

The Story of the Lovers Indra & Ahalya, the Fixation of Their Minds on Each Other

(*Yoga Vasishtha*, Book III, Chapters 89-90)

The mind is the maker and master of the world. The mind is the first supreme being (*purusha*). Whatever is done by the mind is said to be done. Whatever the body appears to do is really no action.

If a man thinks of himself as composed of the body, he becomes subject to all the incidents of physicality. But he who knows himself as bodiless is freed from all the evils that attend the body. Looking on the outside, we are subject to the feelings of pain and pleasure, but the inward-sighted yogi is unconscious of the pain or pleasure of his body. Thus it is the mind that causes all our errors in this world.

Evidence of this is the example of Indra and his consort Ahalya.¹

In former times there reigned a king at Magadha named Indra-dyumna (Glorious Indra). Like his namesake, Indra the King of the Gods, this king was great in prowess and fame. This Magadha king's wife was as fair as the moon with eyes as beautiful as lotuses. Her name was Ahalya and she resembled Rohini, the moon's favorite. In that city of Magadha also lived a rascal who was the chief of all the libertines. He was the cheating son of a brahmin, and he was known by the same name of Indra.

Now this Queen Ahalya came to hear the story of the former Ahalya, wife of Gautama, and her lust.² Hearing the story, Queen Ahalya felt a passion for Indra the libertine and became impatient in the absence of his company. She was thinking only how he should come to her. She was fading like a tender vine thrown adrift in the burning desert. She was burning with an inner flame on beds of cooling leaves of watery lotus and plantain trees. She was pining amidst all the enjoyments of her royal state, like a poor fish lying exposed on the dry bed of a pool in summer heat. She lost her modesty with her self possession. She repeated in her frenzy, "Here is Indra, and there he comes to me."

Finding her in this pitiable plight, a lady of her palace took compassion on her, and said, "I will safely conduct Indra before your ladyship in a short time." No sooner did she hear her companion say, "I will bring your desired object to you," than she opened her eyes with joy and fell prostrate at her feet, like one lotus flower falls before another. Then as the day passed on, and the shade of night covered the face of nature, the lady made haste to the house of Indra, the brahmin's boy.

The clever lady used her best persuasions and succeeded in returning to her royal mistress with this Indra. The queen adorned herself with pastes and paints and wreaths of fragrant flowers,

¹ The *Yoga Vasishtha*'s story of two adulterous lovers, Indra and Ahalya, has many connections with another story that would have been well known to an India reader, that of Indra, king of the gods, seducing Ahalya, the wife of sage Gautama, one of the Seven Rishis. The sage cursed both Indra and his wife. The curse on Ahalya was removed by Rama. As the story became popular over time, the curse was that Ahalya was turned into a stone and came back to life when touched by Rama's foot.

² The story of God Indra seducing Ahalya, the wife of Sage Gautama.

then conducted her lover to a private apartment where they enjoyed their fill. The youth, also decorated in his jewels and necklaces, delighted her with his sweet caresses, as the season of spring renovates trees with his luscious juice. Henceforward this ravished queen saw the world full with the figure of her beloved Indra, and she did not think much at all of the excellences of her royal lord, her husband.

After some time, certain facial expressions by the queen caused the great king to know of her love for the brahmin Indra. As she thought of her lover Indra, her face glowed like a full blown lotus, blooming with the beams of her moonlike lover. The brahmin boy Indra also was inflamed with all of his enraptured senses for love for the queen, and he could not remain for a moment in any place without her company. The king heard the painful news of their affections for each other and of their unconcealed meetings. He also observed many examples of their attachment, and at different times gave them his reprimands and punishments as they deserved.

They were both cast in the cold water in cold weather where, instead of betraying any sign of pain, they kept smiling together as in their merriment. Then the king had them to be taken out of the tank and ordered them to repent for their crimes, but the infatuated pair was far from doing so. They replied to the king in the following manner.

“Great king! As long as we continue to reflect on the unblemished beauty of each other’s face, we lost in the meditation of one another and we forget our own selves. We are delighted in our persecutions, as no torment can separate us from each other. We are not afraid of separation, even though you can separate our souls from our bodies.”

They were thrown in a frying pan upon fire, where they remained unhurt and exclaimed, “We rejoice, O king, at the delight of our souls in thinking of one another.” They were tied to the feet of elephants to be trampled, but they remained uninjured and said, “King, we feel our hearty joy at our memories of each other.” They were lashed with rods and straps and many other sorts of scourges which the king devised from time to time. But being brought back from the scourging ground and asked about their suffering, they returned the same answer as before.

