

# What Our Gurus Taught Us



# What Our Gurus Taught Us

Stories from Hinduism's  
Great Teachers

Renuka Narayanan

 juggernaut

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## What the Thunder Says

In one of the oldest of old Indian books, the main 'action' in the story is the longing to know. Its characters yearn for knowledge about the universe and its ways, and attempt to identify and state mankind's place in the scheme of things through discussing a moral and spiritual code. The name of the book means 'The Teachings of the Great Wilderness' and, among other topics, it speculates on the causes of creation. It argues that there was nothing in the beginning, but beyond the matter and energy that now exist there is a Super-Consciousness or Super-Self or 'Supersoul' at work. This book is the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*, a collection of Sanskrit parables, pensées, hymns and philosophical debates, in six sections. This key book in Hindu theology

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is believed to have been authored around 700 BCE by the ancient lawgiver Rishi Yajnavalkya, part-author of the holy book *Yajur Veda*. In the fifth section of the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*, Yajnavalkya teaches his students the nature of human duty through the story ‘What the Thunder Says’.

Brahma the Creator, hailed as Prajapati, the All-Father, had created three races – the celestials, the humans and the titans, called deva, manushya and asura in Sanskrit. They were made to respectively inhabit the three realms of the universe – the celestial world called Swarg, the earth in the middle called Prithvi and the netherworld called Patal.

Proud to be born and eager to please, the three races meditated together before they went in a body to the All-Father and said, ‘Please instruct us.’

The All-Father accepted their greetings and nodded pleasantly. He looked them over with a critical eye before saying anything.

The celestials were light, airy beings bathed in light. Their realm, which they had named Indralok or Indra’s World after their leader Indra or Sakra, was a fair dominion through which they chased the lightning, played with the thunderclouds and rode the rain. They had



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everything they could possibly want. They were free from hunger, thirst, pain and perspiration. The flower garlands they wore were ever-fresh and their feet did not touch the ground. They had no need to work or toil for anything and they would never grow old and die. There was music and dance in their realm and golden goblets of mead. They were the Immortals to whom the ones below had to offer sacrifice to obtain their favour and cooperation.

The All-Father nodded slightly as he noticed that the devas, particularly their leader Indra, had the beginnings of a crafty, libidinous look about the eye. They had plunged whole-heartedly into enjoyment and wore the raffish air of rakes.

He said to the celestials, 'This is my instruction to you. *Da.*' He said but that one word, *da.*

'Have you understood what I said?' he asked.

'Yes, we understand, All-Father.'

'Well done. Then follow that teaching.'

He looked next at the human beings.

The earthlings were an interdependent race, much weaker than the celestials. Their realm, the earth, was full of danger. They were exposed to the fury of the five elements and the shiftings and heavings of their physical terrain. Mountains rolled great boulders down on them, and mighty rivers broke their banks and washed them

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away with their dwellings of wattle and daub, thatch, wood and stone. Wolves and tigers tore them apart and tiny insects bit their skin, making them itch and scratch in pain. Sickness, old age and death claimed each one of them – no earthling could escape that. They had to think their way through every situation and work very hard to obtain the smallest ease or pleasure.

But though they were clearly interdependent, the earthlings had proved greedy. They wanted to grab everything and hoard everything, be it cows, land or the women of their species. They wanted more and more with every acquisition. They fought and killed each other over the smallest things. Their greed was not merely for material goods. They revelled in saying and doing unkind things merely for the spiteful pleasure of hurting each other.

The All-Father shook his head slightly. A fine mess, there. But what immense potential these puny earthlings possessed did they but know it. With observation and intuitive leaps of imagination followed by hard work, these disgraceful creatures had more creative power than even the celestials. They had the untapped ability to make new things that had never been seen before. And for all its perils and pitfalls, the earth they inhabited was so astoundingly beautiful that even the celestials secretly coveted it. 'I created them in my own image,' thought the

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All-Father fondly. 'They are exasperating but very, very interesting. The devas have a certain...sameness. But my earthlings are wholly unpredictable except in being greedy, and it will be a pleasure to watch them grow and do things. I shall never be bored watching them try to find their better self.'

