

## **Tale of Two Realities - Part 1**

An understanding of life through the Ramayana & Yogasutra

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### **A short note**

Variety is the spice of life in this vibrant world. Fascinated by this sheer assortment, we seek to acquire all that we think will give us happiness. However, even after attaining our goals, we discover to our dismay that we remain unfulfilled. Instead of exploring other possible routes to happiness, we relentlessly continue this pursuit to the extent of getting worn out by life, but still in search of that elusive entity called happiness. This play of emotions is true of most of mankind save a select few. They are the yogis who have discarded the peripherals of the world to access the very source of peace, the ultimate state of fulfilment. Anchored in that source, they live life to their heart's content, never feeling the pangs of unfulfillment in its many degrees and manifestations.

The 'Tale of Two Realities' is an attempt to portray this odyssey of mankind. This work is a montage that selects sutras from the Yogasutra and stories from the Ramayana to present a vivid portrayal of people who coasted through life, of those who rolled and tumbled through it, as also of those who fell in between the two.

I am immensely grateful for the journey that I have had in life, one that drove me to explore Patanjali's Yogasutra and Valmiki's Ramayana. My explorations have gifted me subtle but powerful lessons, lessons that I share with joy, for, as we know that happiness shared is happiness doubled. I thank the redoubtable Yogacharya Sri. S. Sridharan of the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram and Mahamahopadhyaya R. Krishnamurthy Sastri, for exposing me in their respective capacities, to the beauties of both texts.

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### **About the author**

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## Tale of Two Realities

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Part - 1

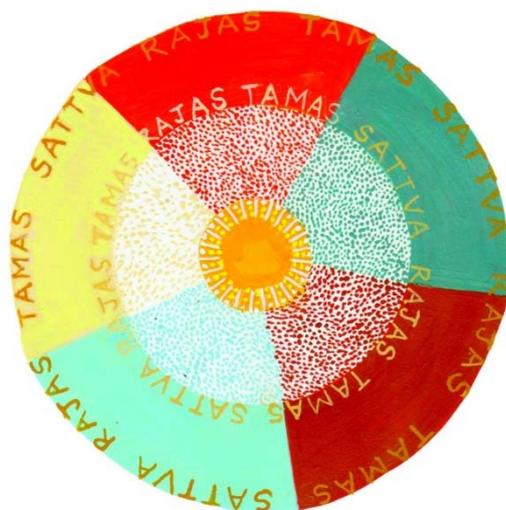
Lakshmi Devnath

### PROLOGUE

The mind is the pivot of human existence. Perception happens through the mind, and it is this factor that makes or mars one's experience of life. A brilliant brain is undoubtedly an asset, but a healthy mind is an absolute necessity. It has a palpable influence on, not only one's experience of life, but also on one's health. Significantly, the mind is not a physical organ like the brain. With no form of its own, it is only thoughts and their emotive content that shape one's mind. Therefore, the more judicious the personality, the healthier this field, and the reverse can be asserted too. An accredited methodology that facilitates a healthy mind is the practise of yoga as delineated by Patanjali. The aim of his yogic process is to have practitioners realise a deeper dimension to their beings, and the supremacy of that entity in their individual life processes. The method is 'Right Perception'. Stated simply, it means realising one's true nature and the world for which they stand. According to him, harnessing one's thought process is the means to this goal. With that, he clearly established the role of the mind in the process of perception. Given the magnitude of this process in the game of life, Patanjali took it upon himself to decipher the phenomenon of the mind and view it in juxtaposition with the Self, the deepest dimension of our personality. This analysis resulted in a separate branch of philosophy called Yoga, one that he documented into a little compendium called the 'Yogasutra'. Every word written therein was worth its weight in gold for the clarity it provided on the nuances of life.

Though we appear and experience ourselves as one, we are actually a package of three entities, according to yoga. The three are the self, the body and mind. The self is in a unique category of its own, while the body and mind, together, form a complex. These two form the two 'realities' in the tale that is waiting to be told in this exploration. Though starkly distinct from one another, they lie knitted and knotted together, and convincingly portray an illusion of being one. The unravelling of their individualities, and the decoding of their intricacies opens a doorway to joyful living, irrespective of the circumstances. The entire narrative, at the fundamental level, is of utmost relevance to our lives, notwithstanding even stark variations in the detail. Therefore, this story must be told. And the narrative must begin with an introduction to the primary characters in the tale.

The Self — the first 'reality', roughly the equivalent of the Western concept of soul is immortal. It is unitary. It is pure intelligence, alive, vibrant, and the very source of right perception. Most importantly, it is the invigorating agent of the human body. Therefore, when it departs, the body turns lifeless, and the person is declared dead. One of the many epithets used by Patanjali to describe this entity is 'Purusa', 'that which dwells within the metaphoric town of the body'.



