

SUTĪKṢṂA SutīkṣṂa, the sage, asked the sage Agastya: O sage, kindly enlighten me — which is more conducive to liberation, work or knowledge?

AGASTYA Birds are able to fly with their two wings: even so both work and knowledge together lead to the supreme goal of liberation. Neither alone can lead to liberation, but both of them together form the means. Listen: There once lived a holy man named Kārunya who was the son of Agniveśya. Having mastered the holy scriptures, the young man became apathetic to life. Seeing this, Agniveśya demanded to know why Kārunya had abandoned the performance of his daily duties. Kārunya replied, "Do not the scriptures declare on the one hand that one should fulfill scriptural injunctions till the end of one's life and on the other that immortality can be realized only by the abandonment of all action? Caught between these two doctrines, what shall I do, O my guru and father?" Having said this, the young man remained silent.

AGNIVEŚYA My son, listen: I shall narrate to you an ancient legend. Duly consider its moral and then do as you please. Once upon a time, a celestial nymph named Suruci was seated on a peak in the Himālayās, when she saw a messenger of Indra, the king of gods, fly past. Questioned by her, he informed her of his mission: "A royal sage by

name Ariṣṭanemi entrusted his kingdom to his son and was engaged in breath-taking austerities in Gandhamādana hill. Seeing this, Indra asked me to approach him with a bevy of nymphs and escort the royal sage to heaven. However, the royal sage wanted to know the merits and the demerits of heaven. I replied that in heaven, the best, the middling and the least among pious mortals receive appropriate rewards, and once the fruits of their respective merits have been exhausted, they return to the world of mortals. The royal sage refused to accept Indra's invitation to heaven. Indra once again sent me to the royal sage with the request that he should seek the counsel of the sage Vālmīki before turning the offer down."

The royal sage was then introduced to the sage Vālmīki. He asked Vālmīki, "What is the best way to rid oneself of birth and death?" In reply, Vālmīki narrated to him the dialogue between Rāma and Vasiṣṭha.

VĀLMĪKI He is qualified to study this scripture (the dialogue between Rāma and Vasiṣṭha) who feels "I am bound, I should be liberated", who is neither totally ignorant nor enlightened. He who deliberates on the means of liberation in these stories surely attains liberation from the repetitive history (of birth and death).

I had composed the story of Rāma earlier, and imparted it to my beloved disciple Bharadvāja. Once when he went to the Mount Meru, Bharadvāja narrated it to Brahmā, the creator. Highly pleased with this, the latter granted a boon to Bharadvāja. Bharadvāja sought a boon that "all human beings may be freed from unhappiness" and begged Brahmā to find the best way to achieve this.

Brahmā said to Bharadvāja, "Go to the sage Vālmīki and pray to him to continue to narrate the noble story of Rāma in such a way that the listener may be freed from the darkness of nescience." Not content with that, Brahmā and the sage Bharadvāja arrived at my hermitage.

After receiving due worship at my hands Brahmā said to me, "O sage, your story of Rāma shall be the raft with which men will cross the ocean of saṁsāra (repetitive history). Continue its narration and bring it to a successful completion." Having said this, the Creator instantly disappeared from the scene.

As if puzzled by the abrupt command of Brahmā, I requested the sage Bharadvāja to explain to me what Brahmā had just said. Bharadvāja repeated Brahmā's words, "Brahmā would like you to reveal the story of Rāma in such a manner that it would enable all to go beyond sorrow. I, too, pray to you, O sage: kindly tell me in detail, how Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and the other brothers freed themselves from sorrow."

I then revealed to Bharadvāja the secret of the liberation of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and the other brothers, as also their parents and the members of the royal court. I said to Bharadvāja, "My son, if you, too, live like them, you will also be freed from sorrow here and now."

This world-appearance is a confusion, even as the blueness of the sky is an optical illusion. I think it is better not to let the mind dwell on it, but to ignore it. Neither freedom from sorrow nor realization of one's real nature is possible as long as the conviction does not arise in one that the world-appearance is unreal. This conviction arises when one studies this scripture with diligence. It is then that one arrives at the firm conviction that the objective world is a confusion of the real with the unreal. If one does not thus study this scripture, true knowledge does not arise in him even in millions of years.

Mokṣa or liberation is the total abandonment of all vāsanā or mental conditioning, without the least reserve. Mental conditioning is of two types — the pure and the impure. The impure is the cause of birth; the pure liberates one from birth. The impure is of the nature of nescience and ego-sense; these are the seeds, as it were, for the tree of re-birth. On the other hand, when these seeds are abandoned, the mental conditioning that merely sustains the body is of a pure nature. Such mental conditioning exists even in those who have been liberated while living: it does not lead to re-birth, as it is sustained only by past momentum and not by present motivation.

