

True Skill

The yogi Raman was a true master of the art of archery. One morning, he invited his favorite disciple to watch a display of his skill. The disciple had seen this more than a hundred times before, but he nevertheless obeyed his teacher.

They went into the wood beside the monastery and when they reached a magnificent oak tree, Raman took a flower which he had tucked in his collar and placed it on one of the branches.

He then opened his bag and took out three objects: his splendid bow made of precious wood, an arrow and a white handkerchief embroidered with lilacs.

The yogi positioned himself one hundred paces from the spot where he had placed the flower. Facing his target, he asked his disciple to blindfold him with the embroidered handkerchief.

The disciple did as his teacher requested.

'How often have you seen me practice the noble and ancient sport of archery?' Raman asked him.

'Every day,' replied his disciple. 'And you have always managed to hit the rose from three hundred paces away.'

With his eyes covered by the handkerchief, the yogi Raman placed his feet firmly on the ground, drew back the bowstring with all his might - aiming at the rose placed on one of the branches of the oak tree - and then released the arrow.

The arrow whistled through the air, but it did not even hit the tree, missing the target by an embarrassingly wide margin.

'Did I hit it?' said Raman, removing the handkerchief from his eyes.

'No, you missed completely,' replied the disciple. 'I thought you were going to demonstrate to me the power of thought and your ability to perform magic.'

'I have just taught you the most important lesson about the power of thought,' replied Raman. 'When you want something, concentrate only on that: *no one will ever hit a target they cannot see.*'

How to be remembered

In the monastery of Sceta, Abbot Lucas gathered the brothers together for a sermon.

'May you all be forgotten,' he said.

'But why?' one of the brothers asked. 'Does that mean that our example can never serve to help someone in need?'

'In the days when everyone was just, no one paid any attention to people who behaved in an exemplary manner,' replied the abbot. 'Everyone did their best, never thinking that by behaving thus they were doing their duty by their brother. They loved their neighbour because they understood that this was part of life and they were merely obeying a law of nature. They shared their possessions in order not to accumulate more than they could carry, for journeys lasted a whole lifetime. They lived together in freedom, giving and receiving, making no demands on others and blaming no one. That is why their deeds were never spoken of and that is why they left no stories. If only we could achieve the same thing now: to make goodness such an ordinary thing that there would be no need to praise those who practice it.'

Rebuilding the world

A father was trying to read the newspaper, but his little son kept pestering him. Finally, the father grew tired of this and, tearing a page from the newspaper - one that bore a map of the world - he cut it into several pieces and handed them to his son.

'Right, now you've got something to do. I've given you a map of the world and I want to see if you can put it back together correctly.'

He resumed his reading, knowing that the task would keep the child occupied for the rest of the day. However, a quarter of an hour later, the boy returned with the map.

'Has your mother been teaching you geography?' asked his father in astonishment.

'I don't even know what that is,' replied the boy. 'But there was a photo of a man on the other side of the page, so I put the man back together and found I'd put the world back together too.'

Thinking about death

Zilu said to Confucius (a Chinese philosopher, who lived in the sixth century B.C.):

'May I ask what you think about death?'

'You may ask,' replied Confucius, 'but if you still don't understand life, why do you want to know about death. Leave thinking about death for when life is over.'

Paying the right price

Nixivan had invited his friends to supper and was cooking a succulent piece of meat for them. Suddenly, he realised that he had run out of salt.

So Nixivan called to his son.

'Go to the village and buy some salt, but pay a fair price for it: neither too much nor too little.'

His son was surprised.

'I can understand why I shouldn't pay too much for it, Father, but if I can bargain them down, why not save a bit of money?'

'That would be the sensible thing to do in a big city, but it could destroy a small village like ours.'

When Nixivan's guests, who had overheard their conversation, wanted to know why they should not buy salt more cheaply if they could, Nixivan replied:

'The only reason a man would sell salt more cheaply than usual would be because he was desperate for money. And anyone who took advantage of that situation would be showing a lack of respect for the sweat and struggle of the man who laboured to produce it.'

'But such a small thing couldn't possibly destroy a village.'

'In the beginning, there was only a small amount of injustice abroad in the world, but everyone who came afterwards added their portion, always thinking that it was only very small and unimportant, and look where we have ended up today.'

The missing brick

Once, when I and my wife were travelling, I received a fax from my secretary.

'There's one glass brick missing for the work on the kitchen renovation,' she said. 'I'm sending you the original plan as well as the plan the builder has come up with to compensate for it.'

