

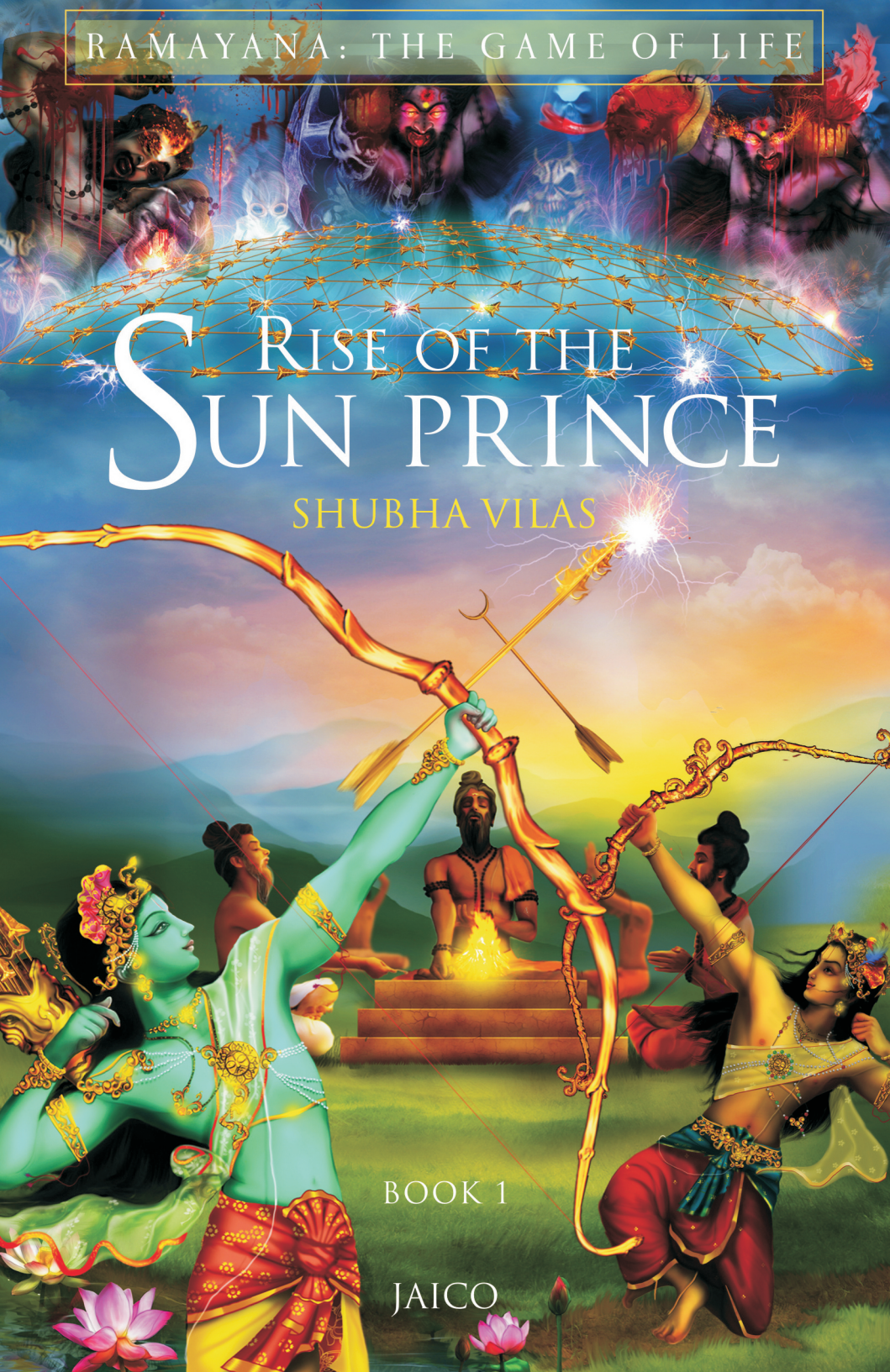
RAMAYANA: THE GAME OF LIFE

RISE OF THE SUN PRINCE

SHUBHA VILAS

BOOK 1

JAICO



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DEDICATION

To a dear friend, Gaurakrsna, who left me forever, but not before emboldening me sufficiently to rewrite the *Ramayana*.

To my mother, Chitra, and my father, Badri Narayanan, to whom I owe the deepest foundations of my life.

To my *paramguru*, Srila Prabhupada, whose teachings and books have influenced my life immensely.

To my guru, Radhanath Swami, whose words of wisdom have inspired my heart, whose love and kindness has touched my soul.

To my guide, who has been a beacon light of direction, a treasure house of wisdom and an unflagging source of encouragement.

To my brother, well-wishers and friends, who have been the supporting pillars in all my endeavors. From them I have learnt to love and serve selflessly.

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I am indebted to Valmiki *muni*, the author of the *Ramayana*. And Kamba *muni*, who further enriched the flavor of the original with his amazing poetry. I have learnt a lot about the intricacies of the *Ramayana* from Sri Velukkudi Krishnan Swami and K.S. Narayanacharya, C. Sita Ramamurti and Sri S. Appalacharyulu. I would also like to appreciate all those who have worked on the website - www.valmikiramayan.net - to make the epic accessible to the world.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

When was the last time you came across a novel that you felt like reading all over again? Have you ever met characters in a story who appear different to you every time you read about them? Most stories can be enjoyed once, at the most twice; they have nothing new to offer after the second read. But unlike regular stories, the *Ramayana* grows more interesting with every reading. An all-encompassing story, it adds value to every kind of reader and addresses every human need. Here, we find adventure and romance, mysticism and sinister plots, struggles and immortal values, poetry and intellectual analogies, and so much more.

Some books teach ideals and some books entertain. *Ramayana: The Game of Life* is an attempt to present this timeless story in a way that is entertaining to the heart and enlightening to the intellect.

A good game is full of twists and turns at every stage and promises to thrill with its absolute unpredictability of results. But no one wants the same to happen in real life. Life should be extremely predictable and smooth – this is what most of us are comfortable with. Stories like the *Ramayana* present the realities of life in the most exciting manner. This magical epic arms us with valuable tools to deal with the various twists and turns of our own lives. The simple wisdom to be found in dharmic tales like the *Ramayana* is always fresh and gives us the clarity we often need, while being rooted in time-tested traditional values.

Those who are looking only for the story of the *Ramayana* will find it here, packed with plenty of exciting drama and action. This book

keeps Valmiki's *Ramayana* front and center, yet explores other versions, gently weaving in aspects of *Kambar Ramayana's* beautiful poetic analogies and folk tales that are in philosophical alignment with Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Those who seek to relate the story to their own lives will find in the footnotes, practical learnings gleaned from various facets of the story. These *sutras* will help them navigate and steer the ship of life through stormy seas and clear skies alike.

Essentially, every one of us falls into one of three categories in the game of life: positive contributor, negative destroyer or protective mediator. So here we find all the sages headed by the iconic Vishwamitra striving to contribute positively to society through the Vedic sacrifice even as the demons, headed by Maricha and Subahu, try to destroy the positive forces by casting spells of intense negativity. And Rama and Lakshmana work to protect the positive from the corrupting influence of the negative by wielding a protective shield of arrows. This, for instance, is a classic scene taken from the game of life. Which role do you want to play?

