

## **The Story of Punya and Pavana** (On Relationships and Grief)

*(Yoga Vasishta, Book V, Chapters 19-21)*

On the continent of Asia, there is a mountainous region surrounded by gardens and forests. Mount Mahendra rises above the rest, touching the sky with its lofty peaks. On the mountain was wish-fulfilling kalpa tree that spread its shade over the hermits and centaurs that took shelter beneath it. The place resounded with the sound of sages chanting hymns from the Sama Veda as they ascended from its caves and peaks to the world of Indra, king of the gods.

Fleecy clouds constantly drizzled rainwater on a thousand peaks, washing plants and flowers below. They appeared like tufts of hair hanging from heaven to earth. Mount Mahendra echoed with the loud roars of fierce eight-legged monsters, and with the thunder from the hollow mouths of its dark and deep clouds, like world-destroying clouds. The thundering noise of waterfalls cascading from precipice to precipice into its caverns would make the loud crashing of ocean waves blush by comparison.

There, on a tableland near the craggy top of Mount Mahendra, flowed the sacred stream of the heavenly Ganges for the purification and drink of hermits. There, the banks of the triple-path Ganges River were decorated with blossoming trees that sparkled like bright gold.

It was there, on the bank of the Ganges River amid a grove of fruit trees, that a sage named Dirghatapa lived with his wife and their two sons. The sage was a personification of meditation and a man of enlightened understanding. He had a noble mind and was accustomed to the austerities of tapas — meditation in pure consciousness. His wife was also long accustomed to the practice of yoga. Their two children were as beautiful as the full moon. They were named Punya (Meritorious) and Pavana (Holy) and they were as intelligent as the sons of sage Brihaspati, the guru of the gods.

In course of time, the two children arrived at the age of discretion. Punya, the elder of the two, was superior to his brother in all his merits. The younger boy, Pavana, was half-awakened in his intellect, like the half-blown lotus at the dawn of the day. His lack of intelligence kept him from knowing the truth and the certainty of his faith.

In the course of all-destroying time, the sage came to complete a hundred years. Age and infirmity reduced the strength of his tall body. His vitality decrepit, he bade farewell to his desires in this world that is so frail and full of a hundred fearful accidents to human life. The old devotee Dirghatapa left his mortal frame in a cave of that mountain, like a bird quitting its nest forever, or a water-bearer laying down the burden from his shoulders. His spirit fled like the fragrance of a flower to that empty space which is ever tranquil, free from attributes and thought, and of the nature of pure consciousness.

The sage's wife, finding her husband's lifeless body lying on the ground, fell down upon it and remained motionless like a lotus flower plucked from its stalk. Adept in yoga like her husband, she also dropped her body like a bee flits from a flower into empty air. Unseen by men, her soul followed that of her husband just like the stars in the night sky disappear at dawn.

Seeing the death of both parents, the elder son Punya busily employed himself in performing their funeral services, but the mind of the younger Pavana was overwhelmed by grief and he wandered about in the woods. He did not have the same firmness of mind as his elder brother, so he wailed and mourned. The magnanimous Punya completed the funeral ceremonies for his parents, then went in search of his brother wandering distraught in the woods.

Punya said, “My boy, why is your soul overcast by the cloud of your grief? Why do you shed tears from your lotus-eyes as profusely as rain, only to render yourself blind? Know, my intelligent boy, that your father and mother have gone to their ultimate blissful state in the Supreme Spirit, called the state of salvation or liberation. That is the last resort of all living beings and that is the blessed state of all self-subdued souls. Then why mourn for them who have returned and are reunited with their own true nature?”

“You vainly indulge yourself in false and fruitless grief. You are mourning for what is not to be mourned at all. Neither is she your mother nor he your father. You are not the only son of them who have had numerous children in their repeated births. You also have had thousands of fathers and mothers in your bygone births, just like there are many streams of running waters in every forest. You are not the only son of them who have had innumerable sons before you. Generations of men have passed away like the currents of a running stream. In their past lives, our parents had numberless children, relatives and friends. The branches of human generation are as numerous as the innumerable flowers and fruit on trees. If we lament over the loss of our parents and children who are dead and gone, then why not also lament those we have lost and left behind in all our past lives?”

“All that is presented to us in this illusive world is only a delusion. In truth, we have nobody in this world whom we may call to be our mother, father, real friend or even enemy. In a true sense, there is no loss of anybody or anything in the world. They only appear to exist and disappear, like the mirage of water in the dry desert. All is only a dream that lasts a few days.”

“Consider these phenomena in their true light and you will find that none of us is supposed to last forever. Therefore shun your error of the passing world from your mind forever.”

“That these are dead and gone and these others exist before us are only errors of our minds, creatures of our false notions and fond desires. There is no reality in them. Our notions and desires paint and present these various changes before our sight, like sunshine presenting water in a mirage. So our fancies, working in the field of our ignorance, produce the false conceptions that roll on like currents in the eventful ocean of the world, bringing waves of favorable and unfavorable events to us.”

“Who is our father and who our mother? Who are our friends and relatives, except our notion of them as such? Friends and relatives are like dust raised by the gusts of our airy fancy. The conceptions of friends and enemies and our sons and relatives are the products of our affection and hatred of them. These being the creations of our ignorance, they disappear into airy nothing upon enlightenment of understanding.”

“The thought of one as a friend makes him a friend. Thinking one as an enemy makes him an enemy. The knowledge of a thing as honey and of another as poison is owing to our opinions of

them. There being only one Universal Soul equally pervading the whole, there can be no reason to conceive of one as a friend and another as an enemy.”

