



Ad Infinitum

Maharajah Bharat sat in meditation pose reading the words of Sri Krishna, which were written on his heart:

*Why are you worried unnecessarily?
Soul never takes birth or dies
What is happening is good, what will happen will also be good
What have you lost, that you are crying?
What have you brought, that you have lost?
What have you produced, that is disposed?
What you have got, it is from here only
This day is yours, but tomorrow is of others
The day after tomorrow is of any others
What is happening is a routine of nature, and by the law of nature only
This body is not yours, nor are you of this body
Everything you are doing, surrender it to the God
This will make you happy and you will enjoy the free and peaceful life*

After a few moments he opened his eyes. The room was the same, the familiar white drapes fluttering gently in the cool evening breeze. All was at peace and he would shortly be joining his family for the evening meal they always ate together and yet... The king had a feeling of unrest lodged deep in his heart that would not go away. If he were being honest with himself, he would admit he'd had this feeling, almost dread, for quite some time now but just recently it was becoming more difficult to ignore. He had been spending even more hours in contemplation in order to banish the feeling but stubbornly it stayed in his breast making him feel uneasy with himself and with the world. But there was nothing for him to worry about – was there? His dear wife and children, praise the Gods, were healthy and happy. In reality, the biggest concern he had was with his eldest son, for Saurumba balked often at his lessons although the maharaj was sure he would knuckle down given a little more maturity, seeing that spiritual knowledge was every bit as important for those of the Kshatriya class as were the lessons in government and combat in which the boy excelled. Yet that was only a very small concern. He remembered how it was to be young. “No,” he thought to himself “Saurumba is not the problem.” And yet... Bharat felt rather than saw a presence standing by the door. “Ah guruji, please enter,” he stood to receive the venerated Brahmin who'd been his own teacher many years before and who he'd persuaded to return to the palace to teach his own children. Wise old eyes gazed kindly on Bharat and in many ways the king was his favourite pupil still as the maharaj never felt too proud to take advice from this wisest of men and dearest of friends.
“You are troubled maharaj.”

Bharat knew there was no use in lying. “Yes guruji. It is this feeling again –“

The teacher nodded slowly, saying nothing.

“It is as if there is something looming, creeping closer, some disaster which I cannot see clearly but which will, nevertheless, wreak havoc on all of our lives.” Bharat sat down heavily as if exhausted by merely speaking the words aloud. “I fear old friend, oh how I fear that in some way this feeling is connected to Saurumba.”

The serenity on the old man’s face did not alter when he replied “Yet you understand maharaj, that what is written will be and not one of us may change a word of it. However, you also know that within the plan there is scope for us to exert our will and perhaps avert a certain course of action, if we do it with right in our heart.”

The king looked at his old friend closely. He knew! He knew there was some catastrophe heading towards the kingdom and he was about to reveal how it could be turned away. “So what do I do? How may I protect my eldest son? A charm perhaps –“

“Alas no, my king. There is nothing you can do.”

Bharat jumped to his feet and his regal bearing looked fearsome as he bore down on the older man. “Nothing? Of course there must be something – a physician – an astrologer –“

Pity rose in the breast of the teacher and he felt his king’s pain as his own. “Oh maharaj,” he began gently and immediately Bharat was calmed. He sat again in his meditation pose and it was as if he were the pupil again. “This thing is coming towards you and it cannot be turned away. It is in the plan that a situation should arise and so it will. Be assured there is a reason for it, as there is a reason for all things, although we may not be privileged to see it now and remember child that there are more lessons to be learned and more souls to learn them than you and I.”

The king smiled at this gentle reprimand. Ah yes, how easy it is to accept the Will of God – and how difficult when the Will concerns one of your own. “This thing – it concerns my son?”

“It does. It also concerns your daughter.”

“Maya? How so guruji?”

“Oh dearest of kings, would you have me remove your lesson also?”

“If there is something I can do –“

“I may speak freely maharaj?”

“That, my friend, is a question you need never ask.”

“Your armies are maintained?”

“Of course. Although as you know we have been blessed with peace for many years.”

“Then,” the old man went on sadly “there is nothing you can do.”

The young man was listening to his guru, he really was, but the sunlight streaming in from the latticed windows pulled his mind from his studies and urged him to be away on the hunt with his father and brothers. The palace, though airy, was filled with the heavy desert heat of the afternoon and Saurumba felt his eyes drooping more than once only to sit up ramrod straight when his guru, spotting this, would poke him none too gently in the ribs. Prince he may be but to his teacher he was, at that moment, no more than an unwilling pupil.