Book One of the six-volume *Ramayana: The Game of Life*, which draws extensively from *Valmiki Ramayana's Bala Kanda*, is entitled *Rise of the Sun Prince*. The coming together of myriad forces that it takes to give rise to a perfect hero are brought out through the early life of Rama. As Rama carefully weighs the pros and cons of so many of His decisions and words, we catch a glimpse of the loftiness of a real hero. What is more, we also begin to value the simplicity of being a good student.

In *Rise of the Sun Prince*, we are exposed to the struggles of an imperfect teacher, one who relentlessly fights his internal battles to rise above his shortcomings. And this, in a way, is the central hero of this book – Vishwamitra, the ever-angry sage. As the teacher mentors his pupils, Rama and Lakshmana, they, too, mentor him on another

sphere. As the story advances, we witness the angry sage and imperfect teacher blossoming into a focused spiritualist and perfect student, learning the laws of progressive living.

We palpably feel the angst of Dasaratha, his struggle as a father on the one hand and a king on the other. How does a loving father resolve his conflicting role as a dutiful king, especially when his duty obstructs his love?

This book also unravels the story of Sita, whose life revolves around a bow. For a girl, handling the delicate balance between love and tradition is like walking a tightrope between life and death. Are traditions made to die or are they made to live on? This is a question only the heart-moving saga of the marriage of Sita and Rama can answer.

Rise of the Sun Prince reveals to us the range of principles that underlie the healthy relationships in our lives – between parents and children, between husband and wife, between brothers, between a leader and his followers, between a teacher and his students.

The *Ramayana* is not a book; it is a way of life. I invite you to delve into *Ramayana: The Game of Life...* to master your own game of life.

he reduce the demon to ashes. Tataka, Maricha and Subahu, aghast upon hearing the news of Sunda's death, became vengeful and pledged to destroy Agastya's hermitage. Agastya cursed the three of them into becoming ferocious human-eating demons. Having failed in her mission to harm Agastya, Tataka turned her wrath upon forests that were home to Agastya and the other sages and annihilated the Malada and Karusa forests. Her intense rage converted the once-picturesque forests into deserted thorny woodlands and she soon swamped them with demons that incessantly harassed the sages to chase them away. Tataka's sons went to Sumali, a demon who happened to be Ravana's grandfather. Sumali became fond of Maricha and Subahu and gave them shelter. Eventually, they became an integral part of Ravana's kingdom, and Ravana lovingly called them his maternal uncles because of their connection with Sumali.¹³

rama's dilemma

Vishwamitra had prepared Rama for the inevitable - to fight with Tataka. As a guru, he knew his disciple Rama's thought process. He realized that Rama's dilemma was not whether to kill an enemy but whether to kill a woman. How could Rama who could never imagine hurling abuses or glaring at a woman even think of piercing one with arrows? For Rama, a woman was a symbol of purity and was someone worthy of respect. Rama's mother had trained Him to venerate women, and He believed real education meant worshipping every woman as he would His mother. But His teacher expected Him to kill a woman, the first of His demon victims.

¹³ Anger, as a result of frustrated desires, can transform a beautiful, prosperous heart into a parched one filled with the thorns of envy and devoid of the fruits of love.



Vishwamitra's lessons for Rama were beyond the realm of theoretical knowledge. Vishwamitra reminded Rama of the multiple responsibilities and roles that He was playing and that waited for Him. He told Him that His main role was that of the prince of Ikshwaku Dynasty, a dynasty expected to protect society. Sacrifice was expected of a king, even sacrificing one's principles at times. On the one hand, was Rama's sacred principle of respect and worship for a woman, but on the other hand was the higher principle of protecting citizens from torture and trauma. Rama had to weigh His principles.

To diffuse Rama's dilemma and mould His mind toward killing Tataka, Vishwamitra explained to Him how Tataka was everything a woman should not be and narrated several instances from the past when gods and demigods had been required to kill women.

Vishwamitra justified that Tataka possessed no womanly virtues to command His respect and veneration. She was evil; her actions were atrocious and behaviour deplorable; she had such malefic valor that she spread terror across the universe. He said that only if a woman with good qualities were mistreated would the aggressor lose all virtue and be destined to a horrendous future. He assured Rama that killing Tataka was necessary and that in doing so, He would not violate His *dharma*.

Vishwamitra told Rama about an instance when the demigod Indra had to kill an outrageous woman. He told Rama about Sumati, who had acquired such unlimited powers that it had blinded her with arrogance. Drunk with power and strength, she began killing and torturing every living thing that came her way. She had gone so far into evil that her name was changed to Kumati, meaning one with crooked intelligence. Indra realized that she was causing too much damage and killed her. Indra also had to kill Manthara, the daughter of Virochana, because she was attempting to destroy the entire earth.

Vishwamitra also told Him about Khyati, the extremely beautiful, fish-eyed wife of sage Bhrigu. Although she was the wife of such an exalted sage, she had a soft spot for demons, pitied them and let them in on the secrets of demigods. Worried that it might cause uncontrollable troubles later, Lord Vishnu had to kill her. At one point in time, the demons were becoming weaker than the demigods. So Sukracharya, their *guru*, performed *tapasya* to appease Lord Shiva. When the guru was away meditating, the demigods tried to attack the demons. They ran for shelter to Khyati, the step-mother of Sukracharya and the wife of Bhrigu. To protect the demons, Khyati used her power of penance to freeze the demigods. The frozen demigods would have become easy prey for the demons had it not been for Lord Vishnu who absorbed all of them into His own body. Khyati realized that Lord Vishnu had thwarted her plans; she was about to curse Him when He released His *sudarshan chakra*, severing her head. When Bhrigu learned of his wife's death, he cursed Lord Vishnu to appear on Earth 10 times. The result of Bhrigu's curse was Lord Vishnu's 10 incarnations, famously known as the *dasavatar*.¹⁴

Vishwamitra gently reminded Rama that as a prince He had to shoulder the responsibility of protecting the innocent from destructive individuals. He told Rama that to prove His commitment to His people, He was expected to come out victorious at the end of many such difficult missions, even if these appeared ruthless, sinful, or against His principles.¹⁵

Rama contemplated the words of His teacher while also being reminded of His father's instructions: to always abide by the words of

¹⁴ Interestingly, Lord Rama was one of the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu, and Vishwamitra was explaining His own story to Him!

¹⁵ Leading is not just about action, but about thinking and weighing the diverse possibilities before acting. Guided intelligence thinks in the right direction. Personal choices have to be sacrificed at the altar of the good of the whole.



Vishwamitra. Keeping both in mind, He spent some time on deliberation. Rama decided that His primary task was the welfare of this world, so He expressed His eagerness to execute His teacher's orders.¹⁶

Rama held His bow with one hand, pulled back the string with the other. The twang of the bow was so powerful and resounding that it shook the entire forest. The thunderous sound forced the birds to fly out of every tree for fear that the forest would be destroyed. At the far end of the forest, the monstrous Tataka who was relaxing in a cave heard the reverberating twang of the bow string. Although she was so used to torturing others, she found the thunderous sound of Rama's bow unbearable. Infuriated, she hollered out of her cave and ran toward the source of the sound. She wanted to kill the one who had caused her such torment.

