

From the Ramayana

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The Ramayana or 'The Path of Rama' was written by the great sage Valmiki, and the Ramcharitramanas or 'The Lake of Rama's Acts' was written much later by saint Tulsidas. The Ramayana of Valmiki is written in Sanskrit and the Ramcharitramanas was written in Avadh—excellent translations of both are available in English today.

Mostly known as a great epic of pre-history, the Ramayana gives tremendous insight into living without conflict—without sorrow. There is one episode in particular that is full of practical wisdom. As the epic unfolds, Rama has been banished to the forest for 14 years and his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana accompany him into exile. His other brother Bharata was not present when this happened and returns to find out about Rama's exile.

To Bharata, absolute dedicated service to Rama was the ethos of his existence and he was unwavering in this focus. This was not just brotherly attachment, though he had deep love for Rama, but the life mission he felt. Life and action are synonymous, but conflict arises when motive, thought or ego are the foundation for the action, propel the action and continue after the physical action has ended—all which become the basis for future action. Something has to be done from moment to moment in life—do it! Why does thought need to interpret right action, which flows only from wisdom? Memory is useful and can be used as a function, but when it assumes entity-ship and gets in the driver's seat, so to say—conflict is unavoidable.

Is it possible to act in life, which is in relationships, without conflict? For this, one must be able to face what is actually happening or taking place in each unfolding situation as they happen—that is, be in the present, to be aware of the rise and fall of thought, and to keep all thought out of action. Thought as memory is used as needed, but a great many troubles arise when thought uses us instead.

Bharata felt his life-mission was direct and total service of Rama, but this was shaken when he returned to learn of Rama's banishment and exile. Not only this, a scheme was engineered to enthrone him as king, as his father the king died in his absence too. To him, this meant separation from Rama and a set of duties that he saw as being quite different from his deeply felt mission of service to Rama would ensue. He felt the only solution was to encourage Rama to return to Ayodhya, coronate Rama as king, and to serve him untiringly. To serve Rama untiringly was his life-mission, but the other two points: Rama's return to Ayodhya and his coronation were conditions that surged from his deep personal love for Rama and what he felt would be best for all. If one feels something to be his or her duty—then one should do it. But, if part or more either concerns another or involves another person's participation—one should not generate ideas till

this has been discussed, as the other person may have different views about it. We mostly take those closest for granted in this just because they 'happen to be related'. Without relating—relationship is just a word and maybe a piece of paper like any other. To relate means to never take anything for granted—relationship or not.

Bharata was very clear about his life-mission of being in service to Rama, but he knew that Rama's coronation at that time and wanting his return from exile were outcomes he thought were best, but these crossed Rama's sense of duty. There was not the slightest tinge of selfishness at all on Bharata's part, and what unfolds in the forest in the dialogues between all result in the most extraordinary revelation of pure action and love—not contradictory as long as inner clarity is not eclipsed.

Bharata takes a large retinue including sage Vasistha who was the family preceptor, ministers and family, and arrives at Rama's hermitage. Rama was to be coronated right there in the forest itself as it was the right thing to do. This would bring great joy to all, be best for the kingdom, and his return to Ayodhya would allow total and dedicated service in his presence—the ideal situation all around indeed.

Rama heard about his father's death on seeing Bharata, which took place after Rama left for exile, and this hit him very hard, and as he had deep love for his father, upon hearing the news, he fainted. Immediately on recovering, Rama asked sage Vasistha what should be done as part of his last rites for his father; and so, what needed to be done was done. Fantastic! There was no suppression of his love or deep feelings or trying to philosophize or intellectualize anything—the weight of the loss was like a ton of bricks, and he fainted. When one is natural, not shrewd and calculating—every action is natural—everything is in its place. On recovering, the intelligence—unencumbered by thought—feels that something needs to be done to observe the death of his father, and so Rama seeks Vasistha's guidance and does the needful. The full depth of his father's death was felt, but we see that dejection or ongoing lamentation, which we usually see as a demonstration of 'love', is a demonstration and not truly natural at all. Feeling the full impact of the loss was natural as was the feeling that something needed to be done. When one inquires within, questions arise: why does any event, joyous or not, have to color the next? Why does feeling sadness or joy or the moment have to interfere with what needs to be done. Is it natural for one experience to run-off or color the next? Events unfold in succession, but we don't let them go—holding on to one while dealing with the other—which naturally will color the new action. It is like continuing to sleep even though one is nicely rested and has had a good night's sleep—it is not sleep any more but lethargy. We eat healthy food to replenish the body's fuel so that there is energy, and this is natural—but to continue the indulgence for taste which is sensual enjoyment is gluttony.