*Artistic depiction of Purusa & Prakriti in the human frame. The five colours are representative of the five elements--ether, air, fire, water and earth.*

Matter — the second ‘reality’ and the material that constitutes the body-mind complex is inert. It is a compound comprising three qualities, or guṇas. They are sattva, rajas and tamas. Broadly speaking, sattva is characterised by luminosity, rajas by action, and tamas by inertia. Patanjali terms this compound as ‘Prakriti’, literally translating as ‘Nature’. The wheel of life rotates on the fulcrum of these ‘Two Realities’.

Accurate perception can happen only if the mind is sattvic. Therefore, the yogic endeavour aims at maximising sattva, the guna that comes closest to the purity of the purusa. Simply stated, ‘sattvicisation’ is but cleansing the mind off its impurities. Patanjali’s term for them is klesa, meaning ‘affliction’. Klesas torment the mind, but suffering happens only when the purusa empathises with the mind to the extent of completely forgetting its individuality.



*Artistic depiction of the mishmash of emotions that characterise the mind.*

The mind can be likened to a cauldron bubbling with incessant activity, generating a mishmash of memories, apprehensions and dreams that manifest with their emotional colouring. When perception, for any reason, gets tinged by these colours, misperception arises. Misperception or distorted thinking causes one to understand things differently from what they truly are. Yoga describes this misapprehension as avidya. In yogic parlance, avidya or ignorance means, not just lack of knowledge, but wrong knowledge. It is the breeding ground of all human frailties, and the substratum from which all existential problems arise. The world is sensual, and the mind, by its very nature, outward-oriented. Swami Ashokananda, in his book titled 'Shafts of Light', bluntly expresses the impact of these afflictions, "However intelligent we are, our whole thinking is awfully stupid."

The mind, although of the form of matter, is of a finer grade. All actions performed, be they thought, word or deed, leave behind a subtle trail in the mind, even as they disappear within the folds of time. The more deliberate the actions, the deeper the impressions made. These memories of lived experiences survive the death of the body to travel along with the purusa, thus serving as its companion across births. The hybrid contents of the mind combine to make mankind, 'desirous', and programmed with conditioned behaviour. Habit, good or otherwise, presupposes a degree of unconsciousness in action resulting in cyclical behaviour. As a saying goes: "Sow a thought and you reap an action. Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny." Clearly, the impact of habits run deep, giving rise to the marked need for utmost vigilance over the formation of negative ones, for they spawn follies, foibles and even grave errors. 'Independence', a popular word in present-day scenario, is not that which is claimed through heedless behaviour and injudicious decisions, which are, but, mere reflections of an errant and weak mind. 'Independence', understood from the perspective of yoga, will have decisions made only in accordance with the needs of the

situation, uninfluenced by factors like likes, dislikes, biases and habit. Patanjali says, "When intellect becomes as pure as Self, liberation follows."1

The after-effects of effluents released by toxic minds have been repeatedly experienced in history, in tandem with the enduring influence of healthy ones. Both deserve to be ruminated upon over and over again for the lessons they have left behind. In their independent ways, both categories have earned a place for themselves in history, and have made splendid contributions to the corpus of psychology. Every significant event in a narrative is the culmination of a series of actions. History, therefore, is not just a chronicling of events, but at a deeper level, a record of the behaviour of people across the spectra of time and place. Therefore, at an a-priori level, history can be understood as a disentangling of the maze of the mind. When viewed thus, it provides an insight into the factors that kindle actions and reactions in people i.e., the pull of the outside world and the push from within. But it is only when ruminated upon and internalised, that history serves its purpose. The mind is neither an easy tool to master, nor is it impossible. The history of Bharat is replete with examples of those who have successfully harnessed their mental energies to lead a healthy and productive life, and the roll of honour includes sages, rulers, litterateurs and the lay, clearly establishing that yoga as meditative wisdom is not just for the renunciate, but also highly relevant for conscious living in the world. Swami Vivekananda writes, "Uniformity is the rigorous laws of nature; what once happened can happen always."2

There is nothing like a good story that deftly packages in worthwhile life lessons. Human nature displays a seamless continuity transcending the apparent boundaries of time, period and geography.

The Valmiki Ramayana, a historical classic of ancient India, is a masterpiece of poetic excellence and a treasure trove of eternal wisdom. For these very

reasons, it has been savoured, studied, dissected, analysed, re-crafted and re-presented in various ways. From the standpoint of the Tale of Two Realities the eponymous classic built around its protagonist, Rama, serves as a brilliant guide to self-analysis. The story presents a magnificent array of diverse minds, and as the personalities move within the story, acting and reacting, the Ramayana gradually shapes itself into a reflective edifice of attitudes and behaviour, revealed by a gamut of characters who jointly weave the fabric of the story. In that process, they hold a mirror to one's own mind. Everything about this epic is epic. Be it the spectrum of virtuosity or the sheer sweep of evil; be it the blatant display of insecurity or the hushed presence of craving; be it the grandeur of regality or the magnificence of renunciation; be it preoccupation with righteousness or prepossession with infatuation; and in the final reckoning, be it the display of will or just the lack of it. The messages that the characters left behind were as diverse as their divergent personalities, but they also collectively emblazoned the immense power of the mind to trip even the most exalted, notwithstanding their avatar hood or formidable yogic attainments.