'Do you want instruction from me?' he asked them, putting on a stern face.

'Yes, All-Father, we do,' they chorused.

'Da,' he said again. 'Did you get my meaning?'

'Yes, All-Father, we did.'

'Very good! Now go forth and follow this instruction.'

It was the turn of the titans next, a lumbering, muscle-flexing lot, gigantic in size with strong, simple hearts. The asuras loved their realm Patal, which was beautiful with many treasures. Precious stones and minerals glowed and sparkled on their walls, silvery underground streams cooled the air and great iridescent serpents played with them and told them wonderful stories. But the asuras did not know their own strength and hurt those weaker than themselves. 'They are marvellous beings, capable of greatness. They can teach the devas and manushyas important things. But their fatal flaw is their temper. It makes them cruel,' thought the All-Father. 'However, theirs is an honourable race, too, created to keep the

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universe in balance. If only they were not so jealous of the airy, confident celestials and the puny but persistent earthlings.’

‘Da,’ he said to the titans and, like the others, they meekly answered, ‘Yes, we have understood your meaning.’

‘Go, then, and follow this instruction.’

And this was his meaning, understood differently by each according to their nature, taught Rishi Yajnavalkya.

The celestials understood da as damyata, meaning restraint. The All-Father had told them to exercise self-control on their pleasure-loving natures.

The earthlings understood da as datta, meaning ‘Give, be generous,’ which was the only way for an interdependent species to survive and flourish.

The titans understood da as dayadhvam, ‘Be merciful,’ which instructed them to curb their natural ferocity.

When the thunder rolls ‘Da! Da! Da!’ it echoes the voice of Prajapati, the All-Father, reminding the celestials, earthlings and titans of their eternal watchwords.

## 2

# How the Butcher Taught the Brahmin

The *Vana Parva* or Book of the Forest is the longest section of the ‘the world’s longest epic’, the *Mahabharata*. This was composed mostly by Veda Vyasa around 400 BCE and the *Vana Parva* is the third of the epic’s eighteen sections. Though the *Vana Parva* is very long, with 21 subsections and 324 chapters, it is one of the most popular passages in Indian literature. It vividly describes the adventurous twelve-year stay of the Pandavas in the forest, the lessons they learn there and how the terrors and triumphs of the experience build their character. The parables in it are widely retold as independent stories in the major Indian languages and enacted in

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the traditional performing arts. In this story from the *Vana Parva* that sounds almost contemporary, Rishi Markandeya teaches Yudhishtir, the eldest Pandava prince, about the nature of dharma through the parable of the ascetic, the housewife and the butcher.

There was a very learned brahmin, Kausika by name, who devoted himself for many long years with utmost diligence to the study of the holy books. He sought out the best teachers he could access and was finally able to memorize and flawlessly recite the entire length of the Vedas. A full, proper parayanam or Vedic recitation required tremendous stamina for it took forty-five hours of non-stop chanting. The divine mantras produced so much heat in the body that, unless they had learned to cool their minds into the spiritually realized state of deep and absolute calm called amritsaras, or lake of nectar, many priests were prone to stomach ulcers and had to be dosed daily with day-old rice, buttermilk and ghee to save their stomach lining.

Kausika proved adept at both practising hard austerities and at Vedic chanting. One day, having stationed himself in the shade of a babul tree, he began to recite a portion of the Vedas. As he began, a sarus crane perched high above innocently let fall its droppings on his head. Angered by

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this 'disrespect', Kausika glared at the bird with such fury that the poor creature, unable to bear the blazing heat of his eyes, fell down dead.

Gratified at this evidence of his mental power, Kausika rinsed the bird droppings off his matted locks and sallied forth to beg his lunch from the townsfolk. He stopped outside a small but very trim, clean house and called out the alms-seeker's cry, '*Bhavati bhiksham dehi?*', 'Whoever's there, give me alms.'

