



YOGA VASISHTA

in English by **Dr. Ramesam Vemuri**

Based on the original book in Telugu by

BRAHMASRI KUPPA VENKATA KRISHNA MURTY

BOOK 1

VAIRAGYA PRAKARANA

DETACHMENT

Revised edition 2025

YOGA VASISHTA

BOOK 1 VAIRAGYA PRAKARANA DETACHMENT

About the Book

Yoga Vasishta is a treasure house of ancient Indian philosophical wisdom. It offers logical and practical answers to questions like: What is Mind ? What is the world? What is the purpose of existence ? What is Brahman?

It is a poetic classic by the Sage Valmiki explaining the nature of The Supreme Self expounded in his own inimitable and graceful way as a Discourse between Maharshi Vasishta and Lord Sri Rama. The present volume, "Yoga Vasishta"– Book 1 - Vairagya Prakarana - Detachment, is a presentation in Telugu by

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and forms a part of his lectures on "Yoga Vasishta" telecast in Telugu by Gemini TV, Hyderabad, Telangana State, India.

This volume is a rendering of the same into English by

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In Book 1:

The 1500 stanzas of the First chapter on Detachment (Vairagya Prakarana) have been ably condensed and lucidly explained in simple words.

After explaining the points - how 'Yoga Vasishta' originated, what are its contents and who is eligible to read this book, the detachment of Rama is elaborately described, to emphasize that Rama is the fittest student to receive the teaching of Yoga Vasishta.

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YOGA VASISHTHA
BOOK 1
VAIRAGYA PRAKARANA
DETACHMENT

AUTHOR'S SUBMISSION

Why does an author keep the core message of his writing hidden deep inside his heart ?

He does so with the hope that the teaching would shine with double the vigor when a reader finally finds it. Because of that reason, he doesn't seal it securely in an iron vault; he only tucks it behind the tender petals of a colorful flower. His wish is that his heart should be accessible— but only to those readers who make a little effort to unravel it. Thus goes the thinking of great writers and poets; and in there lies the inner meaning of their poetic works.

The Celebrated Poet Kalidasa described the Sage Valmiki as the greatest of the spiritual guides. These words are very apt with respect to Yoga Vasishtha. The poetic skills of any author may sparkle all by themselves when telling the story of a noble warrior and King like Shri Rama, or in narrating the end of the demon, Ravana. But writing a tome on the theme of a bone dry and abstruse subject like Vedanta with lyrical beauty, extending the text to 32,000 verses without losing the gravity in the discussions or the detail in narration in a gripping manner till the very end bespeaks of the immense capability of the Sage Valmiki. No other writer has attained such levels of excellence to date.

I consider myself blessed. Thanks to the benevolence and grace showered on me by my Gurus, Swami Janardanananda Saraswati and Swami Sri Ganapati Sachchidananda, I could fathom without much of an effort on my part, the depths of Sage Valmiki's heart and his teaching contained in Yoga Vasishtha. With the purpose of sharing my understanding with all my fellow-seekers, I began a series of discourses on Yoga Vasishtha on Gemini TV.

Inspired by the words of my teachers, I was tempted to investigate the inner meaning of Sage Valmiki's teaching. I was aided in my search by the redoubtable Saint Shri Ananda Bhodendra Saraswati Swami. His voluminous commentary on Yoga Vasishtha under the title "tātparyaprakāśa vyākhyā" repeatedly helped me in capturing the heights of knowledge disseminated in the text. This gave me the courage to gain the fruits of studying Yoga Vasishtha.

Let me first introduce the venerable text Yoga Vasishtha.

About Yoga Vasishtha:

1. **Author:** Sage Valmiki
2. **Period of writing:** Some time after the completion of his earlier book, Ramayana.
3. **Alternate names** by which this book is known: jnānavāśiṣṭha, vāśiṣṭharāmāyaṇa, ūttara rāmāyaṇa, mahārāmāyaṇa, vāśiṣṭha etc. etc.