On the one hand was the design my wife had made: harmonious lines of bricks with an opening for ventilation. On the other hand was the plan drawn up to resolve the problem of the missing brick: a real jigsaw puzzle in which the glass squares were arranged in a higgledy-piggledy fashion that defied aesthetics.

'Just buy another brick,' wrote my wife. And so they did and thus stuck to the original design.

That afternoon, I thought for a long time about what had happened; how often, for the lack of one brick, we completely distort the original plan of our lives.

Epictetus reflects on meetings

Epictetus (55 A.D.-135 A.D.) was born a slave and became one of the great philosophers of Rome. He was expelled from the city in 94 A.D. and it was while in exile that he came up with a way of teaching his followers. Here is an extract from his Art of Living.

'Two things may happen when we meet someone: either we become friends or we try to convince that person to accept our beliefs. The same thing happens when a hot coal meets another piece of coal: it either shares its fire with it or is overwhelmed by the other's size and is extinguished.

But, since, generally speaking, we feel insecure when we first meet someone, we are more likely to affect indifference, arrogance or excessive humility. The result is that we cease being who we are, and matters move into a strange world that does not belong to us.

In order to avoid this happening, make your good feelings immediately apparent. Arrogance may only be a banal mask for cowardice, but it prevents important things from flourishing in your life.'

A story by Kahlil Gibran

I was strolling in the gardens of an insane asylum when I met a young man who was reading a philosophy book.

His behavior and his evident good health made him stand out from the other inmates.

I sat down beside him and asked:

'What are you doing here?'

He looked at me, surprised. But seeing that I was not one of the doctors, he replied:

'It's very simple. My father, a brilliant lawyer, wanted me to be like him. My uncle, who owns a large emporium, hoped I would follow his example. My mother wanted me to be the image of her beloved father. My sister always set her husband before me as an example of the successful man. My brother tried to train me up to be a fine athlete like himself.

And the same thing happened at school, with the piano teacher and the English teacher - they were all convinced and determined that they were the best possible example to follow. None of them looked at me as one should look at a man, but as if they were looking in a mirror.

So I decided to enter this asylum. At least here I can be myself.'

Meeting the king

A Persian king asked Saadi of Shiraz:

'On your wanderings through the cities of my kingdom, do you think of me and of my works?'

'Your Majesty, I think of you whenever I forget to think of God,' was the wise man's answer.

The one guilty man

Wise King Weng asked to visit the palace prison. And he began listening to the prisoners' complaints.

'I'm innocent,' said a man accused of murder. 'I'm here simply because I wanted to give my wife a fright, but I accidentally killed her.'

'I was accused of taking a bribe,' said another, 'but all I did was accept a gift.'

All the prisoners declared their innocence to King Weng, until one of them, a young man of only twenty or so, said:

'I'm guilty. I wounded my brother in a fight and I deserve to be punished. This place has made me reflect on the pain I caused.'

'Remove this criminal from the prison immediately!' cried King Weng. 'He'll end up corrupting all these entirely innocent men.'

How to help the country

Zizhang searched for Confucius throughout China. The country was going through a time of great social upheaval, and he feared there could be bloodshed.

He found the master sitting beneath a fig tree, meditating.

'Master, we urgently need your presence in the government,' said Zizhang. 'We are on the brink of chaos.'

Confucius continued to meditate.

'Master, you taught us that we must not stand idly by,' Zizhang went on. 'You said that we were responsible for the world.'

'I am praying for the country,' replied Confucius. 'Later, I will go and help the man who lives round the corner. By doing what is within our reach, we benefit everyone. By merely coming up with ideas about how to save the world, we do not even help ourselves. There are a thousand ways of getting involved in politics; there is no need for me to be part of the government.'

Where the monkey puts his hand

I said to a friend:

'It's odd that proverb, "An old monkey never puts his hand in the pot".'

'Yes, but it has its own logic,' he replied. 'In India, hunters make a small hole in a coconut, put a banana inside and bury the whole thing. A monkey finds the coconut, puts his hand in the hole to grab the banana, but then can't get it out because his closed hand is too big for the hole. Instead of letting go of the banana, the monkey stays there wrestling with the impossible and gets caught.'

The same thing happens in our own lives. The need to have a particular thing - often something small and useless - ends up making us prisoners of that need.

Choosing one's fate

Many years ago, there lived a man who was capable of loving and forgiving everyone he came across. Because of this, God sent an angel to talk to him.

