

THE YOGA VASISTHA IN POEM

CHAPTER ONE

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Dedicated to

SWAMI VENKATESANANDA

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PRAYER BEFORE READING

Salutations to that supreme reality
In which all shine as if independently
In which they exist for a short while
And into which they merge eventually

Salutations to that consciousness
Source of apparent threefold division
Of knower, knowledge and known
Seer, sight and seen; doer, doing and deed

Salutations to that bliss-absolute
Which is the life of all beings
Deriving happiness from the shower
Of its ocean of supreme bliss

CHAPTER ONE

DEALING WITH DISPASSION

A Seeker's Plight: Work or Knowledge

Wise sage kindly do thou instruct
On this problem of liberation
Which of these is more conducive
Is it work or is it knowledge?

Dear one kindly consider
Birds fly with both their wings
Work and knowledge go together
Leading to the goal of liberation

Hear now an ancient legend
Consider, then do as you please
There was a sage in days of yore
Who was invited to heaven's abode

He asked the messenger inviting him
Of heaven's merits and demerits
As the wise never leap blindly
Based on hearsay or appearance

The messenger informed the sage
Heaven is where fruits were reaped
Of good deeds after exhausting which
One returns back to this very world

The sage could not see any wisdom
In a short detour of indulgence
As it weakens one's condition
And returns one in worsened state

The sage declined the invitation
Seeing it as a loss and not a gain
The messenger requested the wise sage
To kindly reconsider this once again

At the request of the messenger
The sage sought counsel with Valmiki
A wise sage who narrated to him
The story of Rama and Vasistha

Sage Valmiki's Counsel

Qualified is one to take up study
Of the dialogue of Rama and Vasistha
Who feels bound and seeks liberation
Being neither ignorant nor enlightened

Valmiki spoke about the background
Of the dialogue he revealed for all
Containing the secret of liberation
Of Rama and those who listened sincerely

This is not merely a story in the past
But contains a teaching for eternity
If you too live like they did live
You will attain freedom from sorrow

This world-appearance is a confusion
Just like the blueness of the sky
It is better not to dwell on it
But to ignore it while it lasts

Neither freedom nor self-realization
Is possible till conviction arises
That world-appearance is confusion
Between the real and the unreal

Study this scripture or any other
But get beyond the confusion
Of appearance and reality
And attain freedom from sorrow

Liberation is the total abandonment
Of mental conditioning without reserve
Impure conditioning causes birth
Pure conditioning helps liberate

Abandon the roots of bondage
Abandon their very seeds as well
Abandon nescience and ego-sense
Abide in the pure which does sustain

This pure and sustaining force
Does not lead to rebirth at all
It sustains by previous momentum
And not by present motivation

Hear now the story of Rama
Who lived enlightened like a sage
Knowing the truth you will be freed
From misunderstanding and all sorrow

The Story of Rama Begins

Upon completing his education
Rama toured the whole country
The nature of a pilgrim is pilgrimage
To see and discover things as they are

Returning he resumed his duties
But a profound change he underwent
He appeared thin, weak and in ill health
But replied to all that he was fine

Sage Vasistha knew that every change
Surely has a deeper hidden cause
Rama's father, the king, did not wish to know
As truth can be quite inconvenient

Sage Vishvamitra's Arrival

Soon Sage Vishvamitra of world renown
Arrived at Rama's father's court
The king welcomed him with great praise
Granting in advance any boon he sought

Vishvamitra revealed his mission clearly
Asking for Rama's help for security
As he was undertaking a religious rite
And was being troubled by some demons

Because of the nature of the ritual
He could not provide his own security
And knowing Rama's true nature
Felt this would bring him great glory

He asked the king not to delay
On account of attachment to his son
In sending Rama with him immediately
He would confer on Rama great blessings

The stunned king gave various excuses
Finally saying with Rama he could not part
Often powerful demons occupied the stage

And in time, the world stage they did depart

Vishvamitra was angered by these words
As he knew very well who Rama was
And promise given should be honored
Seeing this Sage Vasistha intervened

Said Sage Vasistha to the wise king
You should never go back on your word
Kings are exemplars of righteous conduct
Rama would be safe with Sage Vishvamitra