'Coming!' he heard a woman's voice call from within and waited expectantly, alms bowl at the ready. The minutes went by but nobody appeared bearing food. Kausika frowned, tutted in impatience and decided to wait just a little longer. After at least a quarter of an hour had passed, the lady of the house appeared at the door smiling, carrying a well-filled plate of food to serve in his alms bowl.

'Greetings, respected sage. I beg your pardon for having kept you waiting,' she said in a pleasant, contrite manner.

But Kausika snapped, 'Why did you not send me on my way? How dare you keep me waiting?' and glared furiously at her.

Nothing whatsoever happened to the housewife. Instead she looked at him thoughtfully. 'Did you think

I, too, was a bird?’ she asked in an amused voice.

Kausika was taken aback. ‘How did you know...’ he said uncertainly.

‘I knew, that’s all. I really did not mean to keep you waiting, you know. My husband is an invalid. He called out for help just as I went to get your food. I had to settle him comfortably, fetch him some water, wait for him to drink it and make sure all was well with him before I could attend to you. Now do you understand? I see that you are very choleric,’ she said.

‘If that’s the case...’ muttered Kausika awkwardly, wonderstruck by this simple, unlettered housewife’s omniscience.

She nodded wisely at him. ‘I think you have a lot of questions, but I must get back to my duties. You have studied the Vedas and Upanishads at great length but the meaning of dharma eludes you still. If you will not take it amiss, my advice to you as a well-wisher is that you go to Mithila and seek out the wise butcher, Dharmavyadha. He will set your feet on the right path.’ She smiled and, making polite obeisance, went away.

Proceeding to Mithila, Kausika wondered what he could possibly learn from a butcher. But his curiosity was fairly caught and to that great city of wise King Janaka he went and inquired after the butcher’s whereabouts.



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He was directed at once to Dharmavyadha's famous meat shop and as he approached, reluctance writ in every bone and muscle, the butcher glanced up and saw him. 'Welcome, O learned guest. The good housewife directed you to me, I see, after the bird was burned by your gaze. I believe she wanted you to discuss the nature of dharma with me. Please come in.'

Kausika was amazed. 'This is my second big surprise,' he told himself. The butcher took him home, made him welcome, seated him comfortably and asked how he could serve him. But Kausika had a question first. 'If you are such a virtuous person, why do you sell meat?' he asked.

'Learned guest, my family has sold meat for generations. There is nothing improper in this. I shrink, personally, from killing any creature, nor can I eat its flesh, just as a man may sell liquor but never touch a drop himself. However, this work, too, is part of society and so I fulfil my hereditary occupation to earn my living. It is not contrary to dharma or right conduct.

'However,' he added, 'though this is my job, I also devote a lot of time to looking after my old parents, who really need me now.'

'Very well, my good man. Please tell me what constitutes dharma.'

'Practising dharma is a combination of two kinds of

actions,’ said the butcher musingly. ‘One is to hold back on negative emotions like anger, greed, jealousy, malice, unrestrained lust and untruth. The other is to be proactive in the good things that build a good atmosphere and also make you feel well, things like politeness, kindness, compassion, giving gladly to the needy, being generally helpful and telling the truth – the virtues that hold society together.’

‘Hmm. Yes, that does make sense. I see that you not only know dharma but practise it. I am amazed that you knew about me and so did the housewife, as if by divine insight. How did that happen?’ asked Kausika.

‘I am glad you recognize the spiritual attainment of that good lady. We don’t know each other but she could tell you about me, and I knew that she had, through intuitive awareness. May I now give you some personal advice, if you will not be offended?’ said Dharmavyadha.

‘No, please do tell me,’ said Kausika, wondering what lay in store.