Rama and Lakshmana saw Tataka running toward them from a distance; her ghastly and monstrous features becoming clearer as she inched closer. She had shoulders as strong as the Mandara Mountains, feet so huge and heavy that her earth-carving footsteps left behind a trail of lakes. As Tataka avalanched toward Rama, He was convinced that this couldn't be a woman, because trapped and mauled under each of her footsteps were hundreds of living beings. She wore golden anklets, elephant head-studded earrings and a blood-oozing garland of elephants strung tail to trunk. Her teeth were

¹⁶ Dasaratha advised Rama to follow all of Vishwamitra's instructions without questioning, but Rama gave the instructions a thought before following them. Why? Different authorities instruct us at different times. Vishwamitra was one authority in Rama's life, Dasaratha was another. Before taking action, Rama thought about what advice yet another authority - the scriptures - would give Him in such a situation. Only when He was convinced that Dasaratha's and Vishwamitra's instructions were in complete alignment with the scriptures did He execute them.

like the trident of Yama, the God of death. The sight of such a ghastly being did not arouse any respect or veneration in Rama.

As she hurtled closer to Rama, she seemed like a tornado running into a mountain. Rama stood still, aiming an arrow at her. Suddenly, He was overwhelmed by compassion. It dawned upon Him that the first person He had to kill in this incarnation was a woman. Instead of killing her, He decided to get rid of her impudence. As Rama was pondering, Tataka went wild and hurled a storm of stones toward the brothers. Rama, while evading the stones, swiftly released arrows that chopped off her arms, whereas Lakshmana's arrows struck off her nose and ears. Tataka realized she was now courting defeat, so she swirled up dust and disappeared and tried to trick the princes by pelting stones at them from different directions simultaneously.

Vishwamitra immediately understood that although Rama had agreed to kill Tataka, compassion and righteousness were holding Him from killing a woman. Vishwamitra urged Rama to relinquish His misplaced compassion as this was no innocent woman who had to be protected but a sinister evil that had to be destroyed. He reminded Rama that her powers would multiply with the setting sun and that there were only few minutes to sunset, after which it would be difficult to destroy her.

Rama realized then that Vishwamitra was right; His compassion was coming in the way of the larger cause. Tataka was still invisible and hurling stones from different directions. She laughed out loud at Rama's plight. No sooner than she laughed, she realized her fatal mistake. Rama immediately released an arrow toward the source of the sound. The arrow was as effective as the curse of a sage; it pierced through her heart and tore out of her back and flew into the sky.¹⁷

¹⁷ The arrow whizzed out through Tataka like advice given by noble people whizzes past foolish people, swiftly disappearing after entering their minds!



Tataka was dead in an instant; her monstrous dismembered body slumped to the ground.

Rama begged Vishwamitra for forgiveness for momentarily having disregarded his instructions and allowed His principles to cloud His judgment. Rama felt that He was an offender in the eyes of His spiritual master and His father, Dasaratha. Vishwamitra was thoroughly impressed with Rama's sincerity in admitting to His faults and begging forgiveness.¹⁸ He was also impressed with Rama's ability to think independently, a crucial quality in a leader.¹⁹

Tataka's death brought much-wanted relief and thawed the whole universe. The demigods, led by Indra, assembled and applauded Rama for eliminating her and rained celestial flowers on the brothers. Indra instructed Vishwamitra to give Rama the rest of the missiles in his possession because He indeed deserved to have them.

With Tataka's death, the beauty and abundance of the forest was immediately restored, just as festivities resume on the homecoming of a long-lost son. A proud and beaming Vishwamitra kissed Rama on His forehead because the destruction of Tataka meant another level of personal victory for Him.

¹⁸ Rama was able to see His own faults and sincerely repent because of them, whereas Vishwamitra was trying to only see the good qualities in Rama. This combination is what makes relationships last during potential misunderstandings.

¹⁹ Rama was in a catch 22 situation, because, for a leader, sensitivity and discipline are of equal importance. Showing sensitivity during a situation that demands disciplinary action is bad governance. A leader needs to seek advice but at the same use his discretion to decide which advice to take. The ability to use discretion is a sign that a leader can be given more responsibility and power.

 THE LAW OF AWARENESS

The law of awareness states that access to knowledge can help an insensitive person become sensitive by allowing the light of true knowledge to exterminate the darkness of ignorance.

Tataka represents ignorance or avidya. Ignorance stems from lack of knowledge and results in a life without a conscience. Like a person in a dark room, a person under the influence of ignorance may not realize the effects of being insensitive to others and may actually take pleasure in tormenting the innocent and terrorizing the helpless.

The solution to darkness is light; similarly, the solution to ignorance is knowledge. The light of knowledge illuminates dark hearts, which leads to the development of a conscience.

The following day at dawn, Vishwamitra told Rama that He was qualified to receive more mystic missiles because of the great level of discretion He had displayed when killing Tataka. He gave Rama, four types of wheels – a wheel that punishes, a wheel that establishes virtue, a wheel that controls time and the wheel of Vishnu. He also gave Rama the thunderbolt weapon of Indra, trident missiles of Shiva, the *brahma sirsha* missile of Brahma, two maces named *modaki* and *shikari*, three nooses called *dharma pasa*, *kaala pasa* and *varuna pasa*. In addition to these, he gave Him innumerable weapons of various shapes and powers. All weapons appeared in front of Rama in person, requesting that He use them at His will. Each weapon expressed its desire and eagerness to serve Him. Rama accepted all of them and instructed the missiles to leave and appear whenever He called for them. Rama bowed to Vishwamitra in gratitude.



vishwamitra's river sister

After handing over to Rama all the celestial weapons he had in his possession, Vishwamitra told them that it was about time they continued onward to their destination. From the banks of the Ganga, they reached the banks of another river named Kaushiki. Rama wanted to know the story of this river that was adored by the demigods as well. Vishwamitra began describing the ancient tale about the river's formation. Brahma had given birth to a son named Kusa, whose wonderful qualities led him to become the emperor of the world. His wife Vaidharbhi and he had four sons, Kusa (his first son was also named Kusa), Kusanabha, Adhurta and Vasu. Of these sons, Kusanabha had a hundred beautiful daughters. Once, in the peak of their youth, when they were playing in a garden, Vayu, the wind God, happened to see them. He fell madly in love with all of them and asked them to marry him. He gloated about his power, position and influence over the world. The girls bowed to him in respect but said that they would have to take the father's consent, and only if he, the great Kusanabha, allowed would they marry him. Vayu did not expect to be snubbed by the girls; he lost his temper. To teach them a lesson, he broke their backbones, leaving them writhing in extreme pain. Kusanabha was immensely agonized by Vayu's arrogance and his daughters' pain. He was also proud that they had not compromised on the prestige of the family and knew how to uphold its glory.

Kusanabha arranged for his daughters to be married to a great sage named Brahmadata. Soon after the wedding, one touch by Brahmadata healed the girls' backs.²⁰ Kusanabha now wanted a son so he performed a sacrifice in the hope of fathering one. He was eventually blessed with an effulgent son named Gadhi whom he crowned king before leaving in pursuit of spiritual aspirations. Gadhi

had two children – Kaushiki, a beautiful girl, and Vishwamitra, the sage himself.

