

Tale of Two Realities - Part 2

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 -2)

A Voyage of Self-Discovery

Lakshmi Devnath

This is the story of Ratnakara who transformed into Valmiki. The narrative draws upon the popular version of Valmiki's story.

Those were times when the gods moved through invisible borders to sojourn on earth. Human civilisation was still relatively young, and the atmosphere was permeated with a spirit of enquiry. The external world whetted man's curiosity, and his inner world invited him to reflect. If it was common to see artisans in deep concentration, carving out figurines on chariots, it was equally unexceptional to see mystics contemplating on the secrets of life. Society, at large, was motivated towards augmenting mutual enhancement; fostering a sense of togetherness; and encouraging an attitude of ahimsa. Yet, it was not the perfect age. For dharma, which in its complete state stood on four legs, was now having to balance itself on just three. It was Treta Yuga.

Sage Narada, one of the sons of Brahma, stepped out of his celestial abode to descend into a dense forest in Bhuloka. The forest that was home to several beasts of prey was also the haunt of a hunter and wayside robber, Ratnakara. As was his wont with passersby, Ratnakara accosted Narada and demanded his possessions at knife-point. An unfazed Narada responded, "I have nothing of material value with me." And further asked, "But...why are you committing this baneful act?" The bandit replied that he had taken to it in a desperate bid to support his wife, children and aged parents. Narada looked him in the eye and asked, "Are you aware that you will have to experience the effects of your wrong

Karma? Do you think that your family members will come forward to partake in the suffering that is bound to follow?”

Narada was a sage of legendary wisdom and omniscience. If he was eliciting information from Ratnakara about his motives, it was only with the intention of having the robber introspect. When Ratnakara replied that his choice of action was dictated solely by a sense of duty, Narada utilised that opportunity to awaken the man to the inescapable effects of karmic laws.

यथा धेनु-सहस्रेषु वत्सो विन्दति मातरं । तथा पूर्व-कृतं कर्म कर्तारम् अनुगच्छति ॥

Just as a calf finds its mother even when amidst thousands of cows, so also karma performed follows the doer (albeit purusas being innumerable and their births countless)

—Mahabharata, 13.7.22

Karma means action, and includes all that we think, speak or do. Actions performed deliberately or otherwise produce consequences. The philosophy of the Yogasutra states that it is a long continuum of births and deaths in myriad forms (plant, animal, bird, human, etc.) that the Purusha undertakes in a bid to satisfy its insatiable desires. At the end of each lifetime, the corpus of karmic impressions, the product of several lifetimes, leaves with the Purusha to rest alongside it, till it is time for the next birth. Death, in yoga philosophy, thus, merely signifies the end of one chapter in the magnum opus life-story of the Purusha. Therefore, it proves neither an obstacle to reaping the rewards of meritorious action, nor does it provide a reprieve from facing the effects of negative actions performed, even if in some previous birth. Even as ripe karmic residues fructify, fresh ones get added on, for man performs actions of some kind or the other till the last moments of his life.

Drawing on these premises, the Indic spiritual tradition, at large, codified the karmic laws. The Yogasutra unravels the complex laws in just three sutras: क्लेशमूलः कर्माशयो दृष्टादृष्टजन्मवेदनीयः॥ सति मूले तद्विपाको जात्यायुर्भोगाः॥ ते हलादपरितापफलाः पुण्यापुण्यहेतुत्वात्॥ “Actions impelled by motivations like ego, greed, hatred, fear, pride, desire for name, fame and the like, bind the doer to the action, and the residual effects impact not only the present but also future lives. Further, the merit and demerit of the ‘trails’ determine the specie of birth, lifespan and quality of life.”¹ Clearly, the effects of one’s karma must necessarily manifest itself at some point. In essence, the karma theory declares that it is an unfailing cause and effect relationship that is at play in the cosmos.

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Narada’s question on whether his family would partake in the karmic consequences of his actions set Ratnakara thinking. After a pregnant pause, he answered decisively, “They will.” The different ways in which his wife, children and parents reacted with utmost delight over the spoils that he frequently brought home flashed before his mind’s eye. Not once could he recall anyone, not even his parents chiding him on the means he was adopting to gain that wealth.

