Ayodhya by special couriers, who ran in relays, back and forth, with news they collected. Whenever delays occurred, the queens were weighed down by anxiety. They prayed to the preceptor Vasishtha to give them correct information regarding them. Vasishtha had the *yogic* attainment to discover what was happening to the princes, so he used to tell the queens 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: The princes were nearing Ayodhya and would reach the city within two days! Arrangements were made at the main city gate to welcome the four princes, who had successfully gone through their long and arduous pilgrimage and had 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 with lamps on them, with bright flames, which they wanted to wave before the princes 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, with parties of musicians and singing minstrels proceeding slowly in advance. *Brahmins* recited hymns invoking the blessings of God upon the distinguished scions of the imperial family. Sumanthra was 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, and then they were led into the inner apartments. The mothers awaited them there, with eyes longing to look upon them. The boys ran toward them and fell at their feet. The mothers raised them up and held them fast in close embrace for five or six minutes and 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 mothers' eyes out of the upsurge of love bathed the boys' heads. The mothers wiped their heads dry with the ends of their saris. They stroked their hair, fondled

their heads, seated them on their laps, and fondly fed them sweet rice and curd-mixed rice.

Ah! The mothers' thrill and excitement were indescribable. The pang of separation they had suffered for three long months could be assuaged a little, and 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 a sweet, simple, sincere style the sacredness of each holy place, as explained to them by Sumanthra. The mothers listened with such ardour and faith that they too seemed to experience the exhilaration each shrine provided 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 kingdom. 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 ceremonies 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 gone through with enthusiasm.

The boys are transformed after the pilgrimage

But the parents noticed a change in the boys as a result of the pilgrimage. The transformation was 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 done before. He disliked wearing royal robes; he desisted from delicacies; he never sat on the golden throne; he appeared as if immersed in 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 they 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 hidden and informed Dasaratha, who sent word for the boys to be brought to his apartments. 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 asked them about things, light and serious. Formerly, if he asked just one question, the boys used to reply to ten, but that day, when asked ten, they scarcely replied to one.

Dasaratha drew Rama to his lap and pleaded fondly with him, “Son! Why this refusal to talk? Why this silence? What do you want? Tell me what you need, and I'll fulfil it immediately, without fail. Since you don't

mix with your brothers and play with them as before, they are also unhappy.” Though the King lovingly stroked his chin and looked at Rama’s face, Rama said nothing 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.

Dasaratha called Sumanthra to 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 eager to visit a few more places of interest to them. Dasaratha plied him with so many questions that Sumanthra 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. Their every wish was honoured and carried through. I gave away in charity as much as they wanted; wherever they suggested, I got houses built for pilgrims, without hesitation or delay. They never told me about any happening that 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, “Sumanthra! 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 distaste for food and fun.

“However much the people around him persuade him, Rama doesn’t answer and doesn’t indicate the reason for his strange behaviour. He is 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.”

The loyal minister replied, “If permitted, I will 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.”

Sumanthra hurried to the child’s apartment, heavy with a load of anxiety in his heart. He found the doors bolted from inside, the guards standing outside. When Sumanthra tapped, Lakshmana opened the door and let him in. Sumanthra closed the door behind him and talked with the boys for long on various matters, in order to draw out the reason for their malady. But he couldn’t delve into the mystery. He noticed the difference between the confiding spirit of camaraderie that 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 to reveal to him the reasons for his melancholy. Rama smiled and said, “Sumanthra! What reason can be given for something that is my very nature? I have no wants; I have no desire. Have no anxiety on that score.”

Unable to do anything else, Sumanthra went to Dasaratha and sat beside him. “I feel it would be good to invite the *guru* tomorrow and consider which measures are proper,” he said and, after taking the king’s permission to leave, departed.

The king was sad; he neglected everything else; he ignored the demands of the empire and spun many stories in his mind to account for the children’s behaviour. “They are entering the years of adolescence, 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 learned that Vasishtha was arriving at the palace, the queens made the necessary preparations and

waited for him at the family altar. The *guru* arrived, and they fell at his feet, showering him with eager questions about the boy's peculiar malady and the change that had come upon them. They were all in tears. Noticing the agitation of the king and the queens, Vasishtha turned his attention inward and sought the reason for the sorrow, through inner vision. The truth was quickly revealed to his penetrating purity. Within seconds, he turned toward 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. Don't be 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 Satrugna 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; otherwise, our parents will grieve that we dared disobey the preceptor's command." Lakshmana pleaded with Rama insistently for a long time, advancing various arguments. Finally, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna 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.

Rama exhibits profound wisdom

Seeing them, Vasishtha asked them with great affection to draw near and sit beside him. They all sat close to him, but Vasishtha wanted Rama to come still nearer. He fondled Rama lovingly, playing with his hair and patting his back. He said, "Rama! Why have you 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, don't you? You have to demonstrate the validity of the precious axioms, 'Treat the mother as God (*Mathru devo bhava*). Treat the father as God (*Pitru devo bhava*)' by your own action, right?" Vasishtha placed many such lessons and truths before Rama for his consideration.

Rama sat smiling and listened. When the *guru* had finished, Rama 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 individual (*jivi*)? 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 also have 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?"

As Vasishtha observed Rama raising such profound philosophical problems, he noticed a halo of bright rays of spiritual splendour emanating and surrounding his face! He knew that the light was an indication of divinity attempting to surge outward! 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. Vasishtha 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." He 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 also saw the strange flow of divine awareness shining in their

countenances. He could not understand how it happened, and he awaited Vasishta's arrival 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.

Suddenly, Rama surprised everyone by asking a series of questions: "The individual soul, God, nature (*jiva*, *Deva*, *prakriti*)—what is the interrelation between them? Are these three one? Or are they distinct entities? If one, how did it become three and for what purpose? What unifying principle underlies them? What benefit is gained by recognising them as different, by 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, which showered precious axioms that 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.

Vasishta saw that the words flowing 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 *Yoga-Vasishta*, a meaningful and mellow treatise. It is also referred to as the Rama-Gita.

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

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, with irregular and indifferent meals, he appeared weak and wasted in health.