'God asked me to come and visit you and tell you that he wishes to reward you for your goodness,' said the angel. 'You may have any gift you wish for. Would you like the gift of healing?'

'Certainly not,' said the man. 'I would prefer God to choose those who should be healed.'

'And what about leading sinners back to the path of Truth?'

'That's a job for angels like you. I don't want to be venerated by anyone or to serve as a permanent example.'

'Look, I can't go back to Heaven without having given you a miracle. If you don't choose, I'll have to choose one for you.'

The man thought for a moment and then said:

'All right, I would like good to be done through me, but without anyone noticing, not even me, in case I should commit the sin of vanity.'

So the angel arranged for the man's shadow to have the power of healing, but only when the sun was shining on the man's face. In this way, wherever he went, the sick were healed, the earth grew fertile again, and sad people rediscovered happiness.

The man travelled the Earth for many years, oblivious of the miracles he was working because when he was facing the sun, his shadow was always behind him. In this way, he was able to live and die unaware of his own holiness.

A search frustrated

The mystic Ramakrishna began his dedication to the spiritual life when he was sixteen. At first, he used to weep bitterly because, despite his devotion to the work at the temple, he seemed to be getting nowhere.

Later, when he was famous, a friend asked him about that period of his life. Ramakrishna replied:

'If a thief were to spend the night in a room with only a thin wall separating him from another room full of gold, do you think he would be able to sleep? He would lie awake all night, scheming. When I was young, I desired God as ardently as a thief would desire that gold, and it took me a long time to learn that the greatest virtue in the spiritual search is patience.'

Krishna will hear your prayer

A widow from a poor village in Bengal did not have enough money to pay for her son's bus fare, and so when the boy started going to school, he would have to walk through the forest all on his own. In order to reassure him, she said:

'Don't be afraid of the forest, my son. Ask your God Krishna to go with you. He will hear your prayer.'

The boy followed his mother's suggestion, and Krishna duly appeared and from then on accompanied him to school every day.

When it was his teacher's birthday, the boy asked his mother for some money in order to buy him a present.

'We haven't any money, son. Ask your brother Krishna to get you a present.'

The following day, the boy explained his problem to Krishna, who gave him a jug of milk.

The boy proudly handed the milk to the teacher, but the other boys' presents were far superior and the teacher didn't even notice his.

'Take that jug of milk to the kitchen,' said the teacher to an assistant.

The assistant did as he was told. However, when he tried to empty the jug, he found that it immediately filled up again of its own accord. He immediately informed the teacher, who was amazed and asked the boy:

'Where did you get that jug and how does it manage to stay full all the time?'

'Krishna, the God of the forest, gave it to me.'

The teacher, the students and the assistant all burst out laughing.

'There are no gods in the forest, that's pure superstition,' said the teacher. 'If he exists, let's all go and see him.'

The whole group set off. The boy started calling for Krishna, but he did not appear. The boy made one last desperate appeal.

'Brother Krishna, my teacher wants to see you. Please show yourself!'

At that moment, a voice emerged from the forest and echoed through the city and was heard by everyone.

'How can he possibly want to see me, my son? He doesn't even believe I exist!'

The art of listening

The wise man, Saadi of Shiraz, was walking along a road with his disciple when he saw a man trying to get his mule to move. When the animal refused to budge, the man began calling him the worst names he could think of.

'Don't be silly,' said Saadi. 'The mule will never learn your language. You would do better to calm down and learn his language.'

And as he walked away, he remarked to his disciple:

'Before you get into an argument with a mule, remember the scene you have just witnessed.'

The bugle that drove away tigers

A man arrived in a village carrying a mysterious bugle decorated with red and yellow rags, glass beads and animal bones.

'This bugle can drive away tigers,' said the man. 'From this day forth, for a modest daily fee, I will play the bugle every morning and you will never be eaten by those terrible animals.'

Terrified by the threat of attack by a wild animal, the inhabitants of the village agreed to pay what the newcomer asked.

Many years passed, the owner of the bugle grew rich and built himself a magnificent castle. One morning, a boy who was passing through the village, asked who the owner of the castle was. When he heard the story, he decided to go and talk to the man.

'I was told that you have a bugle that can drive away tigers,' said the boy. 'But there are no tigers in this country.'

The man immediately called together all the villagers and asked the boy to repeat what he had said.

'Did you hear that?' cried the man as soon as the boy had finished speaking. 'There you have irrefutable proof of the power of my bugle!'

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