I shall now narrate to you how Rāma lived an enlightened life of a liberated sage: knowing this you will be freed from all misunderstanding concerning old age and death.

Upon his return from the hermitage of his preceptor, Rāma dwelt in his father's palace, sporting in various ways. Wanting to tour the whole country and visit the holy places of pilgrimage, Rāma sought the presence of his father and asked to be permitted to undertake such a pilgrimage. The king chose an auspicious day for the

commencement of this pilgrimage; on that day, after receiving the affectionate blessings of the elders of the family, Rāma departed.

Rāma and his brothers toured the whole country, from the Himālayā downwards. He then returned to the capital to the delight of the people of the country.

Rāma entered the palace and devoutly bowed to his father, the sage Vasiṣṭha and other elders and holy men. The whole city of Ayodhyā put on a festive appearance for eight days to celebrate the return of Rāma from the pilgrimage.

For some time Rāma lived in the palace, duly performing his daily duties. However, very soon a profound change came over him. He grew thin and emaciated, pale and weak. King Daśaratha was worried over this sudden and unaccountable change in his beloved son's appearance and behavior. When Daśaratha asked Rāma, "Beloved son, what is worrying you?" Rāma politely replied, "Nothing, father" and remained silent.

Inevitably Daśaratha turned to the sage Vasiṣṭha for the answer. The sage enigmatically answered, "Surely, there is some reason why Rāma behaves in this manner. Even as in this world no great changes take place before the coming into being of their cause, i.e., the cosmic elements, changes like anger, despondency and joy do not manifest in the behavior of noble ones without proper cause." Daśaratha did not wish to probe further.

Soon after this, the world-renowned sage Viśvāmitra arrived at the palace. The king rushed forward to greet him.

DAŚARATHA Welcome, welcome, O holy sage! Your arrival at my humble abode makes me happy. It is as welcome to me as vision to a blind man, rain to parched earth, son to a barren woman, resurrection of a dead man, recovery of lost wealth. O sage, what may I do for you? Whatever be the wish with which you have come to me, consider that wish already fulfilled. You are the deity I worship. I shall do thy bidding

VĀLMĪKI Viśvāmitra was delighted to hear Daśaratha's words and proceeded to reveal his mission:

 O king, I need your assistance. Whenever I undertake a religious rite, the demons who are the followers of Khara and Dūšana invade

the holy place and desecrate it. Under the vows of the religious rite, I am unable to curse them.

You can help me. Your son Rāma can easily deal with these demons. And, in return for this help, I shall confer manifold blessings upon him, which will bring you unexcelled glory. Do not let your attachment to your son overpower your devotion to duty. In this world the noble ones do not consider any gift beyond their means.

The moment you say yes, that very moment I consider that the demons are dead. For, I know who Rāma is; even as the sage Vasiṣṭha and the other holy ones in this court do. Let there be no procrastination, O king: send Rāma with me without delay.

Hearing this highly unwelcome request, the king remained stunned and silent for a while and then replied, "O sage, Rāma is not even sixteen years old and is therefore not qualified to wage a war. He has not even seen combat, except what goes on in the inner apartment of the palace. Command me to accompany you; command my vast army to accompany you to exterminate the demons. But I cannot part with Rāma. Is it not natural for all living beings to love their young; do not even wise men engage themselves in extraordinary activities for the love of their children; and do not people abandon their happiness, their wives and wealth rather than their children? No, I cannot part with Rāma.

I have heard of the mighty demon Rāvana. Is he the one that disturbs your religious rite? In that case, nothing can be done to help you, for I know that even the gods are powerless against him. Time and again, such powerful beings are born on this earth, and in time they leave the stage of this world."

Viśvāmitra was angry. Seeing this, the sage Vasiṣṭha intervened and persuaded the king not to back out on his promise, but to send Rāma with Viśvāmitra. "O king, it is unworthy of you to go back on your promise. A king should be an exemplar of righteous conduct. Rāma is safe in the care of Viśvāmitra, who is extremely powerful and who has numerous invincible missiles."

In obedience to the wishes of the preceptor Vasiṣṭha, the king Daśaratha ordered an attendant to fetch Rāma. This attendant returned and announced that Rāma would follow in a minute, and added, "The prince seems to be dejected and he shuns company."

Bewildered by this statement, Daśaratha turned to Rāma's chamberlain and asked to know the facts concerning Rāma's state of mind and health.