When Rama and Bharata sit to talk, Rama inquires about many things, but first he asks about the state of affairs of the kingdom and offers some advice that would be beneficial. Rama was very

wise and experienced in affairs of the state as he was being groomed to be king, so to give the best advice was to give the best—simply and directly. On the other hand, why do we feel that there *must be* small chat or gossip for it to be personal or loving—*especially upfront and as the main theme*? We keep the most useful things for 'later if we have time' and waste time on gossip under the delusion that it is perhaps pleasing, but if we examine ourselves honestly—there is fear which prevents us from touching important themes, as one feels it may interfere with the relationship! It may be unwelcome or the wrong things could be said or right things misconstrued so it is better to make useless small talk—at least no toes will get stepped on. This fear puts calculation into our every relationship and we are always thinking of what to say and how to put it—not that one should speak carelessly, but it is driven somehow by wanting to maintain a status quo with the other person and not causing offence. Very little that is useful or mutually beneficial is ever exchanged because of this fear. When the heart is right or when one is naturally good—fear is dispensed of in relationships, and so hurtful and foolish things do not even arise. The intelligence is wide awake, and every exchange is enriching, as one learns and contributes and there is real growth. This natural giving and graceful receiving is the flow of love in relationships.

Love does that which is best for all and not what protects one's own interests best, which is selfishness and not love. Chit chat and gossip always only pass time and contribute nothing and do not enrich each other. This is not to say that there is no room for small talk, but small talk is different from useless talk and gossip which, though there is communication or transmitting of information, do not contribute or enrich the heart and mind. Small talk is only talk on simpler things but big things can result—useless talk is about things that do not exist like the 'what if's...' and 'suppose...' dead ends that usually get into gossip or talk about other people's business.

Sage Vasistha tells Rama that they have come with some proposals, feelings and thoughts, but not to convince him of anything, as he must do what he feels to be best, and so he tells Bharata to place his feelings very openly in front of Rama for his consideration. They all came to see Rama and would very much like his return as king, but there was tremendous wisdom in approaching openly *for* a solution and not with a solution.

To talk for the purpose of coming to an understanding is to look into something together, and this is very different from talking in order to come to an agreement, which is the plea-bargaining where each side has a desired outcome and each knows what they are willing to concede—each needing to get something. This is lingual combat and it creates unnecessary tension. Can we discuss in order to find out, to know and together look for a solution instead of approaching with one or many solutions which requires premeditated, acceptable outcomes?

If the heart is free from deception and manipulation—there should be no hesitation to be quite free, open or natural. A good heart is also a wise heart, as goodness is not blind and this wisdom will not get hurt or cause hurt. This is what makes goodness good. We think so much in all our

relationships, even in the most intimate ones, because of our personal agendas, and so it happens that there is little trust.

Bharata expresses his feelings that Rama should ascend the throne, be coronated and return to Ayodhya, as this would make everyone happy and allow him to serve Rama fully. This is what he felt and this is what he offered for Rama's consideration—with the caveat that in spite of this, what Rama felt was best—would be best indeed. Bharata was not plea bargaining or merely accepting, but he expressed exactly the reasons and outcome he wholeheartedly felt—there were no hidden agendas or items omitted to be introduced later on in further bargaining as we find in close relationships as well. He expresses that the basis of his feelings is that, in this, he sees the best for all and a continuing opportunity to serve Rama. He closes by imploring Rama to make his decision on the matter and offered his full-hearted acceptance as well. The sincerity of Bharata's intent to serve is evident in his words, and his feelings are consistent, expressing as they do that whatever Rama decides will still give him opportunity to serve Rama front and center. There is tremendous clarity in his approach and one learns that with sincerity, clarity and adjustment—perfect solutions are not only possible but inevitable.