4. **Size of the text:** The original text of the *Yoga Vasishtha* is traditionally said to comprise 32,000 verses. However, some scholars opine that the actual count may be less than 30,000 (based on the Nirnaya Sagar 1937 Edition). It should be noted that quantifying a work of such a magnitude and intricacy is a complex task. Ultimately, an overly critical investigation into the exact verse count offers little value to the reader in terms of absorbing the text's spiritual message.
5. **Subject matter:** Inquiry into the Supreme Self. It comprises the teaching given to the 12 year old prince Rama by the Sages Vishwamitra and Vasishtha. The book establishes that the man enlightened by the wisdom of knowing the highest truth will be able to function with excellence in this world.
6. **The style of Narration and other specialties:**
 - The gist of each topic to be discussed is summarized upfront.
 - The subject is illustrated through a captivating story.
 - The symbolical significance of the characters used in the stories is explained by the author himself.
 - The object of the text is not about the denying or contradicting any other theories.
 - There are no polemic debates.
 - The author raises a number of questions from various angles and answers them himself.
 - Though the subject matter is that of tough Vedanta, one can see the poetic skills of the author at innumerable instances.
 - The text is full of unimaginable metaphors that capture the reader's heart.
 - The dominant Sanskrit meter used in this composition is *Anustup Chandas*, a rhythmic structure traditionally employed in spiritual texts. According to the rules of this meter, each *sloka* consists of 32 syllables. In this context, it is interesting to consider the mystery and significance of the number 32 in Sanskrit literature and Hindu philosophy. The number 32 represents completeness, a set of significant spiritual principles, or a state of divine order and balance. While the *Anustup* meter prevails, Sage Valmiki also employs other meters to suit specific contextual nuances within the work.
7. **Abridged Versions:**
 - As the text is quite voluminous, many condensed versions of the book have been prepared both in the Northern and Southern parts of India. Some of the more popular versions are:
 - The text by the Kashmiri Pundit Abhinandana comprising 6,000 verses.
 - The text by Shri Swami Vidya Prakasananda Giri, Head of the Shukabrahma Ashram, Kalahasti having 8,000 verses.
8. **Translations:** Translations of the text are available in almost all languages. There are six translations in Telugu language itself -- five in prose form and one as verses. I consulted all these books in my work and I am indebted to those authors. Out of these, the translation by Shri M. Subbaraya Sharma was particularly helpful to me.

9. **Expert views:** Yoga Vasishtha is highly revered not only during the old historical times, but also in modern days by the spiritual teachers.

For example:

- Swami Ramatirtha described Yoga Vasishtha as the “most wonderful” text.
- The book is highly revered by the Malayala Swami, The Head of the Erpedu Vyasa Ashram.
- Yoga Vasishtha is acclaimed as the foremost amongst the books on Advaita by the Head of Gayatri Peetha.

10. Structure of Yoga Vasishtha:

There are six chapters in the text.

- *Vairāgyaprakaraṇa* -- On Detachment -- 1,500 verses -This first chapter describes in detail the feelings of detachment experienced by Shri Rama.
- *Mumukṣu Vyavahāra Prakaraṇa* – On the Conduct of a piritual Aspirant -- 1,000 verses. This second chapter gives the details of the basic qualities to be attained by a spiritual aspirant. The importance of human effort in achieving liberation is discussed and it has been established that it is necessary that an effort should be made to obtain liberation.
- *Utpattiprakaraṇa* – On Origination -- 7,000 verses –This third chapter examines the reality of the visible world and if it has been created at all.
- *Sthitiprakaraṇa* – On Sustenance -- 3,000 verses – This fourth chapter investigates how the apparent world is sustained.
- *Upaśamaprakaraṇa* – On the Calm Down -- 5,000 verses - This fifth chapter talks of the method of obtaining a tranquil mind through True Knowledge.
- *Nirvāṇaprakaraṇa* – On Liberation -- 14,500 verses –This sixth and the final chapter is the largest wherein the achievement of Liberation is discussed thoroughly. It is divided into two parts - *Pūrvārdha* and *Uttarārdha*.

11. **Commentaries:** It is said that there are many commentaries in Sanskrit on YogaVasishtha. However, only “tātparyaprakāśikā” by Swami Ananda Bhodhendra Saraswati is available in print. It was published by the NirnayaSagar Press in 1937. This commentary has received accolades from many learned pundits.

About Author Valmiki: It is opined by some experts that the author Valmiki of Yoga Vasishtha was different from the author Valmiki of Ramayana. One group of such people belong to those that are opposed to Non-dualist philosophy. Their main concern is only to deprecate the importance of Yoga Vasishtha as it is an unrivalled text on Non-duality. The other group contends that an evaluation on the authorship is called for using modern techniques rather than going by the word of tradition. Let us examine critically the various arguments advanced by this group.