Vishwamitra's sister Kaushiki was married to sage Richika, the son of the great sage Bhrigu. Richika spent some time with Kaushiki and then left for Brahmaloaka. Kaushiki could not bear the separation from her husband. Through austerities and penances, she took the form of a river to be able to follow him to heaven. When Richika saw his wife transform into a river to follow him, he encouraged her to remain on Earth as a river and continue to serve humanity. Richika then returned to Brahmaloaka never to return again. Vishwamitra touched the waters of the Kaushiki river; the river was his own sister. Rama and Lakshmana were spellbound on hearing a story so close to their teacher's life.²¹ They were grateful to him for sharing a piece of his own life, and bowed to the holy river – the holy sister of their teacher.

²⁰ The inability to realize personal agenda drives us to break others' backs and also their hearts. A selfless heart is not interested in pleasantries, but in the opportunity to serve; such a selfless heart can restore real beauty. The selfish Vayu broke the back of the hundred daughters of Kusanabha, whereas the mere touch of a selfless Brahmadatta restored their real beauty.

²¹ The way children behave reflects the values and culture of their families. Gadhi, an ideal king, lived a life of servitude toward his citizens; his children Vishwamitra and Kaushiki adopted the culture of service and lived to serve the society. While Kaushiki became a river to serve people through her waters, quenching their thirst and purifying them, Vishwamitra became a sage to serve people through his knowledge, purifying the world through his sacrifices. Such selfless lives attracted the appreciation of Lord Rama.

a hermitage of perfection

In the distance, Rama and Lakshmana spotted a hermitage surrounded by a beautiful, lush forest. As always, they turned to Vishwamitra for answers to questions buzzing in their heads.

Vishwamitra told them about the purity and significance of the hermitage. This hermitage was thousands of years old, dating back to the time of Lord Vishnu. Even Lord Vishnu had performed austerities here for thousands of years. Vishwamitra narrated the story of Bali.

Led by a king named Bali, the demons attacked the heavens and displaced the demigods from their kingdom. The distressed demigods took refuge under Vishnu and asked Him to help them regain their lost glory. Lord Vishnu agreed.

At that same time, somewhere nearby, a couple was performing austerities. They were Kasyapa and his wife Aditi, the mother of the demigods. Pleased with their sincerity and devotion, Lord Vishnu appeared before them and granted them a boon of their choice. Kasyapa in fact had two wishes. One that Lord Vishnu be born as his son and become the younger brother of Indra, the king of the demigods. The other that the place be named Siddhashram or 'Hermitage of Perfection' because it was in this hermitage that he had attained perfection by finding a personal audience with the Lord. Lord Vishnu granted him both his wishes. Soon Lord Vishnu manifested as Vaamana, the dwarf son of Kasyapa. Vaamana also resided in this hermitage and performed austerities.

One day while traversing the forest, Vaamana reached the place the demon Bali was performing an elaborate fire sacrifice. He went there as a *brahmana*, begging for alms. The extremely charitable Bali asked

the *brahmana* to wish for anything. Bali's spiritual master, Shukaracharya, who could see through the entire trick, warned his pupil about making the promise to Vaamana because the dwarf was none other than Vishnu, the protector of demigods. Bali, however, ignored the pleas of his spiritual master. To him, being granted the opportunity to serve the Supreme Lord was more important than paying heed to his spiritual master who was in fact trying to disconnect him from God. Bali extended his promise to Vaamana, who promptly asked him for three steps of land. Bali was surprised by the "tiny" request. Three steps, is that all the Lord wanted? As soon as Bali granted Vaamana the wish, the tiny dwarf grew in size to become Trivikrama, and with just two steps, covered the entire universe – by extending His body, He covered the entire sky, and with His hands, He covered all directions; with His second step, He covered the heavens; for His third footstep, there was no place. So He turned to Bali to ask him where He was to place the third step. Bali now understood what had happened and placed his own head under the feet of Vaamana, allowing himself to be pushed out of this world. Vaamana was so pleased with Bali's offer of his head for His third step that He decided to shower him with rewards for such genuine devotion and sincerity.

Vaamana offered Bali the entire Satalaloka to rule over and promised to personally become the guard at the gates of Bali *maharaja's* palace and protect him. That was not all. Vaamana knew of Bali's intense desire to become king of the heavens, so he assured him that he would be king after Indra's reign.

Bali was extremely happy with these gifts for he realized that Vaamana had given him more than He had taken from him. Before departing for Satalaloka, though, Bali had one last request: that he be allowed to return to his earthly kingdom once a year to visit his citizens.



Vaamana granted him that wish.²² Bali thus surrendered his ego to Vaamana and became a great devotee of the Lord. Vishwamitra explained to the princes that after granting deliverance to Bali and returning the kingdom to the demigods, Vaamana came to this very hermitage to rest.

And after thousands of years, the *ashram* had fallen under the care of Vishwamitra and his disciples. Vishwamitra told Rama that this hermitage was as much Rama's as it was his, indicating that the hermitage actually belonged to Rama and that he was just a caretaker. Rama had previously appeared here as Vishnu to perform austerities and later as Vaamana to deliver Bali. Now Rama had come back to His own abode following Vishwamitra.²³

²² In accordance to the desire of Bali, Vaamana permitted him to visit his kingdom, which is considered to be modern day Kerala, India. This return of Bali to his kingdom is celebrated every year as Onam. The only reason Bali wanted to come to his kingdom was to see if his citizens were prosperous and lived a life of purity and devotion to the Lord.

²³ The story of Vishwamitra and Bali are similar in the sense that they both surrendered to the Supreme Lord. But the manner in which they surrendered was different. Bali was forced by Vaamana to surrender by rendering him helpless. Lord Vishnu had to go through so much trouble to get Bali to surrender. He had to incarnate, He had to beg from Bali and He had to extend His feet all over the universe. But Vishwamitra voluntarily went to Ayodhya and requested Dasaratha to allow Rama to accompany him. During the course of the journey, Vishwamitra surrendered each of his possessions, one by one, to Lord Rama. Either one takes shelter of the Lord voluntarily to become glorious or one waits for the Lord's powers to create a situation of helplessness to ensure the outcome of surrender.

 THE LAW OF TRUSTEESHIP

The law of trusteeship teaches us that ownership does not imply control (Rama owned but did not control) and control does not imply ownership (Vishwamitra controlled but did not claim ownership).

Proprietorship is actually illusory and at best temporary. When one is not permanent in this world, how can one claim permanent proprietorship? Things of this world do not really belong to anyone; merely one can consider himself a trustee.

Vishwamitra realized that though he was in possession of the Siddhashram, the real proprietor was Lord Rama. Vishwamitra was at best, a trustee; thus, he decided to relinquish his claim of proprietorship over the ashram that really did not belong to him.

The law of trusteeship helps you handle any property (everything including life itself) that comes your way with respect (because it belongs to God) and at the same time with detachment (because, ultimately, it does not belong to you).

vishwamitra's sacrifice begins

Vishwamitra told Rama and Lakshmana that Siddhashram was where he desired to complete his long-pending sacrifice for the welfare of the world for which he needed their help. Rama requested Vishwamitra to immediately start preparing for the sacrifice. He assured Vishwamitra that He would protect the sacrifice from the demons.