In discussions or dialogues, many things are said so one has to really listen to see what the main issues are; and the same goes for talking where one must be very clear about what is most important. Bharata expressed three wishes: that he would not be denied service to Rama in his physical absence; that it was best for Rama to rule instead of him for many reasons; and, that there had to be some way to uphold righteousness and still have Rama return to Ayodhya for the benefit of all. Of these, the first was uppermost in Bharata's mind—he felt his life-mission of service to Rama was in the balance. One has to really listen, not between the lines, but listen wholly to know what is most important.

Rama recognizes this, and after praising Bharata's sincerity and pure devotion beautifully, asks Bharata to decide what the outcome should be and that he will abide by it regardless of his feeling that he should honor his father's word by accepting exile for 14 years. An enormous burden is put on Bharata, as when love and devotion are real—there can never be even a tinge of selfishness or its resulting outcome.

Bharata is overwhelmed with Rama's trust—not what we call 'unconditional love' (which does not exist), but the 'trust' that Rama has in him. Rama trusts Bharata's wisdom completely as wisdom is never blind, but this thing called unconditional love is blind and selfish as it puts popularity before what is best and hence, it is not love. Love does what is best and therefore it is wisdom in action or truth in action. These three are not different from one another and we see this very often in this episode of the Ramayana where wisdom is love, truth is love—love being truth and wisdom in action. For love or the actions in the name of love, what is best has to be the consideration and this necessitates seeing the truth and wisdom to stay steady—this love is pure love.

The sage-king Janaka, who was also on the scene, comes to the aid of Bharata who is at a loss for words, and after praising Bharata, implores Rama to decide what is best. They have all come to see Rama and, though they would like to see Rama return, love him just as he loves them. Selfishness and its resulting hurt cannot enter where purity of heart and intent shines.

Rama offers his respects to king Janaka and expresses his gratitude for the sage-king's wise counsel and trust. He suggests that they take the opportunity to rest a little and enjoy the beautiful woods since they were there. Why are we, on the other hand, always in a rush for an outcome? Space is the field from which the best harvest is reaped. It allows room for thought, reexamination and reevaluation—not to try to win, but rather to scrutinize one's motives, remembering that all this is part of life, of growth, of evolution and the ascent to inner perfection. Time to think, consider or formulate is very tacky and self-serving. But time and space to feel our connectedness with life, as one who feels connected organically with all of life (not just his or her life) must *feel* life, and it is life itself that responds best. It is not 'our' life, we are a little drop in the ocean of life; and just like the drop or wave in the ocean—the ocean lives, and the drops and waves are its formations.

All who have come are awed by the sheer beauty of the forest and Rama's hospitality. Rama was a prince and used to a princely lifestyle. Family members and townspeople thought it was most unfortunate that a prince would renounce all and live in the forest as an ascetic, denied of all comfort. They wanted to help Rama, serve him and provide him some comfort, but realize that the exact opposite is the case. They, among them the affluent and princely, are awed by the sheer beauty of the peaceful surroundings and Rama's hospitality. One understands that renunciation is not a one-time thing, as it may be traditionally suggested, but rather, it is a living and breathing, ongoing spirit. In accepting exile, Rama walked away from all the wealth and pomp he had and never looked back—he was a prince, now he is a forest dweller—that is all. That was then, this is now—both real, both actual. There are and were no regrets because 'princely' no longer registered with Rama as the 'good old days', which are never good—but always old and dead. While he was prince, he lived appropriately; now as a forest dweller, he lives with the same enthusiasm: enthusiasm as a prince, enthusiasm as a forest dweller—there was no change in his condition, as enthusiasm is constant. That was then, this is now—why should enthusiasm be held in the balance? I lived enthusiastically as a prince, now I live enthusiastically as a forest dweller and hence there is nothing missed at all, no regrets, no remorse—and no rear-view mirror.

Many talk about renunciation but are eager to 'catch-up' and talk about the good old times—either with a teacher, at some function or in earlier days. What is important is that memory as reality is abandoned, renounced—because life is ever-flowing and thought and memory interrupts it. Today this has come or these conditions have come—wonderful. Tomorrow something else—O super-wonderful, what can I do in this? No comparison, no weighing and no sorrow of regret.