The chamberlain was visibly distressed and said:

Lord, since his return from the pilgrimage, a great change has come over the prince. He does not seem to be interested even in bathing and in worship of the deity. He does not enjoy the company of the people in the inner apartments. He is not interested in jewels and precious stones. Even when offered charming and pleasing objects, he looks at them with sad eyes, uninterested. He spurns the palace dancers, regarding them as tormentors! He goes through the motions of eating, walking, resting, bathing and sitting like an automaton, like one who is deaf and dumb. Often he mutters to himself, 'What is the use of wealth and prosperity or of a house. What is the use of adversity? All this is unreal.' He relishes only solitude. He is all the time immersed in his own thought. We do not know what has come over our prince, what he contemplates in his mind, nor what he is after. Day by day he gets more and more emaciated.

Again and again, he sings to himself, 'Alas, we are dissipating our life in various ways, instead of striving to reach the supreme! People wail aloud that they are suffering and they are destitute, but no one sincerely turns away from the sources of their suffering and destitution.' Seeing all this and hearing all this, we humble servants are extremely distressed. We do not know what to do. He is bereft of hope, he is bereft of desire, he is attached to nothing and he depends on nothing. He is not deluded or demented, and he is not enlightened either. At times, however, it looks as if he is overwhelmed by suicidal thoughts spurred by the feelings of despondency: 'What is the use of wealth or of mothers and relations, what is the use of the kingdom, and what is the use of ambition in this world?' Lord, only you can find the appropriate remedy for this condition of the prince.

VIŚVĀMITRA

If that be the case, may Rāma be requested to come here. His condition is not the result of delusion but is full of wisdom and dispassion, and it points to enlightenment. Bring him here and we shall dispel his despondency.

VĀLMĪKI

The king urged the chamberlain to invite Rāma to the court. In the meantime, Rāma himself got ready to meet his father. Even from a

distance he saw and saluted his father and the sages, and they saw that though young, his face shone with the peace of maturity. He bowed to the feet of the king, who embraced him, lifted him up and said to him, "What makes you so sad, my son? Dejection is an open invitation to a host of miseries." The sages Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra concurred with the king.

RĀMA Holy sir, I shall duly answer your question. I grew up happily in my father's abode; I was instructed by worthy teachers. Recently I went on a pilgrimage. During this period a trend of thought has taken hold of me, robbing me of all hope in this world. My heart begins to question: what do people call happiness and can it be had in the ever-changing objects of this world? All beings in this world take birth but to die, and they die to be born! I do not perceive any meaning in all these transient phenomena, which are the roots of suffering and sin. Unrelated beings come together; the mind conjures up a relationship between them. Everything in this world is dependent upon the mind, upon one's mental attitude. On examination, the mind itself appears to be unreal! But we are bewitched by it. We seem to be running after a mirage in the desert to slake our thirst.

Sir, surely we are not bond slaves sold to a master; yet we live a life of slavery, without any freedom whatever. Ignorant of the truth, we have been aimlessly wandering in this dense forest called the world. What is this world? What comes into being, grows and dies? How does this suffering come to an end? My heart bleeds with sorrow, though I do not shed tears, in deference to the feelings of my friends.

Equally useless, O sage, is wealth, which deludes the ignorant. Unsteady and fleeting, this wealth gives birth to numerous worries and generates an insatiable craving for more. Wealth is no respecter of persons: both the good and the wicked can become wealthy. However, people are good, compassionate and friendly only till their hearts are hardened by the passionate pursuit of wealth. Wealth taints the heart even of the wise scholar, a hero, a man of gratitude and a dexterous and soft-spoken person. Wealth and happiness do not dwell together. Rare is that wealthy man who does not have rivals and enemies who scandalize him. To the lotus of right action, wealth is the night; to the white-lotus of sorrow, it is the moonlight; to the lamp of clear insight, it is the wind; to the wave of enmity, it

is the flood; to the cloud of confusion, it is the favorable wind; to the poison of despondency, it is the aggravating agent. It is like the serpent of evil thoughts and it adds fear to one's distress. It is destructive snow-fall to the creeper of dispassion; it is the night-fall to the owl of evil desires; it is the eclipse of the moon of wisdom. In its presence a person's good nature shrivels. Indeed, wealth seeks him who has already been chosen by death.

Even so is the life-span, O sage. Its duration is like that of a water droplet on a leaf. The life-span is fruitful only to those who have self-knowledge. We may encompass the wind, we may break up space, we may string waves into a garland, but we cannot pin our faith on the life-span. Man vainly seeks to extend his life-span, and thereby he earns more sorrow and extends the period of suffering. Only he lives who strives to gain self-knowledge, which alone is worth gaining in this world, thereby putting an end to future births; others exist here like donkeys. To the unwise, knowledge of scriptures is a burden. To one who is full of desires, even wisdom is a burden. To one who is restless, his own mind is a burden; and to one who has no self-knowledge, the body (the life-span) is a burden.