‘You went away to study the holy books to fulfil your ambitions, did you not – leaving your old parents to fend for themselves? They are lonely, sick and afraid and have wept themselves blind. It is good to have personal goals but we cannot abandon our personal duties either. I advise you to go home and look after them with loving

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kindness and a genuine desire to make them happy, not out of an arid sense of duty. If you can do that, the nature of dharma will light you up and you will never be angry or dejected or wish to hurt another creature. You can reclaim all that you have lost through active kindness and find true spiritual happiness. That is the right path for you,' said the butcher.

Kausika winced. He thought of his mother and father trying not to weep inauspiciously as he left home without a backward glance. Yet his mother had cooked his favourite food for his last meal at home and his father had fetched new upper and lower cloths for the dakshina or ceremonial present that Kausika would have to give the guru who accepted him as a student. Great waves of regret washed over Kausika, cleaning his soul of its arrogance. Well, if the Vedas taught you one thing, it was not to flinch from the truth, however unpleasant, he thought ruefully and looked at the butcher with real affection.

'Pure soul, you have convinced me that a clean heart and gratitude are the means to tell between right and wrong. I am vastly obliged to you. I shall take your excellent advice and look after my parents,' said Kausika and made his way home feeling light as cloud.

### 3

## The Conch Bangles

One of the most sacred living texts that even occupies the place of the idol in the temple in some regions is the 'biography' of Sri Krishna, the beloved eighth avatar of Vishnu. It is formally known as the *Bhagvata Purana* or *Srimad Bhagvatam*, the holy story of god, or simply as the *Bhagvatam*, god's story. It was composed in Sanskrit by Veda Vyasa and, as other puranas do, it discusses a wide range of topics from cosmology, geography and myth to music, dance, yoga and culture. Its poetry is greatly admired and quoted across regions and communities. The *Bhagvatam* has between 16,000 and 18,000 verses depending on the edition. Its tenth chapter, with about 4000 verses, is the best-known and most widely studied. Incidentally, the *Bhagvatam*

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was the first purana to be translated into a European language, from a Tamil version to French, in 1788. In this parable from the *Bhagvatam*, Sri Krishna's earthly 'ancestor', King Yadu, is told by a young priest about how he learned to focus on his goal.

Lavanya was the daughter of a small cultivator who lived on the edge of a great forest of sal trees. He grew millet and vegetables and had but one cow, but it gave him, his wife and his daughter plenty of good, rich milk and his little fields were kind to him as were the weather gods.

As advised by wandering holy men on the right way to live, Lavanya's father divided his income into five shares. One share was for offerings to his ancestors, to repay the debt of having achieved human birth. One share was for the gods without whose favour nothing ever seemed to go well. One share was for guests and wayfarers, to be able to feed them properly, for that was a householder's prime duty. One share was for relatives, for as a son, brother, husband, father and uncle, a man had obligatory presents to give at ceremonies and festivals to affirm his relationships. The fifth share was to feed, clothe and shelter himself and his family.

A great many holy men went past their holding and stopped for a drink of water, a short rest and a

simple dinner. They repaid the family by telling them wonderful stories by firelight when the day's work was done – stories of gods and titans, tricksters and heroes. Lavanya's natural intelligence was further energized by their tales.

One day, Lavanya's parents left for the weekly market three villages away, taking baskets of produce to sell. Lavanya soon finished her chores and sat down to weave a new basket of cane. But she had barely begun when four well-dressed people appeared in a bullock cart. They were her parents' age and announced that they had come with a proposal of marriage – for her.

'My son is a good, kind-hearted boy and we have many fields and cows. You will be well looked after and lack for nothing,' the prospective bridegroom's mother said, smiling. She wore a gold and coral necklace and gold bangles set with lucky hair from an elephant's tail. Her nose ring had pearls on it and her upper garment and lower garment were both of fine cotton and trimmed with borders of some rich weave.

'I'm sorry my parents are away at the weekly market, they'll be home only by sunset.' Lavanya blushed, feeling shy in this fine company.