“I am not so sure,” Narada expressed genuine doubt and suggested, “Why don’t you ask them a straight question?” Discerning Ratnakara’s look of suspicion, he candidly remarked, “If you fear that I will escape, tie me up to this tree.” The bandit readily complied with the suggestion and proceeded to his house. On reaching home, he asked his family members individually, “You are aware that I rob and, at times, even kill people in order to provide for all of us. My actions are wrong but I do them only because I want to keep you all comfortable and happy. I trust that you will all partake in the consequences whenever they befall me.” “No,” they replied. As each proceeded to reason out their stance, it was clear that notwithstanding the diversity in their expressions, the communication was uniform. “It is your duty to provide for all of us, and it is your choice how you want to do it. It is unfair to expect us to share in your karmic burden.” Ratnakara gazed at them, disbelievingly.



He appeared stoic but his mind was in a turmoil. His little world that he had so fondly built had upended abruptly. He had been so attached to his family that he had predicated his happiness on theirs; based his deeds on their needs; and not, for even a moment, had he paused to consider the implications of his actions. Above all, he had been gullible enough to assert confidently that his family would willingly partake in his miseries just as he had been intent on providing for them, come what may! He had deluded himself into believing that they would stand by him through thick and thin. He would have continued living under this illusion but for that passer-by, whoever he was, whom he had

left tied to the tree Ratnakara felt his chest tighten and his throat constrict. Something snapped deep inside him. He felt orphaned, betrayed and insecure. Abruptly, he left his house. At the end of the road, he paused but not to look behind. There was no looking back. He was determined to find a way out of the mess that he had landed himself in. Notwithstanding this clarity, he felt very, very, sad.

Sadness is a debilitating emotion. Unfortunately, it is part and parcel of human life at large. Ratnakara's sadness was so intense that he felt trapped and suffocated by it. All that he wanted was liberation from his existing situation. The Yogasutra terms this feeling as 'duhkha' and describes it as a symptom of disturbance in the mind. Patanjali writes, परिणामतापसंस्कारदुःखैर्गुणवृत्तिविरोधाच्च दुःखमेव सर्वं विवेकिनः॥² The sutra lists four factors that contribute to despondency and dejection. They are, disruption of familiar patterns in one's life situation as also consequences of one's actions (परिणामदुःखम्); deep anxiety (तापदुःखम्); demands of deep-rooted habituations in the face of obstacles experienced towards satisfying them (संस्कारदुःखम्); also one's own conflicting emotions and thoughts (गुणवृत्ति विरोधः). Duhkha, Patanjali further warns, furtively resides even in seemingly happy experiences. The wise discern its covert presence and accordingly forearm themselves. The ignorant, though, suffer the backlash of life's experiences. The Yogasutra terms this 'Ignorance' as avidya and elaborates thus: अनित्याशुचिदुःखानात्मसु नित्यशुचिसुखात्मख्यातिरविद्या, "Ignorance is regarding the impermanent as permanent, the impure as pure, the painful as pleasant, and the non-Self as the Self."³ In short, avidya is a fundamental misconception of 'Life'. Denser the intensity, greater the experience of sorrow. Interestingly, its ambit envelops both the unlettered and the scholar, differing in the importance of gaining an experiential understanding of yogic principles as opposed to mere bookish learning. Ratnakara not only had a myopic understanding of himself but also had completely hinged his happiness on his

family, considering them as the be all and end all of his very existence. Patanjali writes तस्य हेतुर्विद्या “the reason for that (delusion) is avidya.”⁴ A Yoga teacher of the modern age, TKV Desikachar poses a rhetorical question, “What is the relationship between dukkha and avidya? ⁵ Every action that stems from avidya always leads to one or another form of dukkha.”⁶ Given the inescapable rules of karma, the Yogasutra frowns upon sacrificing one’s very core, the ‘Self’ at the altar of misconceptions, under any pretext.

(To be continued...)

References

- 1) Y.S. 2.12-2. 14
- 2) 2.15
- 3) Y.S. 2.5. from *The Unadorned Thread of Yoga* by Salvatore Zambito translated by Satchidananda
- 4) Y.S. 2.24
- 5) 1938-2016. Son of the legendary yoga teacher T. Krishnamacharya and founder of the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram
- 6) *The Heart of Yoga* pg. 83

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