The rat of time gnaws at the life-span without respite. The termite of disease eats (destroys) the very vitals of the living being. Just as a cat intent on catching a rat looks at it with great alertness and readiness, death is ever keeping a watch over this life-span.

Holy sir, I am bewildered and scared when I contemplate the coming into being of the dreadful enemy of wisdom known as egotism. It comes into being in the darkness of ignorance, and flourishes in ignorance. It generates endless sinful tendencies and sinful actions. All suffering surely revolves around egotism (it is the 'I' who suffers), and egotism is the sole cause of mental distress. I feel that egotism is my worst disease! Spreading the net of worldly objects of pleasure, it is this egotism that traps living beings. Indeed, all the terrible calamities in this world are born of egotism. Egotism eclipses self-control, destroys virtue and dissipates equanimity. Giving up the egotistic notion that "I am Rāma" and giving up all desires, I wish to rest in the self. I realize that whatever I have done with an egotistic notion is vain: non-egotism alone is truth. When I am under the influence of egotism, I am unhappy; when I am free from egotism, I am happy. Egotism promotes cravings; without it

they perish. It is this egotism alone, without rhyme or reason, that has spread the net of family and social relationships to catch the unwary soul. I think I am free from egotism; yet, I am miserable. Pray, enlighten me.

Bereft of the grace earned through the service of holy ones, the impure mind-stuff remains restless as the wind. It is dissatisfied with whatever it gets and grows more and more restless by the day. The sieve can never be filled with water; nor can the mind ever reach the state of fulfillment however many worldly objects one acquires. The mind flits in all directions all the time, but is unable to find happiness anywhere. Unmindful of the possibility of reaping great suffering in hell, the mind seeks pleasure here, but even that it does not get. Like the lion in a cage, the mind is ever restless, having lost its freedom, not yet happy with its present state.

Alas, O holy one, I am bound by the knots of craving to the net that has been spread by the mind. Even as the rushing waters of a river uproot the trees on its bank, the restless mind has uprooted my whole being. I am being wafted like a dry leaf in the wind by the mind. It does not let me rest anywhere. It is this mind alone which is the cause of all objects in the world; the three worlds exist because of the mind-stuff. When the mind vanishes, the worlds vanish, too.

It is really when the mind-stuff is enveloped by craving that innumerable errors arise in the darkness of ignorance thus caused. This craving dries up the good and noble qualities of the mind and heart, like sweetness and gentleness of disposition, and makes me hard and cruel. In that darkness, craving in its different forms dances like a goblin.

Though I adopt various methods to restrain this craving, the latter overpowers me in a moment and helplessly drives me astray, even as a gale carries a straw away. Whatever hope I entertain of developing dispassion and such other qualities, craving cuts that hope away, even as a rat snaps a thread. And I helplessly revolve, caught in the wheel of craving. Like birds caught in a net, we are unable, though we have the wings for it, to fly to our goal or abode of self-knowledge. Nor can this craving be ever appeased, even if I were to quaff nectar. The characteristic of this craving is that it has no direction: it drives me in one direction now, and the very next moment it takes me away in another direction, like a mad horse. It spreads in front of us a very wide net of son, friend, wife and other relations.

Though I am a hero, this craving makes me a frightened coward; though I have eyes to see, it makes me blind; though I am full of joy, it makes me miserable; it is like a dreadful goblin. It is this dreadful goblin craving that is responsible for bondage and misfortune; it breaks the heart of man and creates delusion in him. Caught by this goblin, man is unable to enjoy even the pleasures that are within his reach. Though it appears as if the craving is for happiness, this craving leads neither to happiness nor to fruitfulness in this life; on the contrary, it involves vain effort and leads to every kind of inauspiciousness. Even when it occupies the stage called life on which several happy and unhappy situations play, this craving, like an aged actress, is incapable of performing anything good and noble and suffers defeat and discomfiture at every turn. Yet, it does not give up dancing on the stage!

Craving now ascends to the skies, now dives into the depths of the nether world; it is ever restless. For it is based on the emptiness of the mind. In the mind the light of wisdom momentarily shines, but there is delusion the next moment. It is a wonder that sages are able to cut this with the sword of self-knowledge.

This pitiable body composed of veins, arteries and nerves is also a source of pain. Inert, it appears to be intelligent: one does not know if it is sentient or insentient, and it engenders only delusion. Delighted with a little gratification and distressed by the least adversity, this body is indeed highly despicable.