Vishwamitra took a vow of silence till the completion of the sacrifice. As the sage began making arrangements, Rama began preparing for the battle ahead. He asked other sages about the demons and the



source, location and time of the attacks. The sages warned Rama and Lakshmana that the demons could attack anytime of the day and from anywhere. They advised them to stay focused and not let even a moment of inattention interrupt them for the next six days. A tiny gap in alertness was all the demons needed to create havoc and destroy the sacrifice.

Rama and Lakshmana kept their eyes peeled on the sacrificial arena. Their job of protecting the sacrifice was akin to the function of eyelids protecting eyeballs. The boys guarded the sacrificial arena just as the eyelids are ever watchful and do not let anything enter the eyes. Lakshmana was stationed at the gate, while Rama walked the flanks. Every time Rama reached the gate, He would alert Lakshmana by gently touching him. Lakshmana was like the stationary lower lid and Rama the constantly blinking upper lid. Just as the upper lid travels all the way up to the top of the eye and then comes all the way down to touch the lower lid, Rama walked from one end of the arena right up to the gate to nudge Lakshmana. The sacrificial altar was the constantly protected eyeball.²⁴

²⁴ From another perspective, this is a metaphor – good advisors (sages), when pouring good advice (clarified butter) into a mind (sacrificial arena), are harassed by faultfinders (demons) who try to corrupt the mind (sacrificial arena) by filling it with contaminated thoughts (blood) and filthy words (flesh). Rama and Lakshmana considered the sacrifice very valuable for the welfare of society – just as the eyelids know how valuable the eyes are for the overall welfare of the body. When the value is immense, it is imperative that alertness, too, be continuous. The guard positions of Rama and Lakshmana symbolize alert intelligence that constantly watches out for faultfinders and prevents the mind from being contaminated by them and allows the mind to become purified by the good advisors. A moment of inattention on the part of the intelligence can allow a contaminated thought to pollute the mind.

Six long days and nights passed under the alert vigil of Rama and Lakshmana. Nothing seemed to occur, and it seemed that the sages had worried needlessly. As the last day approached, the flames in the sacrificial altar blazed ferociously right up to the sky as Vishwamitra poured in the last oblation of clarified butter. And as the flames erupted vigorously, they infused a new energy into the sacrificial arena. Everyone's face shone with brilliance and filled with anticipation like that of a calf on seeing its mother's udders.

Just when everyone was basking in the brilliance of the fire, a sudden shriek ripped the atmosphere.²⁵ Rama, also known as *Rajivalochana*, had lotus-like ability to spot the sun from a distance. Now He could see the fierce demons sweeping down from a distance. The moment He spotted Maricha and Subahu, He warned Lakshmana to be on guard. The much-awaited assault began. Rama and Lakshmana had been waiting eagerly for six continuous days; they could at last use their mystic weapons.

All hell broke loose, and the ascetics scrambled toward Rama for protection. The cool and composed Rama raised His right hand, His pinkish palms facing the sages in the unmistakable *abhaya mudra* (an indication of protection). Lord Rama's protective palm evoked smiles of triumph in the sages.²⁶

²⁵ The most vulnerable time for mistakes is when victory is close at hand. Intelligence is required to stop the mind from getting carried away by the proximity to success.

²⁶ This was the first instance of Rama showing this sign in this incarnation. Body language gives away the state of mind. The sages went with folded hands in a state of fear and Rama stood with open palms in a state of confidence. Rama's pose gave the sages much-needed assurance.



Maricha and Subahu, the avenging sons of Tataka, were leading hoards of demons to swoop down and destroy the sacrifice. The demons had four fangs, two of which covered their lower lips, their hair was coppery red and their eyes rolled, emitting fire. They covered the sacrificial arena with pseudo fires and false black clouds and created an artificial rain of blood. With blood came a shower of arrows, spears and battle-axes. Water, too, began to pour along with huge chunks of mountain peaks. The demons used their hands and mouths to sully the sacrificial fire. They hurled stones, rocks and dirt at the arena with their hands and abuses with their foul mouths. Interestingly, the demons could not descend over the sacrificial arena because of the power and purity of the sages' *mantras*; hence they continued attacking suspended in air.²⁷

The demons became even more spiteful because of their helplessness in being able to descend on Earth. But when they started throwing huge quantities of blood and flesh toward the sacrificial fire, Rama created a floating canopy of arrows to protect it.

This incensed the demons even more, and they began hurling more things. Finally, having had enough, Rama decided to end the war. He chose a missile known as *manavastra*, empowered it and released it

²⁷ The power of sound vibrations is evident here. All believed in the power of their own sound vibrations. While the demons were confident their foul words and curses would make the intensely spiritual atmosphere impure, the sages believed their *mantras* would keep the demons away. The sages had one advantage though - their purity was enhanced by the presence of the source of their purity, the pure Lord Rama. Because the faith and purity of the sages were very high, the demons did not dare descend on the sacrificial arena.

at Maricha.²⁸ The arrow hit his chest, but instead of penetrating him, it hurled him to a distance of 100 *yojanas* (about 800 miles) and threw him into the ocean.

THE LAW OF DISCRIMINATION

You take unwarranted risks when you become arrogant about your powers. You become overconfident about your safety, undermine the dangers of the task you undertake and over-rely on fallible people for direction.

The danger in taking unguided risks is like jumping off a building, hoping Superman will save you. The risk-taker, in fact, gambles away his life assuming he is safe.

Maricha represents the risk-taking person who depends on his own strengths and illusory powers and takes guidance from wrong mentors like Ravana. He undermines the strength of his opponent and takes reckless risks and faces definite failures.

The law of discrimination appeals to such risk-takers to make an honest self-assessment about their strengths and weaknesses, keep in mind the challenge ahead and abstain from masked friends. Else, the risk one takes may whisk one away from one's goal.

²⁸ The word Maricha means mirage or optical illusions. Just as the sun creates the illusion of the existence of water in a desert, Maricha was adept at creating illusory effects and showing what did not exist. He represented those wrongs committed in this birth that would result in sufferings in the next. Rama flung him very far away. This indicated that when one takes refuge in God, the suffering awaiting him is sent far away. Yet another interpretation suggests that Maricha represented accumulated knowledge; there are unlimited books and resources available to gain knowledge, but such knowledge is only information. Unless knowledge leads to tangible transformation, it is useless.

the battle continues

With Maricha gone, Rama chose yet another missile named *agneyastra*, endowed by Agni, the fire God. He released it at Subahu, who instantly burst into flames and turned into a heap of ashes. With their leaders dead, the other demons began to run pell-mell. Not wanting to leave even a single source of negative power alive, Rama pulled out the *vayavastra*, the missile empowered by Vayu. The missile decimated every single one of the demons. The war was finally over!

The death of the demons dispelled the black mystical clouds of illusion and the sun's rays filled the atmosphere with brightness. The sages of Siddhashram gathered around Rama, Lakshmana and Vishwamitra. The uninterrupted sacrifice was now complete and it was a grand success. The demigods who had been watching the destruction of the demons rained celestial flowers on Rama and Lakshmana. Even the trees in Siddhashram rained flowers on the boys. A relieved and proud Vishwamitra praised Rama for His valor and appreciated Him for keeping His father Dasaratha's promise by protecting the sacrifice.