Sage Vasistha was the king's preceptor
The king obeyed his guidance respectfully
He asked his attendants to fetch Rama
Hearing more from them about his son

Rama's Condition

O king said the royal attendants
Rama has changed so drastically
He seems dejected and shuns company
The king now inquired even further

The chamberlains said Rama had changed
Since returning from the long pilgrimage
He has no interest in princely ways
And shuns all entertainment as poison

He rejects all princely royal privileges
And sometimes muses to himself aloud
What is the use of wealth and fortune
All of this is unreal and sorrow giving

He remains alone contemplating silently
He seems to relish his own solitude
Ever immersed in his own thoughts
Getting more emaciated by the day

He sings to himself repeatedly
We want change but aren't willing to change
We are wasting our life in various ways
Instead of trying to reach the supreme

Seeing him and hearing his words
We too are all greatly distressed

He seems bereft of hope and desires
Not deluded, not enlightened either

He says there is no use in any of these
Wealth, family and even kingdom
All the ambition in the world
O king, please do find his remedy

Sage Vishvamitra then interceded
He requested for Rama's presence
Knowing dispassion born of wisdom
Had blossomed leading to enlightenment

Just then Rama himself appeared in court
Saluting and offering his respects to all
His face shone with peace of maturity
The king, his father, welcomed him warmly

Dear son do kindly explain to us
What is it that seems to sadden you
Dejection is an invitation to misery
The wise sages nodded in agreement

Rama's Observation of Life

O sages, happy indeed was childhood
The best of teachers instructed me
But a trend of thought recently arisen
Has taken a hold of me completely

My heart questions what happiness is
How it can be had in the changing world
All beings are born to die in this world
And all die to be born again as well

What is the meaning in all this change?
Why do we suffer and sin endlessly?
Unrelated beings come together
The mind conjures relationships strangely

Everything verily depends on the mind
And its ever changing attitude to all
But this very mind appears unreal
When inquired into quite seriously

We are running after a mirage foolishly

Living without freedom in slavery
Wandering the world's forest aimlessly
Witnessing the dance of birth and death

How does this suffering finally end?
Is there a way out of life's bondage?
Though I shed no tears externally
My heart cries and bleeds profusely

Wealth

It is wealth which deludes the ignorant
Creating worries, causing unsteadiness
Generating an appetite for even more
Indifferent to good and bad people

Wealth hardens the heart of all
As they pursue more and more of it
Happiness and wealth do not coexist
Rare are the wealthy without enemies

Wealth is the seed of evil thoughts
It adds fear to one's distress
Wealth seems to seek the one
Whom death has already chosen

Lifespan

Short in duration is this lifespan
Like a water droplet on a leaf
This lifespan is only fruitful to those
Who have attained self-knowledge

Blowing winds we may encompass
Indivisible space we may divide
Waves we may thread into a garland
But hopes on this lifespan are futile

One tries vainly to extend his life
Only to increase sorrow and suffering
Only those who strive to know the self
Can hope to have some real gain

Knowledge and wisdom are burdens
To the unwise, full of desires
Mind and lifespan are burdens too
To the restless, without self-knowledge

The rat of time gnaws at lifespan
Termites of disease eat one's vitals
Just as a cat hungrily eyes the rat
Death hungrily eyes this lifespan

Egotism

Most fearful it is to contemplate
The entry into wisdom by egotism
It approaches in darkness with stealth
And flourishes in its own ignorance

Endless sinful tendencies it generates
All suffering revolves around egotism
It is always 'I' that does suffer
It is the sole cause of mental distress

Egotism is the worst disease of all
Masterfully pushing poison as pleasure
Ruthlessly trapping all living beings
All world's calamities it does create

The Mind

Eclipsing self-control, it creates havoc
Destroying virtue and equanimity
All done with ego-notion is wasted
From its clutches I now seek freedom

Bereft of grace earned through service
The impure mind still drifts aimlessly
Dissatisfied with all and anything it gets
It is impossible to satisfy its appetite

This mind wanders without purpose
Unable to find happiness anywhere
Unmindful of the suffering it brings
Ruthless it is in its blind pursuits

Bound by the knots of craving am I
The net laid out by this mind only
Just as rushing rivers carry away
I feel uprooted and taken downstream