I can only compare a tree to the body: with branches for arms, trunk for the torso, holes for eyes, fruits for head, leaves for numerous illnesses — it is a resting place for living beings. Who can say that it is one's own? Hope or despair in relation to it is futile. It is but a boat given to one for crossing this ocean of birth-and-death; one should not regard it as one's self.

This tree which is the body is born in the forest known as saṃsāra (repetitive existence). The restless monkey (mind) plays on it, it is the abode of crickets (worries), it is constantly eaten by the insects (of endless suffering), it shelters the venomous serpent (of craving), and the wild crow (of anger) dwells on it. On it are the flowers (of laughter). Its fruits are good and evil, it appears to be animated by the wind (of life-force), it supports the birds (of the senses). It is resorted to by the traveller (lust or desire), for it provides the shade

of pleasure. The formidable vulture (egotism) is seated on it, and it is hollow and empty. It is certainly not meant to promote happiness. Whether it lives for long or falls in a short time, it is still useless. It is composed of flesh and blood, it is subject to old age and death. I am not enamored of it. It is completely filled with impure substances and afflicted with ignorance. How can it fulfil my hopes?

This body is the home of illness, the field for mental distress and changing emotions and mental states. I am not enamored of it. What is wealth, what is kingdom, what is the body? All these are mercilessly cut down by time (death). At death this ungrateful body abandons the soul that dwelt in it and protected it: what hope shall I repose in it? Shamelessly it indulges again and again in the same actions! Its only certain purpose seems to be to burn in the end. Unmindful of old age and death that are common to the rich and the poor, it seeks wealth and power. Shame, shame upon those who are bound to this body, deluded by the wine of ignorance! Shame on those who are bound to this world!

Even childhood, the part of life which people ignorantly regard as enjoyable and happy, is full of sorrow, O sage. Helplessness, mishaps, cravings, inability to express oneself, utter foolishness, playfulness, instability, weakness — all these characterize childhood. The child is easily offended, easily roused to anger, easily bursts into tears. In fact, one may say boldly that the child's anguish is more terrible than that of a dying person, a sick man or any other adult. For in childhood one's state is comparable truly to that of an animal living at the mercy of others.

The child is exposed to the countless happenings around it; they puzzle the child, confuse the child, and arouse in it various fantasies and fears. The child is impressionable and is easily influenced by the wicked: in consequence, the child is subjected to control and punishment by its parents. Childhood seems to be a period of subjection and nothing else!

Though the child may appear to be innocent, the truth is that all sorts of defects, sinful tendencies, and neurotic behavior lie hidden and dormant in it, even as an owl lies hidden in a dark hole during the day-time. O sage, I pity those people who foolishly imagine that childhood is a happy period.

What can be worse suffering than a restless mind? And, the child's mind is extremely restless. Unless the child gets something new every day, it is unhappy. Crying and weeping seem to be the child's foremost activity. When the child does not get what it wants, it looks as if its heart is broken.

When the child goes to school, it receives punishment at the hands of its teachers, and all this adds to its unhappiness.

When the child cries, its parents, in order to pacify it, promise to give it the world; and from then on the child begins to value the world, to desire worldly objects. The parents say, "I shall give you the moon for a toy." and the child, believing their words, thinks that it can hold the moon in its hands. Thus are the seeds of delusion sown in the little heart.

Though the child feels heat and cold, it is unable to avoid it — how is it better than a tree, then? Like the animals and birds the child vainly reaches out to get what it wants; and it is fearful of every elder in the house.

Leaving this period of childhood behind, the human being goes on to the stage of youth, but he is unable to leave unhappiness behind! There he is subjected to numerous mental modifications and progresses from misery to greater misery, for he abandons wisdom and embraces the terrible goblin known as lust that resides in his heart. His life is full of desire and anxiety. They who have not been robbed of their wisdom in their youth can withstand any onslaught.

I am not enamored of this transient youth in which shortlived pleasure is quickly followed by long-lasting suffering, and deluded by which man regards the changing to be changeless. What is worse still, it is during youth that one indulges in such actions that bring unhappiness to many others.

Even as a tree is consumed by a forest fire, the youth's heart is consumed by the fire of lust when his beloved leaves him. However much he may strive to develop purity of heart, the youth's heart is stained with impurity. Even when his beloved is not present near him, he is distracted by the thoughts of her beauty. Such a person who is full of cravings is naturally not held in high esteem by good men.