The writing style of both Ramayana and Yoga Vasishtha is about the same. In fact, no critic has been able to point out any major differences. However, some of these critics ask why there is not even a hint made about Yoga Vasishtha in Ramayana. The answer to this question is available right in the first chapter of Yoga Vasishtha. One may take a look.

The second argument is that because we find reference to Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna, Arjuna, Sage Suka and others in Yoga Vasishtha, it should belong to a period later than that of Bhagavad-Gita. But if we keep in mind the caliber and skill of a writer who could handle a complex and intricate subject as Advaita Vednata with such a dexterity as found in the book, it is unlikely that we will be persuaded to conclude that such an enlightened and exceptionally competent author belonging to a later period would have tried to create a false impression about the date of his work. Hence, it is untenable to argue that it belongs to the post-Bhagavad-Gita period.

A question may, however, arise about the reference to the events of later eons (*yuga*) in the text. But inclusion of a reference to the events that are likely to take place at a future date is quite typical of the Sage Valmiki. He did so in his other and more popular work, Ramayana too. In fact, in the Balakanda of Ramayana, his narration cuts across past, present and future times in the description of different events. Sage Valmiki resorts to this type of narrating the future in uttarakanda of Ramayana also. Thus the narration of future events as seen by him through clairvoyance is a characteristic of the Sage Valmiki. It is no wonder that we find examples of such descriptions of future events in Yoga Vasishtha also. In fact, whenever a future event is described, the author raises a question through one of the characters in the book about the chronological inconsistency and a suitable reply is given right there. Readers familiar with the works of other great Seers and Sages do not find this style of writing odd at all. For example, we find future events being narrated at a current time in Agastya Samhita. Sage Vyasa authored an entire purana which describes the future events only.

Thus when viewed with an unbiased eye, it is inevitable to conclude that the author of Yoga Vasishtha and Ramayana was one and the same poet.

Further, we have to note that the Sage Valmiki was not only a writer *par excellence*, but also a great Maharishi. The word 'Rishi' in Sanskrit means the one who realized the ultimate Truth (*tatva*). A true writer is one who can speak accurately. Because he has both these qualities, he could write with such a depth of understanding and beauty. We notice several instances of this signature style of the Sage in both Ramayana and Yoga Vasishtha.

I studied and tried to decipher the core message of Yoga Vasishtha and the commentaries on it with the same spirit. I took help from elders, prayed to my teachers, and also consulted the teachings of Shri Janardanananda Swami who was not only a noble saint but also happened to be my father before his renunciation of the world. What I could understand is presented by me in my discourses that were telecast by the Gemini TV and the same is now offered in the form of a text. That is the reason it is called as the ‘heart’ of Yoga Vasishtha.

We find a variation in spelling of the name of the Sage Vasishtha. It is written in the Devanagari script both as Vaśiṣṭha and Vasiṣṭha. Both ways are correct as the former spelling is derived to mean as the one who conquered his senses and the latter one means the one who excelled as a householder.

Sage Vasishtha himself clarified that writing his name either way was acceptable as quoted in a verse in Mahabharata (Canto 13, Chapter 63, verse 96). I adopted ‘Vaśiṣṭha’ in my writings as it would emphasize the importance of control, over the senses which is an important requisite in the study of Vedanta.

Acknowledgements:

All words are inadequate to express my indebtedness to my Teacher, Swami Ganapati Sachchidananda. Therefore, I dedicate this work to him. I am also grateful to Gemini TV for telecasting my discourses. I tried to present the teaching contained in Yoga Vasishtha in a logical manner and with a modern idiom. Please condone any omissions or commissions. However, my request to the readers is that this presentation should not be treated to be a condensation or abridgement of the original text. It is an effort to capture the “core” message and please study it in that spirit.

I am only nominally there in delivering this message. The inner sentient principle that motivates, acts and speaks is different. I pray to my Gurus to channel the Grace of that inexplicable principle to all in experientially realizing It.

Salutations to the Gurus.