The teacher's gentle voice droned on and the boy, through years of practice could, on occasion, arrange his face into an attitude of attentiveness while his mind roamed far and free. Yes, he understood his position as eldest son and he also understood the necessity to temper the needs of the material with the spiritual needs, for without this balance one could not grow into a complete man. But oh, how he wished he were his brother Arun. Younger princes were of course schooled in the royal palace but theirs was the schooling of archery, horse riding and sports with maybe a little mathematics but, since their future responsibilities would be less, their free time was more and so Saurumba, on this interminably long afternoon, with the sounds of his brother's horses returning from the hunt in his ears, wished he was Arun or Vijay or even the baby Indra – anyone in fact, except himself.

The duties of a royal prince, his father was always telling him, are great and so the studies should also be great. Saurumba's lessons consisted of philosophy, mathematics, history, politics and other useless things he was sure he would never need. In order to get through the sometimes gruelling lessons he would think of the physical studies he did enjoy like swordsmanship, horsemanship and the sporting competitions his father would hold twice yearly. "To rule well," his father would say "is to rule with wisdom, honesty and integrity. These are the marks of a great king, my son."

It was true. Maharaja Bharat was loved and respected by those under his rule and no one had invaded their land for many, many years. The people were prosperous and happy. Saurumba knew he would have to be at least as good as his father.

That thought brought him abruptly back to his studies and he focused on what his guru was saying "Ah, you have returned my prince," the old man smiled softly. "That was a particularly long leave of absence – even for you, was it not?"

The boy felt a hot flush creep over his face as he realized he hadn't fooled the wise old man after all. "Now, as I was saying," the teacher went on smoothly, for he had no wish to shame his pupil further "in order to serve adequately the soul must make sacrifices. There must be a sacrifice of desire and of self. There is no true service without sacrifice," noticing his pupil's face he added, "you may shrink from it my prince but you cannot alter the laws of life. But remember, when love is in your heart all service, all giving, brings such joy that there is no sacrifice after all."

"Yes," Saurumba acknowledged "I know you speak wisely dear guru but it is difficult for me because I am so –"

“Physical,” the teacher finished.

“Exactly guruji. I am living in the physical world am I not? Therefore is it not right that I should prefer the physical pursuits?”

“Of course there is nothing wrong in that child, because of course you are correct we do live in the material world and it is precisely for that reason we can deduce that we must have something to learn.”

“Because if we did not we would still be in Heaven?” the boy offered.

“Well yes,” the old man replied, “We would not have incarnated at all and so it is for us to find out what it is we require to learn to help our soul growth and to go ahead and learn and it is in this way we can move on.”

“So I must strive to understand why I was incarnated into a royal house?”

“Well, the reason for that would be simply the position of being a royal prince will afford you the opportunities to learn the lessons this time around.”

“Oh. So you mean to say guruji, that I did not earn the right to be king in a previous incarnation?”

“Why no dear prince,” the old man laughed delightedly with his pupil’s remark (and he often did, Saurumba had noticed) “you are a prince this time it is true, and a very fine one too if I may say, but last time you could equally have been a beggar or a scoundrel.”

“What do you mean –“ The prince stood up angrily.

“Voice your opinions by all means but temper your actions my son. A beggar may not be less than you and a scoundrel may be nothing more than a soul lost his way. To understand this is to understand life itself. There is no disrespect implied or intended,” the teacher went on kindly, noting his pupils stricken face “but life *is* and it is my purpose to teach you the truth, is it not?”

“It is guruji.”

“Therefore I will do so – although I cannot promise it will all be to your liking.”

“I apologize my teacher, for I realize there are many things I do not understand.”

“Your wisdom grows, dear pupil,” the teacher replied. “Now see you have a visitor. I will leave you now. We can resume our lessons tomorrow. Namaskar my prince.” He bowed and left.

Saurumba looked towards the gilded doors to see his sister, Maya. At thirteen years of age, she was a year younger than her brother and already draped in a sari, living in the woman’s quarters of the palace and was the only princess of the royal house.

“What have you been doing brother?” she asked.

“What else do I do – except study? Come here, I have a need for some company.”

“And I have a need for those lessons you grumble about. Why does everyone think women do not require learning?” This was Maya’s favourite song and, Saurumba noted glumly, she was singing it again.

“Oh dear and most respected sister,” he intoned, “please sit by me and I will reiterate all knowledge I have learned this day.”

Maya pushed him off the silk ottoman he was perched on. “No you will not,” she stated firmly. “You will do better than that. You will speak to father and ask if I can attend lessons too.”

“Well...”Saurumba frowned. He well understood his father’s view. Maya was now thirteen years of age and officially a woman and as such should spend her time in the women’s quarters along with her mother, learning... – well whatever it is that woman learned, he supposed. But clearly this would not be enough for his headstrong sister and so far as he was concerned she could have his lessons and be welcome.