Moreover, said the brahmin Indra to the king, “This world is full with the form of my beloved. All your punishments inflict no pain on her because she views the whole world as full of myself. Therefore all your punishments to torment the body can give no pain to the mind (soul) which is my true self and constitutes my personality (*purusha*) that resides in my person. This body is only an idea that presents a shadowy appearance. You can pour out your punishments upon it for a while, but it amounts to no more than striking a shadow with a stick. Nobody can break down a brave and resolute mind. Then tell me great king, what do the powers of the mighty amount to?”

“False conceptions of external appearances conspire to disturb the nature of the mind. It is better to chastise the body that misleads the mind to error. The mind identifies with whatever is constantly in its thoughts. The mind that is steadfast to its fixed purpose is forever firm.”

“Being and not being are words applicable to bodies. They do not apply to the mind because what exists in thought cannot be negated in any way. The mind is immovable. It cannot be moved by any effort like one can move bodies. It is impregnable to all external actions, and neither your anger or favor can have any effect on it.”

“It is possible for men of strong resolutions to change the course of their actions. But where is a strong minded man to be found who is able to withstand or change the currents of his own thoughts? It is impossible to move the mind from its fixed fulcrum, just as it is impracticable for tender stags to remove a mountain from its base.”

“This black-eyed beauty is the sole object of my mind. She is seated in the lofty temple of my mind like Goddess Bhavani on Mount Kailash. I fear nothing as long as I see this beloved preserver of my life and soul before me. I sit amidst the conflagration of a burning mountain in summer’s heat, but wherever I stand or fall, I am cooled under the shadow of her showering cloud. I think of nothing except the only object of my thought and wish. I cannot persuade myself to believe in me as anything other than Indra, the lover of Ahalya.”

“This constant association has made me believe this of myself. I cannot think of me other than what is my nature. Know, O king, that the wise have only one object in their thought and view. The mind, like Mount Meru, is not moved by threat or pity. The body can be tamed by one or another means, but the wise, O king, are masters of their minds. Nothing can deter them from their purpose.”

“Know for certain, O King, that neither our bodies nor our sensations are realities. They are only shows of truth and not the movers of the mind. On the contrary, it is the mind that supplies the bodies and senses with their powers of action, just like water supplies trees and branches with their sap. The mind is generally believed to be a sensuous and passive principle, wholly moved by the outward impressions of senses. But in truth, the mind is the active and moving principle of the organs of action. Because all the senses become dormant if the mind does not act, so the functions of the entire creation cease without the activity of the Universal Mind.”

The lotus-eyed king, thus defied by this perverse Indra, addressed Sage Bharata who was sitting by him. The king spoke to the sage, “Lord, you are acquainted with all morality. See this ravisher of my wife and hear the arrogant speech that he utters before our face. Please, O great sage, pronounce your curse upon him without delay, because it is a breach of justice to spare the wicked, just as it is to hurt the innocent.”

Being thus asked by the great king, the sage Bharata, the best of the wise munis, considered the crime of this wicked soul Indra. Then he pronounced his curse by saying, “I curse you, O reprobate sinner, to an early death, together with this sinful woman who is so faithless to her husband.”

The adulterous couple replied to the king and his venerable sage, saying, “What fools must you be to have wasted your curse, the great gain of your spiritual austerities (*tapas*), on our devoted heads. The curse you have pronounced can do us very little harm. Though our bodies should fall, death cannot affect our inner minds and spirits. The inner principle of the soul, owing to its inscrutable, subtle and intellectual nature, can never be destroyed by anybody anywhere.

Then this fascinated pair, head over heels in love with each other, fell down by effect of the curse, just like when branches cut from a tree fall upon the ground. Being subjected to the torment of reincarnation, they were both born as a pair of deer in mutual attachment, and then as a couple of turtle doves in their inseparable alliance. Afterwards, this loving pair came to be born

as man and woman, who by their practice of austerities, came to be reborn at last as a brahmin and brahmani.

Thus the curse of Bharata was capable only of transforming their bodies. It never touched their minds or souls which continued in their unshaken attachment in every state of their reincarnation. Therefore wherever and in whatever shape they come to be reborn, they always assumed the form of a male and female pair by virtue of their delusion and memories. Seeing the true love that existed between this loving pair in the forest, even the trees become enamored of the other sex of their own kinds.