Vishwamitra knew in his heart that this war was but a small accomplishment in the life of the great Lord Rama. His purpose of bringing Rama all the way from Ayodhya was finally served. The hermitage had regained its original glory and after Vishwamitra's massive sacrifice, become Siddhashram, the place of perfection, yet again.

After six exhausting days of unrest and turmoil, every one retired to peace and tranquility.

THE LAW OF SELF-CONTROL

The law of self-control inspires one to discipline the untamed animalistic mind through the whip of focused intelligence, keeping it within the protective fence of a regulated lifestyle.

When the untamed mind escapes the protective fence and the ever-cracking whip, it instinctively resorts to animalistic behavior with unruly desires. An uncontrolled mind loses focus and commits gross and subtle errors, mistaking the powerful to be weak and the unattractive to be attractive.

Subahu represents the disruptive person who makes the mistake of considering the powerful Rama to be weak. A whim-driven reckless and fenceless lifestyle leads such a person to disregard the intelligence of discipline.

The law of self-control helps discipline the unregulated mind through resolute intelligence. A regulated lifestyle based on spiritual principles acts as a fence that keeps unlawful tendencies at bay.



A RIVER OF TALES



departure from siddhashram

The next morning, the now-peaceful Siddhashram was buzzing with activity. Basking in the light of regained freedom, the sages and their students went about their daily chores with great gusto. Rama and Lakshmana, after their morning prayers, went and bowed to Vishwamitra and urged for more opportunities to serve him. His disciples' eagerness to serve stoked him and his face glowed with happiness.

Much of the hectic activity at the *ashram* had to do with the sages preparing to go to Mithila. King Janaka, the king of Mithila, had planned a special *yajna*. The sages urged Rama and Lakshmana to accompany them because they wanted the boys to have a glimpse of the biggest attraction of this *yajna* – Saivachapa, the legendary and much-talked-about marvellous bow of Lord Shiva. The mere mention of such a powerful bow captivated the two boys, just like butterflies captivate a toddler. Every sage had something or the other to say about the glorious and extraordinary bow. It was extremely heavy and was unstrung at one end, as if imperfect and incomplete; it almost seemed as if it lay there awaiting a worthy archer to string it and make it perfect and whole again.

Lord Shiva had handed over the bow to the celestial beings after his

fight with Daksha. The celestial beings in turn had handed it down to King Devavrata (ancestor of King Janaka) as a reward for successfully performing a *yajna*. Since then, the bow had adorned the court of Mithila. People from everywhere visited Mithila to catch a glimpse of the famed bow. Demigods, *gandharvas*, *yaksas*, *rakshasas* and innumerable princes all tried to lift the bow and string it, all in vain. The bow story excited Rama and Lakshmana, and they were only too eager to undertake the long trip to Mithila.

Vishwamitra began preparing to leave; he called the presiding deities of the forest and bade them farewell, knowing he would never return to the forest. He paid his respects to them and expressed deep gratitude for being allowed to its unlimited resources and being made to feel at home. Vishwamitra's mind was brimming with all the wonderful memories and enchanting chronicles attached with Siddhashram. No matter how deep his affection was for the *ashram*, he had to leave because a larger purpose awaited him; he decided to head northward toward the boundless Himalayan mountains.¹

Vishwamitra's disciples arranged hundred cart-loads full of worship equipment and ingredients for the onward journey. The great sage walked ahead of the entire caravan. Every animal and every bird of the forest kept following them to bid them adieu. As the boundary neared, Vishwamitra turned around and asked them to return to their homes.² The heavy-hearted animals and birds returned to their homes, as the sages continued onward to the northern banks of Ganga.

¹ Respect is natural when one sees divinity in everything and everyone. The outcome of such respect is gratitude.

² It appeared as if these animals were giving a loving send-off to their dear relatives. To love God, we must love everything that God loves to the same degree as we love God. When one lives a genuine life of love toward every living entity, the reciprocation one experiences is also genuine.

With no halts in between, the caravan traveled on until they reached the banks of river Sona that evening. Rama was enthralled by the beauty of the place and turned to Vishwamitra for details. Vishwamitra recounted stories about his own ancestors and told Rama that the land was his ancestors', all of whom were pious kings. The sages accompanying Vishwamitra praised him and his lineage for their service to humanity. Rama, too, bowed in reverence of His teacher's lineage. As night fell, everyone went off to sleep as birds would in their nests with the setting sun.

lessons on crossing a river

As the rising sun heralded dawn over the Sona river, the entourage woke up and prepared to continue with their journey. While crossing the river, Rama noticed that it was shallow at some places and deep at others. He assumed that a boat was not necessary to cross a river that was full of so many sand dunes at the shallow points. He took his suggestion to Vishwamitra whose prompt reply was: "Follow the path laid down by the great sages of the past."³

³ Profound insight lay within Vishwamitra's spontaneous reply. A spiritual aspirant does not need to invent newer ways of perfecting his life but needs only follow the path established by great spiritual authorities. Some paths may seem easy, but they may in fact conceal quicksands that suck away the enthusiasm to practice spiritual life. Furthermore, some paths may seem tough initially, but they may in fact be safe and secure because they have already been trod upon by great authorities, who had left clues to crossing arduous paths with relative ease. Hence, always ask an authority before treading on any path, and you may find valuable clues of experience!



lessons in ganga's story

The entourage traveled for half a day more since crossing the Sona river, when suddenly, the most profound vision unfolded before them – it was Ganga, the holiest of all rivers. The sages were immensely delighted to have a glimpse of this holy river.⁴

The sages, along with Vishwamitra and Rama and Lakshmana, stopped to enter the pristine waters of Ganga to take a holy dip. Each cupped a palm full of water from the holy river and in obeisance offered it back to the river.⁵

As the day gave way to dusk, Rama sat at Vishwamitra's feet, eager to hear the story of Ganga's appearance on earth.⁶ Vishwamitra was aware that Rama already knew the story; nonetheless, he began narrating the tale of Ganga with great enthusiasm to impart a lesson in eagerness to others through this story.

Himavan, the king of the mountains, was married to Manorama, the daughter of Mount Meru. They were blessed with two beautiful and virtuous daughters, Ganga and Uma. Impressed by Ganga's purity,

⁴ The ambience of holy places invariably fills a human with delight because these places are reservoirs of spiritual vibrations emitted by thousands of spiritual personalities from the past.

⁵ To gain favor from a person, you should offer something in return with love and devotion. There cannot be a more appropriate gift to offer Ganga than its own waters, implying these thoughts: "I do not possess anything that maybe a worthy gift to give you, the one who has given me so much. So let me offer your own waters to you, added with my love and devotion. Please accept it and purify me."

⁶ Eagerness to gain knowledge is the prerequisite to becoming knowledgeable.

the celestial beings requested Himavan to send his daughter to serve the heavenly planets. Ganga then became a holy river in the world of demigods. Meanwhile, Uma performed austerities to become the wife of Lord Shiva. Soon they had a son named Kartikeya.