Kuppa Venkata Krishna Murthy

1. INTRODUCTION

Of all the books on spirituality that teach the essence of Truth, two stand out in their uniqueness. The first one is the Yoga Vasishtha in which the highest philosophy is taught by a human being (Sage Vasishtha) to the divine Lord (Sri Rama) as an offering. The second one is the Bhagavad Gita in which a sermon is given by the God (Sri Krishna) to a human being (Arjuna) as a teaching. Both the texts are quite comprehensive and very lucid. Neither of them indulges in complex technical debates. Yoga Vasishtha is a text based on the discourses that went on at a leisurely pace for several days. Consequently, it had become a 32,000 verse classic. Bhagavad Gita, in contrast, was a message delivered on a battlefield just before the commencement of a furious war. Hence it's a brief text of only 700 verses.

Yoga Vasishtha is also known by other names such as Jnana Vasishtha, Uttara Ramayan, Vasishtha Ramayan, and Maha Ramayan. Tradition attributes the authorship of Yoga Vasishtha to Maharishi Valmiki. A few of the modern scholars consider it to be later than the Bhagavad Gita. The reasons given to ascribe a later date to Yoga Vasishtha, however, do not appear very convincing.

The conciseness of the Bhagavad Gita has given scope for varying interpretations of its teaching. Maharishi Valmiki did not leave any room for such an eventuality to come up in the Yoga Vasishtha. He not only dealt exhaustively with all the concerned philosophical topics but also took care to explain the intricate points of Vedanta through illustrative stories. Thus he left no opportunity for any ambiguity or doubt to arise both in the theory and the practice of Advaita Vedanta.

The post-Bhagavad Gita period is characterized by the development of a systematic argot in the presentation of the principles of Vedanta. We come across many precise and well defined technical terms like '*adhyāsa*' (illusion), '*upādhi*' (substratum), '*saviseṣa*' (matter with specific internal aspects), '*nirviseṣa*' (matter without distinctions), '*bādha*' (sublation of the effect along with its cause) and '*anirvachanīya*' (indefinable) coming into vogue in the works of philosophy that are later than the Bhagavad Gita. But we do not find any such terminology in the Yoga Vasishtha. On the other hand, words such as '*spandana*' (vibration), '*sphuraṇa*' (occurrence), '*vāsana*' (impressions from past action), '*ullasa*' (manifestation) '*līla*' (play), '*vivarta*' (creation by changeless change), '*ābhāsa*' (experiencing a non-existing thing) which are common to the Upanishads are often found in Yoga Vasishtha.

It is reasonable to conclude that Yoga Vasishtha was authored by Maharishi Valmiki himself based on the style of narration, word usage and the structure of the presentation followed therein.

2. ORIGIN OF THE BOOK

Now let us examine when and why Maharishi Valmiki undertook to write this book. A critical evaluation of the various clues that are available within both Srimad Ramayana (an undisputed text by the Maharshi Valmiki) and Yoga Vasishtha help us to answer the questions.

Sage Narada preached the essence of Sri Rama's life to Maharshi Valmiki when Sri Rama was the reigning King of Ayodhya. Further, Lord Brahma was said to have encouraged Maharshi Valmiki to undertake the writing of the epic Ramayana for the benefit of posterity. So, Maharshi Valmiki began the writing of Ramayana. When the work was in progress, Princes Lava and Kusa (sons of Sri Rama) were born to Mother Sita in Maharshi Valmiki's hermitage, as she was assigned to stay there by King Sri Rama. Maharshi Valmiki originally intended to start the composition of Ramayana with the childhood of Rama (*bālākānda*) and end with the canto on War (*yuddhakānda*). Accordingly, he narrated the beneficial effects of listening to Ramayana at the end of *yuddhakānda*. But, after the birth of Lava and Kusa, the poet Maharshi Valmiki changed his mind and added the *uttarakānda* (later part) in his composition of Ramayana. He later on taught Ramayana to Lava, Kusa, his chief disciple, Bharadwaja and a few others.