The sages, wise ones and ministers were quick to notice that Rama was unchanged and had the very same demeanor. On the contrary, it was they themselves who were restless and desirous of some sort of change or adjustment. Having space in our lives allows perspective. Yesterday, when Rama was a prince, he could welcome royal guests (with whatever was available then), and today, being a forest dweller (tides change in our lives often), he is just as hospitable (whatever is available now) and loving, offering all that he has—no apology for his simplicity and not whining about less or wishing more—nothing of the sort. Yesterday that, today this—renunciation in life! We fear change in life and in fear are always working towards achieving all kinds of security: financial, psychological, lifestyle and even emotional—why? Yes, a little financial security is helpful, but why are we so afraid of challenging our sense of attachment to things? This is fear, and those who live in fear can never know freedom or peace. Do your best, whatever comes—let it come!

Some of the people in the epic, especially the mothers, expressed remorse at seeing Rama, Sita and Lakshmana as forest dwellers while the ladies gathered one day. Kaushalya, the mother of Rama, responded promptly that this was so natural and that conditions in life changed. She expressed her pride that all three adapted so well and was confident that their time in exile would pass more quickly since they were not fighting the changing tides. You may feel slightly perplexed to hear a mother (and queen) saying she was glad they were well while talking to other mothers (also queens and princesses), but change was a fact and their adaption was so beautiful that their joy had not diminished one bit. Why shouldn't a mother be very proud that the storms of life have not shaken her dear ones? Her magnificent reply was full of wisdom, love, and a gentle admonition and reminder to all that love is not weak—and cannot weaken. Wisdom is strength and when wisdom acts, doing best—it is love in all its strength, and it gives strength!

Before taking leave of Kaushalya, Rama's mother, Sita's mother Sunayana asked her if Sita may accompany them to meet her father king Janaka and other family members who were all keen to see her. Kaushalya immediately consented, but it is not a matter of 'consent' or power over anyone, but a genuine courtesy, as she recognized that her daughter was married and to be truly happy (not just Sita, but all the family), there should not be dual pulls. There was just an all-encompassing feeling and this is true sensitivity—sensitive to the implication of one's thoughts, feelings, words and actions on all. This only comes about when wisdom dawns in the heart and begins to respond in one's life.

On seeing his daughter Sita again, and embracing her, the sage-king Janaka felt the full depth of her love, and though Sita was a princess, she was clad as a forest-dwelling ascetic. Being a very powerful and most respected king, you would think there would be some remorse or words of concern expressed about her condition, but no! —the sage-king Janaka spontaneously expressed his pride at Sita's example of honoring her duty as Rama's wife and proclaimed that her fame would exceed that of the Ganga as the wise in all circles would recant her superb example. That

Janaka praised her instead of feeling sorry for her was a profound response of what is natural and best—the recognition of Sita's shining example of perfect action. Joyful and sad moments are part of life's stream; experience them and let them pass as they come—newer ones are in the queue. We try to block, prevent and manipulate events instead of adjusting ourselves, and this causes much sorrow for all. Janaka felt the joy of reuniting with Sita and there was no suppression in this. Realizing what had actually taken place, his natural (not contrived) words were recognition and praise of them.

Sita was deeply moved by her father's praise, and after meeting her family felt it proper to ask permission from her parents to return to her husband—another event that the sage-king Janaka extolled as her greatness. Her parents and family were most proud that Sita was firm in the wisdom that was itself love, as it always responded perfectly. There was no premeditation or thought about the perfect response, as when the heart and mind are absolutely pure, free of all selfishness—goodness rushes to fill the space and respond to life.

Today, we confuse words like 'sensitivity' with love. Sensitivity, as it is used commonly, denotes fragility, but this is not love. It is an extreme self-centeredness where one feels delicate or vulnerable or hurttable in areas, and this is all about oneself and one's feelings. How can this self-centeredness be love in any way? Brutishness is the opposite of this sensitivity or self-centeredness—and neither is it love. Wisdom is not shrewdness or calculation, but an abiding in goodness, and this what is love. Natural goodness is not capable of getting hurt or hurting others. When the fangs of non-love and all that it represents are removed—love remains.

Rama had already expressed earlier that to honor the word of his father in exile was what he felt was best to do, but still he listened to others with an open mind and even offered sage Vasistha, the sage-king Janaka and Bharata the decision by which he would abide.