The cause of objects is the mind alone
Whatever exists in all the worlds
Is so because of mind-stuff only

Worlds vanish without this mind

Many errors result when craving surges
As darkness of ignorance eclipses wisdom
All good qualities do get dried up
The heart is hardened by craving's dance

Though I try hard to restrain craving
It insists on its own appeasement
Overpowered and carried away I am
Now I revolve pinned to craving's wheel

Like birds in a net who cannot fly
I feel trapped in the net of craving
Which runs directionless like a mad horse
Imposing a tight net of relationships

Hero converted to a coward I am
With eyes to see but blind I am
Full of joy but miserable I am
A dreadful goblin is this craving

Unable to enjoy natural pleasures
Coming unsought as gifts from above
I am made to submit to vain efforts
Leading to endless misery and suffering

Craving occupies life's stage dominantly
An aged actress incapable of performing
Dances to self-defeat and humiliation
Yet refuses to stop her painful dance

Surging to the skies at one moment
Then diving to the depths of gloom
This up and down—based on emptiness
Glory to sages, masters of the mind

The Body

A pitiable composition is this body
Source of pain though insentient
Delighted with a little gratification
Distressed by the least adversity

This body can be compared to a tree
Branches for arms, trunk for torso

Holes for eyes, fruits for head
Leaves for its abundant illnesses

Resting place for all living beings
Still we cannot say it is our own
A boat to cross life's turbulent ocean
It cannot be regarded as one's self

This tree born in the forest of samsara¹
Restless monkey mind plays on it
Abode of crickets are our worries
Insects of suffering eat it constantly

Serpent of craving resides in it
Crow of anger stays here as well
Flowers of laughter, fruits good and bad
Wind of life-force does animate it

Birds on it are different senses
Resorted to by traveler of desire
Providing pleasure as its shade
Vulture of ego is seated on it

Hollow and empty is this tree
It cannot give lasting happiness
Living and falling in a short time
Subject to decay, old age and death

Filled with impurities is this body
I am not the least bit enamored by it
Afflicted by the disease of ignorance
How can this fulfill any hopes I have?

Home of illness and mental distress
With changing emotions and moods
Though we care and protect it well
It abandons us at death ruthlessly

Its only purpose is to burn at death
Shame on those bound to the body
Deluded by the wine of ignorance
Shame on those bound in this world

Childhood

¹ Samsara: repetitive existence

Regarded as enjoyable, but not really so
Filled with helplessness and mishaps
Cravings, inability to express oneself
Utter foolishness, instability and weakness

The child is easily hurt and angered
Easily bursts into tears and anguish
Living completely at the mercy of others
Exposed to everything without choice

Easily influenced by the wicked
Subjected to control and punishment
Filled with hidden sinful behavior
Extremely restless and unhappy

The child must have new things daily
Crying and weeping—its foremost activities
Not getting what it wants each day
It looks and acts heart broken

Being disciplined by its teachers
Being promised everything by its parents
The child begins to value things promised
Seeds of delusion are sown in childhood

Unable to avoid heat and cold
How is the child better than a tree?
Leery is he like animals and birds
As the child is fearful of its elders

Youth

Transitioning from childhood to youth
Unable to leave unhappiness behind
Subjected to more and more conditioning
He embraces things and desires increase

Wisdom is lost as desires increase
Delusion enters the heart and mind
Selfish actions become his activity
Causing unhappiness to others and himself

Even as great forests are consumed by fire
Lust and impurities consume the mind
Distracted by thoughts of pleasures
He loses his inner peace and calm

Dashing after short lived pleasures
Makes a beggar of the young prince
Continually distracted and ever wanting
Youth breeds much mental distress

When lust and desires enter the heart
Good qualities are hastily abandoned
Each time this cycle repeats itself
Goodness is set aside callously

Youth appears desirable physically
It is most destructive to the mind
Temptations plunge one to sorrow
Hence I am not enamored by youth

They are great who have overcome
Survived the taint and evils of youth
Without succumbing to temptations
Or increasing likes and dislikes

He becomes a slave of sexual attraction
Though the body is full of impurities
Wisdom is lost in the insistence
Of what is not over what really is

Old Age

Dissatisfaction of youth brings old age
How cruel indeed is this life
Just as the wind tosses a dew drop
Old age mercilessly destroys the body