On Earth, King Sagara, an ancestor of Lord Rama, ruled Ayodhya. Sagara and his wives, Keshini and Sumati, went to the Himalayas to perform austerities. After long years of penance, Sage Brighu appeared before them and blessed them with a boon – a son named Asmanja for Kesini and 60,000 sons for Sumati.

Asmanja grew up to be a very destructive and violent child, and his greatest pleasure came from killing innocent children by flinging them into running waters. Exasperated and disgusted with the incurable hostility in Asmanja, Sagara cast him out of the kingdom.⁷ On the contrary, Asmanja's son, Anshuman, was very good and obedient.

Sagara wanted to conduct a horse sacrifice for the welfare of the world. Because of Indra's vicious conspiracy⁸, the horse meant for the sacrifice suddenly disappeared. Sagara ordered his 60,000 sons to find the horse; his sons searched every nook and corner of Earth without much success. So, hoping to find it in the nether world, they began digging the earth, creating huge craters in the process. They finally

⁷ A leader determines right and wrong based on the greater good his actions can do for the welfare of society.

⁸ Sagara's sacrifice was for world peace, but Indra had to disrupt it, as was Indra's habit with any such ceremony anyone else conducted. Whenever huge sacrifices were conducted across the world, Indra felt the person conducting it would be empowered and would eventually usurp him. Always assuming his reign was at stake, Indra did everything in his power to sabotage every sacrifice he thought threatening.



found the horse in the nether world. Seated next to the horse in peaceful meditation was sage Kapila. Mistaking him to be the horse thief, they attacked him. But this hasty attack cost them their lives, and they were reduced to ashes.⁹

Up above on Earth, Sagara began worrying about the prolonged absence of his sons. He asked his grandson, Anshuman, to go in search of them. When Anshuman found the truth, he was deeply pained by the unfortunate death of his uncles. A distraught Anshuman wanted to purify the souls of his dead uncles and needed water for that. As a downcast Anshuman searched the nether world for water, Garuda, the bird carrier of Lord Vishnu and, incidentally, his grandmother Sumati's brother, came to his aid. He told Anshuman to take the horse back to complete the sacrifice. The completion of the sacrifice was important because his uncles had sacrificed their lives for it. Garuda also told Anshuman that because his uncles had been too violent and mauled Earth, no water other than Ganga's could wash off their sins. And for that, the heavenly Ganga would have to be made to flow on Earth.

Sagara completed the sacrifice successfully but he was too deeply hurt to think of another penance to bring Ganga down to Earth. He left the kingdom to Anshuman when he came of age. Anshuman was constantly driven by the anxiety of getting Ganga to flow on Earth so his uncles, lying as heaps of ashes for so many years, could be purified by the touch of the holy water. But he, too, could not convince Ganga to wash off his uncles' sins, so his son, Dileepa, inherited his father's unmet desire. Dileepa, too, failed to bring peace to his grand uncles' souls and bequeathed the "Ganga task" to his son, Bhagiratha. By

⁹ Hasty decisions as a result of frustration and lack of clarity can turn even a king into ashes.

now, this unfinished task had become a curse because of the aching and trapped souls of Sagara's sons. Bhagiratha took it upon himself to complete the task his ancestors could not. He reached Mount Gokarna in the Himalayas and performed years of austerities in the severest of conditions. He succeeded in pleasing Brahma, who appeared before him and acceded to his request of letting Ganga descend on Earth, but on one condition: Bhagiratha would also have to perform austerities to please Lord Shiva, so that the Lord would bear Ganga on his head to withstand the impact of her descent, the force of which would be too much for Earth to bear.

Bhagiratha then channelized his time and energy in appeasing Lord Shiva, and finally, the Lord agreed to absorb Ganga's ravaging flow. Lord Shiva held Ganga in his knotted dreadlocks and released her into the Bindu lake, distributing her as six streams. The seventh stream of Ganga followed Bhagiratha's chariot to where his ancestors' ashes lay. Along the way, the chariot traversed through plains, mountain ranges, forests and rocky terrain. Flowing rapidly and unhindered, Ganga unintentionally destroyed Jahnu *muni's* hermitage. The sage became furious and drank up the entire river.¹⁰ Bhagiratha pleaded repeatedly for the release of Ganga. After constant apologies, the sage consented, releasing her through his ears. This rebirth from Jahnu *muni's* ears gave Ganga another name - Jahnavi! After years of effort and a long arduous trail, Bhagiratha

¹⁰ Focusing on the goal while on the path of success could lead you to ignore minor details. These minor details could end up swallowing the pride of achieving your goal.



managed to bring Ganga to flow upon the ashes of his ancestors who were finally free from their offense against Kapila.¹¹

As on all nights before this, Vishwamitra narrated enchanting stories from the past and lulled the boys to sleep.

the glorious mithila

The next morning, the entourage woke up early for they had to cross the wide Ganga to reach a beautiful city called Vishala. The king of Vishala, Sumati, stepped out of his palace to greet the venerable sage Vishwamitra and his fellow travellers. The king was charmed by the amazing personas of Rama and Lakshmana. From the *rishis* traveling with Vishwamitra he heard of their brave conquests at Siddhashram. Impressed, he requested the entourage to spend the night in his kingdom and accept his hospitality.

At daybreak, the caravan trail made its way toward the glorious city of Mithila. As Mithila became visible in the horizon, the sages broke into a broad smile. Destination, at last! The glistening temple domes, the fluttering flags, the immaculate pathways all exemplified the greatness of the king ruling the city. The name Mithila evoked immediate reverence because it was a famous temple town, the town

¹¹ Bhagiratha is the epitome of determination, as seen in the way he achieved his goal. The path to perfection is filled with unlimited impediments. Success, more than contemplation, requires determined action. Bhagiratha made every effort to wash away his ancestors' sins, but the act itself was purely self-centered. Yet he had this genuine desire to serve the people, like all his ancestors before him. This resulted in his effort to serve humanity through a gift named Ganga.

that housed Saivachapa. Hordes flocked to the city every day to pay homage to the majestic bow.

Mithila's outskirts were equally captivating – picturesque gardens, lush fields, glistening lakes carpeted with blue and pink water lilies, flocks of magnificent birds and disciplined row after row of *ashoka* trees lining the pathways. Trees were filled with nectar-oozing flowers that lured black wasps and bees to hover over them and take some of their nectar to make honey. When the buffaloes stepped into Mithila's rivers, their milk mingled with the pristine waters. Golden mangoes on the banks spewed sweet nectarine juice into the flowing waters as did sugarcane juice and honey from honeycombs. It seemed as if the river had milk and juice and honey and not water!

the stone damsel

Along the way were many mango orchards and groves of fruits trees. Vishwamitra took Rama and Lakshmana on a detour into one such thicket, just at the edge of the city of Mithila. Nestled in it was a dilapidated and deserted hermitage. The hermitage seemed like it had seen better and glorious days. But just as old age envelops the beauty of a living being, uneasy crinkles and furrows had swamped the hermitage of its glory. This pit stop seemed uncalled for, but Vishwamitra had taken Rama there for a purpose.