'Oh, we'll wait here for them,' said the group cheerfully and looked about for a place in the shade. Lavanya

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scurried to drag out the string cots and spread grass mats on them for her guests to sit on. She fetched water for them, and a refreshing drink of jaggery juice in terracotta cups, and rounded up all the palmetto hand fans in her little home for the guests to use.

And then a terrible thought struck her.

‘The evening meal!’ she thought. ‘We don’t have enough husked rice to cook for everyone. I’d better husk more right away before I cut the vegetables.’

Excusing herself politely, Lavanya took out a good measure of unhusked paddy from the bin to the far end of the yard and began to pound it in the mortar with the long wooden pestle.

As she worked, the six conch bangles that she wore on either wrist began to clank merrily, ‘Tak-taka-tak-tak! Tak-taka-tak-tak!’

‘On, no!’ thought Lavanya. ‘What a noise these bangles make. How uncouth and impolite they will think me. And they’ll wonder how poor I am that I wear such plain, simple bangles and not carved, pierced golden ones like they do.’

She broke four bangles on either wrist, leaving only two, and resumed husking the paddy.

But even those two clanked against each other as she worked, producing a childish, embarrassing sound as

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though a little boy or girl was running about in the yard playing with a wooden cart or clapper.

‘This is no good. They will think I’m a real country bumpkin and hopelessly immature at that,’ thought the intelligent maiden. ‘However, I can’t possibly go back in there completely bare-wristed, that is not considered proper in a girl. I know what! I’ll break another bangle and leave on just the one.’



‘I knew that intelligent maiden from previous visits to her home and that day I happened to come by but hung back and observed her actions quietly; and when I had the opportunity for a word, I asked her about it,’ said the young priest to Yadu. ‘From that incident, O King, I learned the value of solitude and concentration when an important personal task is at hand. Many people together will make a noise and may even break into a quarrel. They will ruin your enterprise. Even two people are likely to talk, argue and distract each other. That maiden’s moves taught me to assess when to proceed alone on a life goal and why.’



## 4

# Husbands and Wives

The *Markandeya Purana* is said to go as far back as c. 250 CE. 'Purana' means 'an old tale'; however, this book remains a living text with a powerful hold on popular belief. Chapters 81 to 93 of the *Markandeya Purana* form the famous *Chandi Paath* which celebrates Shakti, the sacred feminine. These verses are still recited every year during Durga Puja in October. Among the purana's 9000 verses is also found the terrifying tale of Raja Harishchandra, who sold his wife and son to keep his word. Harishchandra was forced to tend a cremation ground at Varanasi or Kashi, the holiest of Hindu cities on the banks of the Ganga, the holiest Hindu river. Harishchandra Ghat in Kashi, where he

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is said to have done so, is still the most important and possibly the oldest continually used cremation ground in India; and Harishchandra's story, as the silent movie *Raja Harishchandra*, was the first Indian film to be made, in 1912 by Dadasaheb Phalke, 'the father of Indian cinema'. In another story about relationships from this purana, Rishi Markandeya acquaints his disciple Kraustuki with the complicated give-and-take between husbands and wives.

Svarochh Manu, one of the ancestors of the human race, loved the company of women. Although he was permitted only one patrani or chief queen by custom, he made himself ridiculous by elevating three queens, Manorama, Vibhavari and Kalavati, to that position. His subjects sniggered openly at his lack of wit and there was worse to follow. One day when he was out jaunting on the river, a pair of ducks, mated for life in the way of their kind, swam past quacking in amusement. Svarochh could understand the speech of all living creatures and was greatly embarrassed when the female duck compared his personal life to hers and dismissed him scornfully as a pleasure-seeker incapable of loving anyone with commitment and sincerity. Another time, when out in the forest, he saw a doe frolicking amorously around a

particularly handsome deer. The deer snubbed the doe with these harsh words, 'Pah! Be off. Do you think I'm Svarochh Manu to eagerly accept every female that throws herself at me?'