Youth is the abode of diseases and mental distress. It can be

compared to a bird whose wings are good and evil acts. Youth is like a sandstorm that disperses and dissipates one's good qualities. Youth arouses all sorts of evils in the heart and suppresses the good qualities that may exist there; it is thus the promoter of evil. It gives rise to delusion and attachment. Though youthfulness appears to be very desirable to the body, it is destructive to the mind. In youth, the man is tempted by the mirage of happiness and in its pursuit he falls into the well of sorrow. Hence I am not enamored of youth.

Alas, even when youth is about to leave the body, the passions that had been aroused by youth burn the more fiercely and bring about one's quick destruction. He who delights in this youth is surely not a man, but an animal in human garb.

They are adorable, they are great souls and they alone are men who are not overcome by the evils of youth and who survive that stage of life without succumbing to its temptations. For it is easy to cross a great ocean; but to reach the other shore of youth without being overcome by its likes and dislikes is indeed difficult.

In his youth, man is a slave of sexual attraction. In the body which is no more than the aggregate of flesh, blood, bone, hair and skin, he perceives beauty and charm. If this 'beauty' is permanent, there is some justification to the imagination; alas, it does not last very long. On the contrary, very soon the very flesh that contributed to the attractiveness, the charm and the beauty of the beloved is transformed first into the shrivelled ugliness of old age, and later consumed by fire, or by worms or vultures. Yet, while it lasts, this sexual attraction consumes the heart and wisdom of the man. By this is creation maintained; when this attraction ceases, the *saṃsāra* (birth-death cycle) also ceases.

When the child is dissatisfied with its childhood, youth takes over; when youth is plagued by dissatisfaction and frustration, old age overpowers it—how cruel is life. Even as wind tosses a dew-drop from a leaf, old age destroys the body. Even as a drop of poison when it enters the system soon pervades it, senility soon pervades the entire body, breaks it down and makes it the laughing stock of other people.

Though the old man is unable to satisfy his desires physically, the desires themselves flourish and grow. He begins to ask himself,

“Who am I? What should I do?” etc., when it is too late for him to change his life’s course, alter his life-style, or make his life more meaningful. With the onset of senility all the distressing symptoms of a physical break-down, like cough, white hairs, hard breathing, dyspepsia and emaciation manifest themselves.

Perhaps the deity presiding over death sees the white-roofed head of the old man as salted melon and rushes to take it. As a flood cuts away the roots of trees standing on the river-bank, senility vigorously cuts the root of life. Death follows and carries it away. Senility is like the royal attendant who precedes the king, death.

Ah, how mysterious and how astounding it is! They who have not been overcome by enemies and who have taken their abode in inaccessible mountain-peaks — even they have been afflicted by the demoness known as senility and degeneracy.

All enjoyments in this world are delusion, like the lunatic’s enjoyment of the taste of fruits reflected in a mirror. All the hopes of man in this world are consistently destroyed by Time. Time alone, O sage, wears everything out in this world; there is nothing in creation which is beyond its reach. Time alone creates innumerable universes, and in a very short time Time destroys everything.

Time allows a glimpse of itself through its partial manifestation as the year, the age, and the epoch; but its essential nature is hidden. This Time overpowers everything. Time is merciless, inexorable, cruel, greedy and insatiable. Time is the greatest magician, full of deceptive tricks. This Time cannot be analyzed; for however much it is divided, it still survives indestructible. It has an insatiable appetite for everything — it consumes the smallest insects, the biggest mountains, and even the king of heaven! Even as a young boy plays with a ball for his pastime, Time uses the two balls known as the sun and the moon for its pastime. It is indeed Time alone that appears as the destroyer of the universe (Rudra), the creator of the world (Brahmā), the king of heaven (Indra), the lord of wealth (Kubera), and the nothingness of cosmic dissolution. It is indeed this Time that successively creates and dissolves the universe again and again. Just as even the great and mighty mountain is rooted on earth, this mighty Time is also established in the absolute being (Brahman).

Even though Time creates endless universes, it is not wearied, nor

does it rejoice. It does not come, nor does it go; it does not rise, nor does it set.

Time, the gourmet, sees that the objects of this world have been ripened by the fire of the sun, and when he finds them fully ripe, he consumes them! Each epoch of time is decked, as it were, by the lovely jewels of colorful beings for the pleasure of Time that wipes them all out playfully.

To the lotus of youthfulness, Time is the nightfall; to the elephant of life-span, Time is the lion. In this world there is nothing, high or low, that Time does not destroy. Even when all these are destroyed, Time is not destroyed. Just as a man after a day's activity rests in sleep, as if in ignorance, even so Time after the cosmic dissolution sleeps or rests with the creation-potential hidden in it. No one really knows what this Time is.