“But are you not – learning how to be married or something?” he said.

She flung a pillow and it caught him square in the face. “Ha! Is that all you think I am worth? Well I’ll have you know –“ she bore down on him, her small face, so like his own, frowning fiercely “there is *much* more to me than that. Why, I want to know about – well, about so many things. Like the names of the stars and where they

come from and where I come from and where I am going and how to do mathematical equations and what to do if another country invades us and –“

“Steady on,” Saurumba laughed. He held her hands in his own to calm her. He sometimes thought his sister should have been born the eldest son.

Maya sat down beside him and his arm went protectively around her. She looked at him with huge brown eyes made bigger with the unshed tears they held. “Saurumba. Please help me. Sometimes I feel I will suffocate.”

“What is this? Are you ill? He jumped to his feet.

“No, no,” she pulled him down. How she loved her wilful brother who would defend her with his life, she knew. “I mean, I am stifled inside.” She pulled the golden sari closer around her as if chilled.

“You just want to know,” he guessed.

“Exactly so,” she beamed her sunshine smile and the sadness vanished. “Father will listen if you talk to him.”

“And say what?”

“Well, just that I would benefit in sharing in your lessons with guruji. I would only listen, I would not interrupt or ask any questions –“

“You? Not ask any questions?” he laughed. “Now that, I refuse to believe.”

Brother and sister sat quietly together in the failing light and it came to Saurumba that he was privileged - more than privileged - to have the wisdom of guruji and why should it not be shared with Maya? Still, he knew his father. It would not be an easy task.

“What about mother?” he asked eventually.

“Mother will agree with father.”

Saurumba nodded. In a family of acquiescent females, from where had his sister sprung? He resolved to speak to his father the next day.

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“If you would be well, happy and fulfilled my children,” the teacher said in his soft resonant voice, “you must first give your attention to the soul, to the spirit and to God. I understand that in your young lives material things already pull at you strongly and,” his wise old eyes rested on the young prince, “I am fully aware that even at this moment you would rather be enjoying physical pursuits with your brothers. But hear me now and understand, and when troubles come – and come they will for is that not the nature of life? Recognize and understand that the concerns of this life are naught but illusions and as such will surely pass away, even as your strong young bodies will age and be no more. So therefore give not too much thought to these things, neglecting the spiritual, for it is, in truth, all you have of value to carry with you. Can you understand?”

Maya, as usual, was the first to reply “Yes guruji but it is difficult –“ she studied her hands for a moment before going on “sometimes we get – sucked in.”

“Yes of course,” the teacher replied, “it will ever be this way whilst we are on the material plane, but the challenge is in overcoming these things, is it not? Otherwise,” he smiled, “life would become too easy, do you not think?”

Maya laughed, showing small white teeth in a brown skinned oval face. “I do not like things to be too easy,” she confessed.

“And what are your thoughts young master?” the teacher asked Saurumba.

“Well,” the boy began slowly “I do not understand – so many things.”

“Of course. You are young and no one expects you to understand everything at this time. The time will come when you will accept this truth even as you cannot understand it now. And when that time comes all the pieces will join together and become a whole. It is then you will be free.”

“We are free,” Maya interrupted.

“Ah yes, you think so child, but tell me this: are you free from pain, from disease should it choose to strike you, are you free from old age and death?”

“Of course not guruji. You are being silly. No one is free from those things – not even our father the king.”

“You speak truly little one,” the teacher agreed. “But think of the beggar who lives his life simply, knowing and trusting in God. He is happy in his rags, he is happy when he has food in his belly and happy when he has not because he recognizes the Creator’s hand in all things and should the Lord bless him with good health he is happy and if He does not then he remains unfazed because he knows all comes from God and, in the understanding, God will never fail him. He travels through his life at one and at peace with himself and others and he wants for nothing. He is free.”

“But he will still grow old and die,” Saurumba said.

“Of course he will. He must live within the Laws of our material world, the basis of which are Birth-Childhood-Adulthood-Old Age-Death. No one can escape these things but the freedom comes when he is not troubled by any of these things. It is in the letting go and sure knowledge that at the essence of himself lies the heart of his Creator. In truth this makes him a free man – even though he be bound in chains.”

“Because maybe the chains are there for a lesson he has to learn?”

“Yes Maya,” guruji was clearly delighted at the progress she had made in the short time she had been allowed to join her brother at his lessons.

“And when the lessons are learned he will no longer need the chains?” she went on excitedly.

“Correct again. Saurumba, listen to your sister,” the teacher smiled “she is becoming a quicker pupil than you.”