The Ramayana narrates that Rama and Sita were manifestations, on earth, of Vishnu and Lakshmi. The two were markedly noble in their descent and demeanour. But the challenge that is the mind remains impartial to all who work with it. And, so it was that, notwithstanding the impressive purity of the thought process of the couple and the eagle-eyed watch they kept over their actions, disturbances and distortions did manage, on a few occasions, to make their presence felt, sometimes to the extent of even blindsiding them. The infamous 'Golden Deer' episode in the life of Sita has gone down in history as a stellar illustration of intense craving and gross indiscretion. As for Rama, the bathos that he projected at the end of a bloody war, had everybody, from Sita to the gods, go into a tailspin and, further, transform the overall mood from exultation and joyous anticipation to one of utter disbelief.

Rama was by nature soft-spoken and peace-loving. The celestial bird Garuda had once marvelled on the gory battlefield, "O Raghava, you are fond of even your enemies."<sup>3</sup> And the prince loved his wife to distraction. It was, for her sake, that he had trekked thousands of miles, mobilised an army and won over a formidable foe who was dreaded by the three worlds. But, on that historic day, as Sita shyly stepped off the palanquin to reunite with her husband, and those standing around awaited with bated breath the ultimate fruition of an arduous expedition, the tirade of cruel words with which Rama greeted her frightened the onlookers out of their wits, and drove her to take recourse to a fire ordeal. Jolted into disbelief, the gods descended on Lanka, and addressed Rama, "How could you, creator of all the worlds, and first among the enlightened, remain indifferent when Sita threw herself into the fire? How is it that you do not seem to realise that you are foremost among the gods? ....When the worlds have been destroyed, and before they come into being, you are seen to exist, O scorcher of the foe. And yet you repudiate Vaidehi like any ordinary mortal!"

"No individual, howsoever great, can be just a mass of sattvaguna. Every individual has all the qualities in different degrees. Rama too, is no exception"

One of the commentators on the Ramayana writes, "But no individual, howsoever great, can be just a mass of sattvaguna. Every individual has all the qualities in different degrees. Rama too, is no exception."<sup>4</sup>

A bewildered Rama replied, "I look upon myself as a man, Rama, born to Dasaratha. Be pleased, exalted Lord, to tell me who I am, what my antecedents are and why I am here." Thereupon, Brahma replied, "Sita is Lakshmi incarnate, and you are Vishnu, the Splendid, the Lord that has assumed a dark form, and you are the Great Progenitor. For the slaying of Ravana, you took a human form."<sup>5</sup>

This monumental amnesia, as it were, of Rama, is representative of the fettering spell of Prakriti, and the veils that it can cast to obscure the vision of even one as exalted and self-possessed like Rama. If he formed one end of the spectrum in the Ramayana, Ravana formed the other. The intermediate space was filled with characters of no mean order. They were drawn from various species that included humans, simians, avians, gandharvas, yakshas and rakshasas. Irrespective of the classification, they all exhibited highly developed minds, each differing from the other only in the strength or weaknesses that they displayed. In the analysis of their beliefs, ideas, convictions, fancies, caprices and conceit, lies the takeaway of the Tale of Two Realities.

This work is neither a retelling of the Ramayana, nor an exposition on the Yogasutra. Rather, by juxtaposing select episodes of the epic with relevant sutras, it aims at kindling an attitude of introspection, even while engaging with familiar episodes from the Ramayana. The handpicked incidents reflect the residual impact of mental afflictions on the principal characters and their spill-over effect upon others involved.



The Tale of Two Realities is limited to the first six books of the Ramayana, with the stories of Patanjali and Valmiki forming the curtain raiser to chosen episodes from the epic. They are pivotal points in the mammoth story, where a clear shift in the flow of events happens. The 'Tale' weaves itself around these defining moments. The events leading up to them, and the impact they leave behind provides for our edification. The purpose behind this deconstruction is not to sit in judgment of the characters, but rather to enrich our own lives by gaining an understanding of the mental struggles that the characters faced, and their victories and falls. Examples from the Ramayana help to concretely portray the abstract relationship that exists between the 'Self' and the 'mind' in each one of us. In the final reckoning, an understanding of this relationship is important as it is inevitable for our journey on earth. The nuances in this partnership sets the tone and tenor of our lives. It is a relationship that is vital in influencing the parameters by which we measure ourselves, not by what we have, but by who we are. It is this relationship that determines how comfortable

we are in our skin. It is this relationship that determines how comfortable we are with the world. It teaches us the importance of respecting individual boundaries, and reveals to us the beauty of being boundless. In the final reckoning, the Tale of Two Realities is all about leading a life of strength and integrity, within and without, one that aims to eschew temptations and delusions.

It is precisely this, that an appreciation of this work aims to bring about, even as it will establish that an active engagement with life is perfectly compatible with happiness, provided the source that we seek it from is not the weakening and damning outside world, but our own nurturing Self. Drawing on its unconditional and limitless strength we may step out into the world to realise our dreams and aspirations, and on its lap we may comfortably place our burdens with the reassurance that all is well in one's world.

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