Besides the Time I have just described, there is another Time which is responsible for birth and death; people refer to it as the deity presiding over death.

Yet again there is another aspect of this Time, known as *ṛtānta* — the end of action, its inevitable result or fruition. This *ṛtānta* is like a dancer with *niyati* (the law of nature) for his wife: the two together bestow on all beings the inevitable fruit of their actions. During the course of the existence of the universe, they are indefatigable in their labor, unwinking in their vigilance and unflinching in their zeal.

When Time thus dances in this universe, creating and destroying everything, what hope can we entertain? *Ṛtānta* holds sway even over those whose faith is firm, and makes them restless. On account of this *ṛtānta* everything in this world is constantly undergoing change; there is no permanency here.

All beings in this world are tainted with evil; all relationships are bondage; all enjoyments are great diseases; and desire for happiness is only a mirage. One's own senses are one's enemies; the reality has become unreal (unknown); one's own mind has become one's worst enemy. Egotism is the foremost cause of evil; wisdom is weak; all actions lead to unpleasantness; and pleasure is sexually oriented. One's intelligence is governed by egotism, instead of being the other way round. Hence there is no peace or happiness in one's mind. Youth is fading. Company of holy ones is rare. There is no way out

of this suffering. The realization of truth is not to be seen in anyone. No one is happy at the prosperity and happiness of others; compassion is not to be found in anyone's heart. People are getting baser and baser by the day. Weakness has overcome strength, cowardice has overpowered courage. Evil company is easily had, good company is hard to come by. I wonder where Time is driving humanity.

Holy one, this mysterious power that governs this creation destroys even powerful demons, robs whatever has been considered to be eternal of its permanency, kills even the immortals — is there then any hope for simple folk like me? This mysterious being seems to dwell in all, and its individualized aspect is regarded as egotism. There is nothing that is not destroyed by it. The entire universe is under its control; its will alone prevails here.

O sage, thus neither in childhood nor in youth nor in old age does one enjoy any happiness. None of the objects in this world is meant to give happiness to anyone. The mind vainly seeks to find such happiness in the objects of this world. Only he is happy who is free from egotism and who is not swayed by craving for sense-pleasure: but such a person is extremely rare in this world. Indeed, I do not regard him as a hero who is able to battle successfully against a mighty army; only him I consider a hero who is able to cross the ocean known as the mind and the senses.

I do not regard that as a 'gain' which is soon lost: only that is a gain which is not lost — and there is no such gain available to man in this world, however hard he may struggle. On the other hand, both fleeting gains and temporary adversities come to a man even without his seeking. I am puzzled, holy sir, that a man roams here and there seemingly busy throughout the day, all the time engaged in selfish activity, and though he does not do one good turn during the day, he is still able to sleep at night.

Yet, even though the busy man overcomes all his earthly enemies and surrounds himself with wealth and luxury, and even when he boasts that he is happy, death creeps in upon him. How it finds him, only God knows.

In ignorance, man binds himself to wife, son and friends; he knows not that this world is like a large pilgrim center where countless people come together fortuitously — they whom he calls his wife, son and friends among them.

This world is like a potter's wheel: the wheel looks as if it stands still, though it revolves at a terrific speed — even so, to the deluded person this world appears to be stable, though in fact it is constantly changing. This world is like a poison tree: one who comes into contact with it is knocked unconscious and stupefied. All points of view in this world are tainted; all countries in the world are territories of evil; all the people of the world are subject to death; all actions are deceitful.

Many aeons have come and gone; they are but moments in time — for there is essentially no difference between an epoch and a moment, both being measures of time. From the viewpoint of the gods even an epoch is but a moment. Even so, the whole earth is but a modification of the earth-element! How futile to pin our faith and our hope on it!

○ holy one! Whatever appears to be permanent or transient in this world is all like a dream. What is a crater today was a mountain before, what is a mountain today becomes a hole in the earth in a short while. What is a dense forest today is soon transformed into a big city; what is fertile soil now becomes arid desert. Similar is the change in one's body and in one's life-style and fortune.

This life-and-death cycle appears to be a skilful dancer whose skirt is made up of living souls, and her dancing gestures consist of lifting the souls up to heaven, hurling them down in hell, or bringing them back to this earth. All the mighty deeds, even the great religious rites that people perform here, are soon consigned to one's memory. Human beings are born as animals and vice versa. Gods lose their divinity — what is unchanging here? I see even the creator Brahmā, the protector Viṣṇu, the redeemer Rudra and others inexorably going towards destruction. In this world sense-objects appear to be pleasant only till one remembers this inevitable destruction. Just as a child playing with earth makes different designs with a clod, the ordainer of the universe keeps creating new things and soon destroying them.