“Ha! She always did have too much to say for herself,” the boy grumbled but was secretly pleased.

“So then young master, would you care to close the lesson by recapping on what we have been discussing today?”

Ouch – the teacher had caught the boy off guard and he knew one more unfavourable report to his father would preclude him from joining the hunt the next day. The teacher motioned for him to stand and as he did so a wondrous feeling came over him and his almond eyes shone with something akin to excitement and he spoke “You were explaining, guruji, that God’s love for us is unconditional and all encompassing and will never fail in whatever situation we might find ourselves, so long as we look to it and understand our life experiences for what they are – merely lessons to be learned. And God’s love will keep us company through each and every trial we have to face – and for the good things too – God does not play blindly with us. We are each of us his treasured creations and thus He builds us – or rather allows us to build ourselves – with His materials.” The boy broke off suddenly embarrassed.

“At least I think,” he finished quietly.

For a long time no one, not even Maya, spoke.

At last the teacher got to his feet. “Namaskar Prince, Princess,” he bowed and left before the children could notice tears shining in his luminously dark eyes.

“Did I get it wrong again?” Saurumba wondered.

“Oh no my brother,” his sister replied, “I think you just got it wonderfully and perfectly right. For once,” she added playfully, and together they ran from the darkening learning room to find their brothers.

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Bharat turned his mind to the present. It was true he could do nothing about the future but the present, well, that was something he could deal with. “How goes the boy’s studies?”

Guruji smiled. “Very well maharaj. Only this evening he encapsulated the entire lesson in a few succinct words. Truly, he was inspired by Govinda Himself. I believe understanding grows in his young heart.”

“Ah,” Bharat replied “at last the child becomes a man. In truth I was beginning to despair the boy would ever gain the understanding required to succeed me. He

seemed only to think of the hunt and battling with his brothers to give any thought to serious study.”

“He has a fine mind.”

The king nodded. “Just let us pray he is allowed to make use of it.”

“Ah my king, no knowledge is ever wasted. Knowledge rounds out the soul as well as the mind.”

Bharat laughed. “Ever the teacher, guruji. And what would become of me without you? Come, I am about to eat with my family. Do please join us.”

The old man looked uncomfortable. “No, no sir. I will eat in the kitchens. The cooks prepare an evening plate for me.”

“This night, guruji, has been marked in some way – a way in which I do not understand but I do know enough to be aware that some river has been crossed which cannot be uncrossed, therefore we would be no less than honoured if you would share our table.”

The old man bowed. “Then maharaj, how can I refuse?”

Together they walked the long corridor to the eating rooms.

Bharat smiled hearing his daughter’s voice as they drew nearer. It was a family custom that, each evening, one family member should tell a morality tale of his or her own invention and clearly tonight it was Maya’s turn.

The maharaja and the teacher halted at the double doors of the room. The guard made to open the door but the king stayed his hand “I will listen from here,” he whispered, “the better not to distract.” The teacher smiled in agreement and the two stood listening with pride to the child’s tale.

“Once upon a time,” Maya recited “ there was a tree which was covered with beautiful, ripe apples. All the fruits were ready to eat and hung from the branches begging to be picked. All but one apple. He was smaller, less ripe, and he clung to the tree more tightly. He was looking very worried.

A girl stood below looking at this apple tree. She wanted an apple and they all looked inviting; one or two even dropped obligingly at her feet. But she knew she could have one apple only so she looked the tree over carefully. And she saw him. The little apple, green skinned, clinging to the tree with all his might.

She watched this apple. She knew if she picked him now he would taste sour and his flesh would be hard but if she waited just a little time he would ripen out with sweet flesh and a rosy skin. Then he’d taste better than all the other apples. She sat back to wait.”

“*Shabash* Maya,” Bharat heard the voice of the maharani in praise of her daughter.

“Now what lesson are we to learn from the little apple?”

“To eat mangoes instead?” Vijay piped.

The others laughed. “Well not exactly my son,” maharani Jaya said kindly “Arun?”

“I think perhaps patience mother. What do you say Saurumba?” Arun looked to his older brother for confirmation.

“It is fitting our impatient sister relates to us a story of how to be patient,” Saurumba laughed.

Jaya looked to her daughter “is your brother correct, my daughter?”

“Yes. The story means you have to wait for good things,” Maya replied triumphantly.

“That is the truth,” her mother agreed. “A very nice story indeed.”

Bharat flung open the doors “Patience!” he stormed “the child speaks of patience and yet cannot wait for her father to attend table before she begins her story!” At this they all laughed and guruji felt himself most blessed to be a part of such a family’s lives.