“What you are? What makes your identity when your body is only a composition of bones, ribs, flesh and blood, and not yourself? Being viewed in its true light, there is nothing as ‘myself’ or ‘yourself.’ A fallacy of our understanding makes me think of me as Punya and you as Pavana. Who is your father and who is the son? Who is your mother and who your friend? One Supreme Self pervades all infinity. Who do you call the self and who the not self?”

“If you are a spiritual substance and have undergone many births, then you have had many friends and properties in your past lives. Why do you not think of them also? You had many friends in flowery fields where you pastured in your former form of a stag. Why do you not think of those deer who were once your dear companions? Why do you not lament for your lost swan companions in the pleasant pool of lotuses where you did dive and swim about in the form of a gander? Why not lament your fellow trees in the forest where you once stood as a stately tree? You had lion comrades on the rugged mountain crags. Why do you not lament them also? You had many mates among the fish in clear lakes decked with lotuses. Why not lament your separation from them?”

“You were a monkey in the grey and green woods of the country of Dasarna. You were a prince in land of frost and a raven in the woods of Pundra. You were an elephant in the land of Haihayas and an ass in that of Trigarta. You became a dog in the country of Salya and a bird in forests of sarala trees. You have been a ficus tree in the Vindhyan Mountains and a wood insect in a large oak tree. You were a cock on Mandara Mountain, then born as a brahmin in one of its caves. You were a brahmin in Kosala and a partridge in Bengal. You were a horse in the snowy land and a beast in the sacred ground of Brahma at Pushkara. You were an insect in the trunk of a palm tree, a gnat in a big tree, and a crane in the woods of Vindhya. Now you are my younger brother.”

“You have been an ant for six months and lain within the thin bark of a bhugpetera tree in a glen of the Himalayan hills. Now you are born as my younger brother. You have been a centipede in a dunghill at a distant village where you lived for a year and half. Now you have become my younger brother. Once you were the child of a Pulinda tribal woman and you lived on her breasts like the honey-sucking bee on a lotus flower. That same person is now my younger brother. In this manner, you were born in many other shapes and had to wander all about Asia for numberless years. And now are you my younger brother.”

“I see all this by my clear discernment and all-viewing sight. I see the past states of your existence caused by the prior desires of your soul. I also remember the many births that I had to undergo in my state of ignorance, which I see clearly before my enlightened sight.”

“I was a parrot in the land of Trigarta and a frog at the beach of a river. I became a small bird in a forest, then I was born in these woods. I have been a Pulinda hunter in Vindhya, then a tree in Bengal, and afterwards a camel in the Vindhya range. I am at last born in this forest. I, who have been a chataka cuckoo in the Himalayas and a prince in Paundra province, then a mighty tiger in the forests of Sahya Hill, am now become your elder brother. He who had been a vulture for ten years, a shark for five months, and a lion for a full century is now your elder brother in this

place. I was a wood partridge in a village in Andhara, a ruler in the snowy regions, then a proud son of a priest named Sailacharya in a hilly region.”

“I remember the various customs and pursuits of different peoples on earth that I had to observe and follow in my repeated reincarnations among them. In those different lives, I had many fathers and mothers and many more brothers and sisters, and also friends and relatives numbering hundreds and thousands. For whom shall I lament and which shall I forget among this number? Shall I wail only for those I lose in this life? But these also are to be buried in oblivion like the rest, and such is the course of the world. Numberless fathers have gone by, and unnumbered mothers also have passed away and died. Innumerable generations of men have perished and disappeared, like falling, withered leaves.”

“There are no bounds to our pleasures and pains in this terrestrial world. Lay them all aside and let us remain unmindful of all existence. Forsake your thoughts of false appearances, relinquish your firm conviction of your own ego, and look to that ultimate course which has led the learned to their final blessing. For what is this commotion of people except a struggle to rise and fall? Therefore strive for neither, but live like an indifferent sage regardless of both. Live free from your cares of existence and nonexistence. Then you shall be free from your fears of decay and death. Remember calmly your self alone. Do not be like the ignorant. Do not allow anything or any accident to move you from your self possession.”

“Know that you have no birth or death, no fortune or sorrow of any kind, no father or mother, and no friend or foe anywhere. You are only pure spirit. You have nothing of an unspiritual nature.”

“The world is a stage that presents many acts and scenes. Only those play their parts well who are excited neither by its passions and feelings. Those who are indifferent in their views have their quietude amidst all the occurrences of life. Those who have known the true One remain only to witness the course of nature. Those who know God do their acts without thinking themselves their actors, just as the lamps of night witness the objects around without being conscious of them. The wise witness objects as they are reflected in the mirror of their minds, just like a mirror and gems receive the images of things.”

“Now my boy, rub out all your wishes and visible signs of memories from your mind and see the image of the serene spirit of God in your innermost soul. Learn to live like the great sages, with the sight of your spiritual light and by effacing all false impressions from your mind.”

Pavana, having been lectured by Punya in this manner, became as enlightened in his intellect as the landscape becomes enlightened at daybreak. After, they continued living in that forest with the perfection of their spiritual knowledge. They wandered about in the woods to their hearts content. After a long time, they both attained nirvana and rested in their disembodied state of nirvana, like a lamp without oil wasting away of itself.

Thus is the end of men’s great boasts of having large crowds of followers and numberless friends in their embodied states of lifetime. Alas, they carry nothing with them to their afterlife, nor do they leave anything behind which they can properly call theirs.