Maharshi Valmiki was in a dilemma at the beginning itself while composing the *bālākānda* part of Ramayana. The popular story is that Maharshi Vishwamitra made an unexpected visit to King Dasaratha's kingdom in Ayodhya when Sri Rama was a royal prince aged 12 years and requested the services of Sri Rama for protecting the proceedings of his sacrificial ritual (*yajna*) from demonic characters. During those days, Sri Rama became very much a withdrawn person with a strong desire to become an ascetic. He was indifferent to worldly things. For this reason and due to the tender age of Sri Rama, his father, King Dasaratha was reluctant to oblige Maharshi Vishwamitra's request. The Sages Vasishta and Viswamitra together helped Prince Sri Rama to overcome his sense of disinterest by providing answers to his gnawing questions on the philosophy of life. They also educated King Dasaratha on the hidden valour of Sri Rama and persuaded him to send Sri Rama with Maharshi Vishwamitra to protect his Yagna from demons. King Dasaratha relented and Sri Rama undertook the assignment to accompany Maharshi Vishwamitra to protect his sacrificial rituals from the assaults of demons. While on this assignment, Sri Rama performed memorable deeds like destroying the demon Tataka, marrying Sita and so on. Had the part on Rama's ascetic desires been introduced in the *bālākānda* of Ramayana itself, it would have become necessary for Sage Vamiki to narrate the serious philosophical teachings of the Maharshis Vasishta and Viswamitra on the essence of Vedanta to Sri Rama right there in *bālākānda* of Ramayana. If he were to do so, Ramayana would have been full of involved philosophical discussions in the initial chapters of *bālākānda*. That would have made the text of Ramayana very imbalanced because the subsequent poetic descriptions, embellishments, stories planned to be told by him in Ramayana would have looked pale compared to these serious philosophical discussions.

Therefore, Maharishi Valmiki discreetly skipped the philosophical teachings of Maharshi Vasishta in his first work, Ramayana. However, Maharshi Valmiki knew the value and spiritual significance of the discourses given by Maharshi Vasishta.

So, he planned to compose a book exclusively devoted to these Vedanta teachings and name it 'Yoga Vasishta'. After a time, Maharshi Valmiki proceeded to give effect to it in a leisurely way. But his advancing age and certain developments like Sita (Rama's consort) entering into the womb of Mother Earth made him lose the vim. As a result, Maharshi Valmiki's effort to compose the book 'Yoga Vasishta' slowed down.

[Note: Great scriptural works like Yoga Vasishtha do not happen because of the wishes of a person nor do they stop because of the lack of enthusiasm on the part of a writer. They are the outcome of a divine inspiration, unaffected by the human failings or joys. The following story bears this out.]

Bharadwaja, an ardent disciple of the Maharishi Valmiki was taught Ramayana as a part of his training in austerity and meditation. Enchanted by the poetic beauty in his teacher's composition, Sage Bharadwaja started to promote the celestial Ramayana in other kingdoms also by travelling to those places and singing the Epic Ramayana to the audience there. Because of his austere and meditational practices, Bharadwaja attained many yogic siddhis, which enabled him to visit different worlds (*loka-s*), not merely different kingdoms in the country.

During one of such travels, he happened to sing the glory of Ramayana at a congregation of the Gods on Mount Meru. He was fortunate to have Lord Brahma Himself in the audience at that time. Lord Brahma was very pleased with the lyrical beauty of Ramayana, a work that had taken shape from His initial encouragement to Maharshi Valmiki. Lord Brahma also appreciated Bharadwaja's melodious rendering. The Lord profusely congratulated Bharadwaja and directed him to ask for a boon. Bharadwaja, a noble intellectual he was, requested the Lord to please suggest a way out of sorrow for all the living beings in the universe. Lord Brahma replied in these words:

तस्मिञ्छ्रुते नरो मोहात्समग्रात्संतरिष्यति ।
सेतुनेवाम्बुधेः पारमपारगुणशालिना ॥

*tasmiñchrute naro mohātsamagrātsamtariṣyati |
setunevāmbudheḥ pāramapāraguṇaśālinā*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 2, Sloka 10

Meaning - "Why do you have to ask me for that? Your Teacher has already started writing a new book on this subject. You can as well pray to him. If you get initiated into the message of that great treatise, you can cross the '*samsāra*' (worldly bondage) as easily as walking over a bridge on a treacherous stretch of sea."

Thus Lord Brahma praised this holy scriptural treatise, Yoga Vasishtha, even long before it was completed. Unlike in the present times, the disciples in those days, in spite of their best intimacy with their teacher, never took liberties to demand any particular subject to be taught to them. Spiritually advanced students like Bharadwaja could confidently talk even to Lord Brahma, but would hardly dare open their mouths in front of their own Teacher.