This perception of the defects of the world has destroyed the undesirable tendencies in my mind. Therefore, desire for sense-pleasure does not arise, in my mind, even as a mirage does not appear on the surface of water. This world and its delights appear bitter to me. I am not fond of wandering in pleasure-gardens, I do not relish the company of girls. I do not value the acquisition of wealth. I wish

to remain at peace within myself. I am constantly inquiring, "How can I wean my heart completely away from even thinking of this ever-changing phantom called the world?" I do not long for death, nor do I long to live. I remain as I am, free from the fever of lust. What shall I do with the kingdom, pleasure or wealth, all of which are the playthings of egotism, which is absent in me?

If I do not get established in wisdom now, when shall another opportunity arise? For indulgence in sense-pleasure poisons the mind in such a way that its effects last several life-times. Only the man of self-knowledge is free from this. Therefore, O sage, I pray to thee: instruct me in such a way that I may forever be free from anguish, fear and distress. With the light of your instruction destroy the darkness of ignorance in my heart.

By reflecting on the pitiable fate of living beings thus fallen into the dreadful pit of sorrow, I am filled with grief. My mind is confused, I shudder, and at every step I am afraid. I have given up everything, but I have not established myself in wisdom; hence, I am partly caught and partly freed. I am like a tree that has been cut but not severed from its root. I wish to restrain my mind but do not have the wisdom to do so.

Hence, pray tell me: what is that condition or state in which one does not experience any grief? How can one who is involved in the world and its activities, as I am, reach the supreme state of peace and bliss? What is that attitude that enables one not to be influenced by various kinds of activities and experiences? Pray tell me: how do you people who are enlightened live in this world? How can the mind be freed from lust and made to view the world both as one's own self and also as no more valuable than a blade of grass? The biography of which great one shall we study in order to learn the path of wisdom? How should one live in this world? Holy sir, instruct me in that wisdom which will enable my otherwise restless mind to be steady like a mountain. You are an enlightened being: instruct me so that I may never again be sunk in grief.

Obviously this world is full of pain and death: how does it become a source of joy, without befuddling one's heart? The mind is obviously full of impurities: how can it be cleansed and with what cleanser, prescribed by what great sage? How should one live here so as not to fall victim to the twin currents of love and hate? Obviously

there is a secret that enables one to remain unaffected by the grief and suffering in this world, even as mercury is not affected when it is thrown into the fire. What is that secret? What is the secret that counteracts the habit of the mind that is spread out in the form of this universe?

Who are those heroes who have freed themselves from delusion? And what methods did they adopt to free themselves? If you consider that I am neither fit nor capable of understanding this, I shall fast unto death.

VALMĪKĪ Having said so, Rāma remained silent.

All those who had assembled in the court were highly inspired by the flaming words of Rāma's wisdom, which is capable of dispelling the delusion of the mind. They felt as if they themselves had been rid of all their doubts and deluded misunderstanding. They drank the nectarean words of Rāma with great delight. As they sat in the court listening to Rāma's words, it appeared as though they were no longer living beings but painted figures—they were so still with rapt attention.

Who listened to Rāma's discourse? Sages like Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra, the ministers, members of the royal family including king Daśaratha, citizens, holy ones, servants, caged birds, animal pets, the horses of the royal stable, and the celestials, including the perfected sages and heavenly musicians. Surely, even the king of heaven and the chiefs of the nether world listened to Rāma.

Thrilled to hear Rāma's speech, all of them acclaimed "Bravo, bravo" with one voice, and this joyous sound filled the air. To felicitate Rāma, there was a shower of flowers from heaven. Everyone assembled in the court cheered him. Surely, no one but Rāma, who was full of dispassion, could have uttered the words that he gave expression to—not even the preceptor of the gods could. We were indeed extremely fortunate to have been able to listen to him. While we listened to him, it seemed as though we were filled with the feeling that there is no happiness, even in heaven.

THE
PERFECTED
SAGES

The Perfected Sages in the assembly said: Surely, the answers that the holy ones are about to give to the weighty and wise questions of Rāma are worthy of being heard by all beings in the universe. O

sages, come, come, let us all gather in the court of king Daśaratha to listen to the answer of the supreme sage Vasiṣṭha.

VALMĪKĪ Hearing this, all the sages of the world hastened to the court, where they were duly received, honored and seated in the court. Surely, if in our heart the lofty wisdom of Rāma is not reflected, we shall indeed be the losers. Whatever our abilities and faculties, we shall thereby prove that we have lost our intelligence!