However, Svarochh Manu, despite his resolve to simplify his life, was unable to change his ways. After he passed away, he was remembered principally for his self-indulgence and lack of commitment, for exercising all kinds of 'rights' without a corresponding sense of duty.

This legacy of judgement was to haunt the Manu of the next epoch, King Uttama, who was happily married to a beautiful queen called Vahula. Though shy at heart, the queen was a practical person. She knew she had a tremendous public role to play and tried to cope. She participated with composure in all her queenly duties, be it in court or at the sacrificial fires. She administered her part of the palace sensibly, discouraged tale-bearing and petty quarrels and tried to give her household a good tone without being tiresomely pious. Her maids doted on her and the people spoke of her with respect.

Feeling secure in the esteem of those around her, Queen Vahula thanked the gods in her prayers. But soon, there followed a star-crossed phase. Perhaps the royal duties proved too much or familiarity had something to do with it, but Vahula no longer found her husband

attractive or interesting. She began to withdraw subtly from him and with each passing week she withdrew more openly. The three pains according to Sankhya philosophy are Adhyatmika, those born of the mind and body, Adhidaivika or supernatural and Adhibhoutika, because of an incident, accident, mishap or calamity. All three were to fall together on this royal couple's heads.

The tension and the brooding silence between the king and queen grew and grew without a single conversation about it. One day at a public dinner with important merchants and foreign diplomats present, the wine flowed freely and the king had a bit too much. The queen did not drink but he offered her his goblet anyway in a noticeably public manner. The queen turned her head away with a frown and an awkward silence suddenly fell on the company. The king lost his temper and summoned a palace guard.

'Take the queen away and abandon her in the jungle,' he said. 'You are not permitted to question the right or wrong of my command.'

The guard bowed impassively to the queen and indicated that she should follow him, and Vahula swept away without a word, a proud smile on her face. 'She actually looked relieved to go' ran the gossip afterwards.

Soon after this catastrophe, a poor priest of the kingdom appeared in court to demand the king's help. Someone, possibly the neighbourhood rakshasa, or demon, had stolen his wife from their hut in the middle of the night.

'Describe her, we'll send out search parties,' said the king.

'She's not very pretty and not very amiable. In fact, she has a foul temper,' said the priest.

'What?' exclaimed King Uttama. 'It's easier to find you a pretty, new wife, you know.'

'Your Majesty,' said the priest reproachfully, 'my wife is my wife. It is my duty to keep her safe from the rest of the world, from my own family, and even from myself.'

'But you have no precise information about who took her away and where. Why should I exert myself fruitlessly chasing in all directions?' said the king.

'O Lord of the Earth, you take a sixth of our produce as your due and we, your subjects, can sleep fearlessly because you uphold the law,' said the priest.

Abashed, the king got up a stout hunting party and went to the forest inhabited by the demon. He soon found him, gawking at kingfishers diving into a forest

pond, while the priest's wife sat inviolate nearby, placidly eating bel fruit.

'Hey, you!' roared King Uttama, at which the demon leaped to its feet and politely saluted him. 'I am your subject, too, Your Majesty, since I live in your kingdom,' it said meekly and awaited royal orders.

'Return this man's wife to him at once. Why did you kidnap her?' said the king.

'Well, here she is, and no harm done,' fawned the demon. 'I only took her away to spoil the priest's endless sacrifices to the gods because a householder's offerings have no merit, as you well know, without his wife beside him.'

The concerned parties went their way cheerfully after that but not the king. He felt ashamed of how he had treated his queen, never making the attempt to understand her while expecting her to run like a well-oiled yantra and sending her away in that brutal fashion.

'Where is she now?' he asked a rishi in the forest, known to be an adept in the supernatural arts. The rishi looked inwards, and out again with a worried face.

'Kapotaka, king of the serpents, kidnapped Queen Vahula when he found her alone in the forest by your order and took her to the netherworld. He would have