As a drop of poison enters the body
And begins to thoroughly consume it
Senility enters representing old age
Making one a laughing stock for all

Unable to satisfy desires in old age
But desires continue to grow
Too late he begins to self-inquire
Too late to change life's course

Senility is the royal attendant
Weakness an invitation to death
Rare are those without enemies
Rarer those unaffected by senility

Time

Enjoyments and pleasures are delusion
Reflected in the mirror of the mind
All controlled by the wheel of time
Which leaves nothing undestroyed

Time gives a glimpse of itself
As year and age but stays hidden
Overpowering all and everything
Consuming all most mercilessly

The greatest magician of all is time
It cannot be analyzed at all
Consuming insects and gods too
In the fury of its insatiable appetite

Like a boy playing with a little ball
Time plays with the sun and moon
Creating and dissolving universes
Time is established in the absolute

Continually at work without rest
Time does not tire or rejoice
Neither coming nor going at all
Never rising—neither does it set

The gourmet time sees all objects
As they ripen in the fire of sun
As tasty treats for consuming
And wipes them out playfully

To lotus of youth—the nightfall
To elephant of time—the lion
Destroying all and everything
But indestructible is this time

As one sleeps after a hard day
Time sleeps during dissolution
With creation-potential hidden in it
Unknowable and unfathomable is time

Life and Death

All that we see is dream-like
Appearing and ever changing
Mountains become craters

Fertile soil becomes arid desert

Not only do things keep changing
But we are ever changing too
Age, lifestyle and fortune
Ever dance to their own tune

Life-and-death cycle—a skilled dancer
With a skirt made of human souls
Lifting them up in forward movement
Hurling them down in backward step

Everything she consigns to memory
Great deeds, rituals and rites too
Humans are reborn as animals
Is there anything unchanging here?

The gods are destroyed as well
The pleasant reveal their ugliness
Just as a boy plays with a mud ball
Everything gets created and destroyed

Rama's Closing Thoughts

Perception of defects in the world
Has stilled my mind's tendencies
Sense-pleasures do not arise within
As mirages do not appear on water

The delightful appears bitter to me
I do not relish pleasures or wealth
I wish to remain at peace within
Seeking freedom from this tyranny

I am constantly inquiring within
How to wean heart from the world
I do not care how long I live
As long as I remain ever free

If not established in wisdom now
Will there ever be another opportunity
Indulgences will consume lifetimes
Self-knowledge is all that I now seek

Therefore, O Sage, I pray to thee
Kindly do thou please instruct me

On freedom from anguish and distress
In the light of your instruction

Destroy the ignorance in my heart
This I humbly request of thee
I am filled with grief and confused
And shudder with each step I take

I have given up everything I have
But am yet to be established in wisdom
Partly caught and partly freed am I
And wish self-control but haven't the means

Pray tell me that condition or state
Which is beyond the experience of grief
How does one live in this world
And reach the abode of peace and bliss?

What attitude should one have in life?
What is it that needs to be done?
How does one free the mind of its lust?
As the mind sees worth in the worthless

Whose biography should I study?
How should I live in this world?
How to be free of love and hate?
What is the secret to escape grief?

Holy sir kindly do instruct me
How to counteract habit of mind?
That is itself spread out as creation
In the form of this visible universe

Who are those great heroes
Who have crossed over delusion?
What methods did they adopt
To free themselves of bondage?

Kind sage do thou please instruct me
Of the way and of the means
If you consider I am unfit for this
I shall fast unto death certainly

Valmiki Said

All assembled in the royal court

Were greatly inspired by Rama's words
It seems as if Rama spoke their plight
They sat as statues in great delight

Among those who listened to Rama's words
Were sages Vasistha and Vishvamisra
The king and his court of ministers
Citizens, servants, animals and birds too

Even gods and sages from near and far
All acclaiming in one voice 'Bravo, bravo'
Showers of flowers descended on Rama
As none but he could give such expression

Then came about pin drop silence
Skies and heavens stood at attention
Hearing what was about to be revealed
Sages and the wise came to listen and learn

All were received with due honors
And seated respectfully in assembly
All knowing this they could never miss
Rama's wisdom was a priceless gift to all