Bharata found all the answers within himself and was perfectly resolved. His foremost desire was to serve Rama as his life-mission and he discovered that this could happen by discharging his duty as caretaker of the kingdom till Rama's return. This was not a compromise but a direct realization that this was indeed the best course of action. If he was concerned about service, he did not have to be in the physical proximity of Rama, as the spirit of Rama was enshrined in his heart and this spirit would rule—with himself as the instrument. He missed Rama and saw that Rama was not only well but unchanged, and discovered through Rama that renunciation was love.

When I renounce, or to put it the other way, don't get attached to things as life flows, I will not try to cling to them, arresting change, growth, progress and evolution. I do my best in all things but am free from expectation, which is a face of selfishness and not love. I don't try to manipulate the other or pressure the other in any way, and this living and breathing sense of non-attachment is renunciation, which is pure love. I can never and will never get hurt as I am not trying to cling to anything and, therefore, there is no way I can hurt you either, as to hurt, I myself must be hurt

and there is no platform for hurt within, in the spirit of renunciation. Rama did not feel hurt when he joyfully accepted exile immediately upon hearing of his father's word, and he never felt hurt in exile. As a result of this inner detachment or real renunciation, he never thought ill of others, including Bharata's mother Kaykayi who was instrumental to his exile. Rama felt and said that it was not her fault, not out of courtesy or affection, but by knowing that each reaps what must be reaped and someone has to be the instrument, just as the instrument called the mailman delivers both money and bills.

Bharata's love was based on self-sacrificing service, and Rama's love was the love of renunciation. Through their dialogues, Bharata had a glimpse of this higher and more perfect love and absorbed it fully—saturating himself in this fire that burns everything that is not love, and where only love remains. We use words like 'forgive' and 'forget', but we could forgive though never forget, so there is no forgiving really. Rama's love is renunciation, and in this blazing fire there is constant, second-to-second renouncing where thought never gets a chance to solidify into impression and influence other actions in the future—it is this that is love. Thought is used and disposed of because it is not necessary, and so the mind and heart are kept ever pure, untainted, uncolored—whole and holy. Silly little things like grudges and hidden hurt have no foothold in this fire of renunciation or pure love.

Bharata was fully satisfied, the dialogue firmly enthroned Rama in his heart and he was ready to return and serve Rama as caretaker in his absence. Before leaving, he asked Rama for two things: his sandals which he could enthrone, and this would always be a visible reminder of Rama, and what was best to be done with the sacred waters and things brought for Rama's coronation, as they came there with this hope. Rama gave him his sandals immediately and asked him to kindly seek counsel from the wise sage Atri who alone could best advise him further.

Sage Atri had lived right there in the forest for a long time and was overjoyed to hear the words and sentiment of Bharata. "There is a beautiful well (lake) close by which nourishes us all. It will be the best place for the sacred waters gathered for Rama's coronation, and many who have not been able to visit the sacred place from where these waters have been gathered will now be able to be blessed right here," said sage Atri. A tremendous service was rendered to all the ascetics who inhabited that region in pursuit of truth, and sage Atri thanked and blessed Bharata on behalf of all. At Bharata's request, he showed him all the beautiful sites in the forest, explaining to him the significance of each, and especially all the places where Rama stayed or visited which Bharata was most keen to visit.

After spending some time with the wise sage Atri, Bharata returned to Rama and asked his permission to return to Ayodhya so that he may continue his service as king Rama's representative.

Events come and go in succession, but we get impressed with one and depressed with the other—both 'press' themselves on the mind and form the basis for future action. This is how conditioning builds up. This does not mean that one becomes cold and calculating, but rather, be aware of what is actually taking place instead of giving attention to thought. Acting in the light of what is there only, and letting action drop like a wave falling back into the ocean without residue, the mind becomes light—enlightened.

Nothing is taken for granted in relationships where there is real love. Taking leave or asking permission to visit or seeing if it is a good time to talk are not social courtesies or excesses—it is respect, and this respectfulness is the treatment of love. Renunciation is pure love as it does not register events or remember them, and it is therefore incapable of getting hurt or hurting, because here, only pure love exists.

Debating on the facts of this episode or scripture will not accomplish anything, but if we can see meaning in it that is relevant to our lives, something that can trigger an instant change—it is very worthwhile. This particular episode of Bharata's visit to Rama till his return back to Ayodhya is a series of classic examples of living without conflict in relationships—in life.

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