As always, Rama wanted to know about the history of the hermitage, and Vishwamitra embarked upon an old, related story. Years ago, Lord Brahma had created through his imagination the extremely beautiful Ahalya. She was natural beauty personified – each of her features seemed exquisitely carved, her appearance most astounding. In fact, she was Lord Brahma's most fascinating creation.



Lord Brahma wanted only the most qualified groom for his dearest daughter Ahalya. All the demigods, including Indra wanted to marry her and were willing to go to any extent to become her husband. Lord Brahma thought it wiser to hold a competition to assess the suitor's worth and choose the right groom. He declared that the one to circumambulate the world fastest would receive his daughter's hand in marriage.

All the demigods jumped into the fray; they mounted their divine vehicles and set off with hopes of victory in the race. Gautama *rishi*, a sage of divine origin, was one such competitor. Wise that he was, he had a different "time-saving" interpretation of the task. Gautama *rishi* circled a cow instead! His logic: Mother cow represents the entire universe. Lord Brahma was floored by Gautama *rishi's* knowledge and comprehension of the scriptures as well as his wisdom.¹² Lord Brahma gave his daughter's hand to the ideal groom, Gautama, much to Indra's consternation.

Gautama *rishi* took his new bride, Ahalya, to this very hermitage and began his spiritual pursuits with her by his side. Indra, however, was so besotted by the beauty of Ahalya that he could not get her out of his mind. He was still nursing his wounds and did not want to give up on Ahalya so easily and was waiting for the opportune moment to exploit her.

The impatient Indra could wait no longer. He "forced" an opportune moment instead. One day, in the wee hours, Indra imitated cock-crowing to announce daybreak.¹³ Gautama *rishi* responded to the call,

¹² Wisdom is the application of the deeper truths of life in a way that is practical. The demigods were trying to be technically correct, but Gautama *rishi* was practically correct. It requires wisdom to match expectations.

¹³ The more you ponder over things that your mind is obsessed with, the more the mind churns out ways to acquire that thing.

woke up and proceeded to the river for his ritual bath. The moment Indra was waiting for had finally arrived. He morphed into Gautama *rishi*, entered the hermitage and expressed his desire to make love to Ahalya.

Ahalya, immediately realized that it was an imposter because her husband was too disciplined and focused to make such a request at such an untimely hour. She at once knew it was Indra. She felt flattered that Indra, the king of the demigods, was smitten by her. Besides, she found Indra's charms irresistible. Although in her head, she battled hard to fend off the raging passion, she eventually succumbed to temptation unable to curb her uncontrollable lust for Indra or resist his ardent advances.¹⁴

When all passion was spent, Ahalya realized the horrible reality of her actions; she knew she had sinned. Soon the burden of guilt weighed down on her lust for Indra. She tore herself away from the demigod and urged him to leave right away, lest her husband came and destroyed them both. As she pushed Indra away from her, she implored him to keep their transgression a secret.¹⁵

Hard as he tried to avoid any repercussions, Indra knew he would have to bear the consequences of his actions. He was suddenly aware of the dangerous predicament he was in and could not ignore the possibility of Gautama *rishi* returning home any moment. No sooner than this thought ran through Indra's mind, Gautama *rishi* had stepped into the hermitage to the sight of an imposter and his wife in

¹⁴ Justification is the mind's way of overpowering the discretion of intelligence; however, justification when combined with lust for enjoyment makes the operation irreversible.

¹⁵ Shamelessness hides the tricks of the mind. The mind tricks you into an impulsive moment of weakness. It is only after the trick is executed that guilt creeps in disgracefully.

embrace. The wise sage knew what had transpired and he could sense intense anger building up inside him. An extremely embarrassed Indra tried to dodge Gautama's fiery eyes. Indra even tried to slip out in the form of a cat but in vain. Indra could not move; the guilt of immorality froze him.¹⁶

The incensed Gautama *rishi* hissed like a trampled snake. It might have been possible for Indra to dodge an arrow, but not Gautama's curse; Indra was cursed to become a eunuch. Gautama then turned to his mortified wife and cursed her into an inert stone.¹⁷

Ahalya begged and pleaded for forgiveness and was sincerely remorseful of her gross mistake. Gautama *rishi* was moved by her sincerity and justified her act as momentary weakness. But the curse had been pronounced and could not be undone. Gautama was angry but felt compassionate toward Ahalya. He told her that at some point in future Lord Rama would visit the hermitage to redeem her from the curse and help her reunite with him. Ahalya then turned into a stone instantly and Gautama *rishi* left the hermitage for the Himalayas.

¹⁶ It was an encounter of the Pure with the Impure. The persona of Gautama *rishi* reflected innocence while that of Indra reflected guilt and fear. Gautama *rishi*, radiated purity having just bathed in the Ganga, while Indra's face reflected the dark shame of immorality. Compromising on integrity for cheap worldly thrills leads to fear and guilt. Guilt engulfs the mind like spreading ink on blotting paper.

¹⁷ Ahalya's actions reflected the hard-heartedness of a stone; she deservedly became one. A stone-hearted person is selfish and is concerned with self-enjoyment. Gautama *rishi* realized that she was afflicted by the attention-seeking disease and false sense of pride. Because no one pays attention to a stone, cursing her into a stone was to cure her of her "illness." Gautama *rishi* simply saw her as a patient with a disease. The cure for her disease was a tonic called repentance, which she had already started consuming. Soon the disease would vanish.

Vishwamitra had been narrating the entire story standing near the very stone that was Ahalya. He pointed toward the stone that had been waiting for ages, praying every moment for the touch of Rama's lotus feet. Vishwamitra urged Rama to place His feet on her and exonerate her. As soon as Lord Rama placed His feet slowly upon the stone, Ahalya stirred back to life, her beauty restored. Ahalya had tears of gratitude as she thanked Lord Rama for having freed her despite her heinous sin.¹⁸ For her, Rama was a father who gave her a fresh lease of life, a new birth. She rushed into the hermitage to arrange for a ceremonial welcome for Rama. Ahalya's glorious husband, Gautama *rishi*, also returned and was happy to be reunited with her.¹⁹

¹⁸ Continuous repentance for her mistake and incessant reminiscence of Lord Rama's name purified Ahalya of all her corrupt proclivities.

¹⁹ Tataka's slaying demonstrated the power of Lord Rama's arms, whereas Ahalya's deliverance demonstrated the power of His feet. Both women who had committed mistakes, but Lord Rama's treatment toward both differed. Repentance was what made the difference: Tataka never repented for her mistakes, Ahalya did. This episode instills hope in us that even a sinner has a future, provided he is sincerely repentant.

In terms of practical application, one can learn to be vigilant against the whims of the mind. Indra is compared to the mind and Gautama to intelligence associated with wisdom that helps one differentiate. Ahalya is compared to an individual. If an individual uses his intelligence, he can transform this world; but if the connection with mind is strong then there can only be a strong exhibition of selfishness. The moment an individual connects with the mind too strongly, the intellect abandons him, and he becomes inert like a stone. It is only a momentary impulse under whose influence the individual turns away from the shelter of intelligence to accept the whims of the mind. When the inert individual comes in constant connection with spiritual sound vibrations, the desire to serve God arises and the opportunity to do so follows.



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Cover illustration: Rama and Lakshmana protect Vishwamitra's rites from Maricha and Subahu

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