It was not out of any fear, but that was a mark of showing unreserved reverence towards one's own teacher. Their devotion to and trust in the Teacher was so exemplary. Being aware of this and having understood the predicament that Bharadwaja would land in, if he were to take up the matter with Maharshi Valmiki, Lord Brahma happily gave an assurance to Sage Bharadwaja that He would Himself talk to his Teacher, Maharshi Valmiki. No sooner, Lord Brahma went to Maharshi Valmiki with Bharadwaja in tow.

Maharshi Valmiki went into Divine ecstasy with the sudden appearance of Lord Brahma at his ashram. He was overwhelmed with devotion to the Lord, and worshipped the Lord in a befitting manner.

Lord Brahma was, however, quite unmindful of the services of the sage. He addressed Maharshi Valmiki to say : “Oh Great Saint! The book you are composing now is a great one. You might think that it is just a philosophical study. No. It is the description of the true character, the true nature of Sri Rama. So do not feel tired and stop the writing midway. All the ‘*loka-s*’ (worlds) will be benefited by that composition. It will serve as a boat to cross the ocean of life. People would be able to effortlessly navigate the course of their life with the aid of this ‘boat’. I came all the way here to exhort you to complete this extraordinary work. It will benefit the entire mankind. Do not stop it.”. So saying, He left for his abode.

Maharshi Valmiki could not immediately grasp what had happened as he was flustered with the sudden appearance of Lord Brahma at his hermitage. The visit passed so fast like a wave that rose high in the sea and in a trice fell back and merged in the waters even before one could notice it. Maharshi Valmiki’s divine ecstasy gradually receded and he composed himself, called his disciple Bharadwaja and asked him, “My boy! Tell me clearly what was Lord Brahma saying to me?”. Bharadwaja was surprised at his teacher’s fluster, but repeated Brahma’s instructions verbatim. Maharshi Valmiki understood the significance of Brahma’s advice. He slowly began explaining the content of the book, Yoga Vasishtha, to his disciple.

Bharadwaja took the opportunity to get some of his doubts on Ramayana clarified. He posed a few questions to Maharshi Valmiki in all earnestness. “Oh my divine Teacher! While reflecting on the contents of the epic Ramayana, it sometimes seems to me that Rama was swept away by the trials and tribulations of the material world like ordinary people. But at some other times, I feel that Rama was showing wisdom par excellence like a great philosopher. Mother Sita’s bearings too were similar. Kindly tell me Sir! Did Sri Rama, Sita, and his brethren Lakshmana et al behave like spiritually mature individuals or they were like the ordinary ignorant laity?” Spurred by these questions of his disciple and also remembering the specific direction given by the Lord Brahma, Maharshi Valmiki decided to reveal the essence of the new book, Yoga Vasishtha, to Bharadwaja. In addition, Maharshi Valmiki also kept Bharadwaja informed of the progress he was making in composing Yoga Vasishtha.

In the light of the background explained above, we may say that the classic text Yoga Vasishtha emerged as a result of the combined strength of the decree of Lord Brahma, Maharishi Valmiki’s own inner philosophic urge and Bharadwaja’s genuine longing to find the ultimate Truth.

2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO READ YOGA VASISHTA ?

Does it then imply that Yoga Vasishtha is a work meant only for spiritually advanced students like Bharadwaja, who are capable of talking directly with great divinities like Lord Brahma? If so, ordinary folk like you and me will be ineligible to go anywhere near it. Such thoughts would keep us away from this noble work. But, certainly that was not the intention of Maharshi Valmiki when he composed Yoga Vasishtha.

What the Sage would want to convey in all humility is that he was just an instrument in composing Yoga Vasishtha and it was Brahma's will that enabled the emergence of it. That was the basic reason behind his narration of this incident to us. In order to dispel any doubt on our part, Maharshi Valmiki described one more event at the beginning of the book in order to nudge us to read this book.

3. STORY OF ARISHTANEMI

King Arishtanemi entrusted the responsibility of running his kingdom to his sons because of his advancing age. He retired to a forest to perform austerities. He spent all his time in deep meditation. Lord Indra came to know of it. Indra had the responsibility to evaluate anyone who takes up intense meditation. Not being aware of this fact, some people in modern times speak disparagingly about Indra and accuse him of being jealous of others.

By the time Arishtanemi's meditation reached a ripe stage, Lord Indra sent a divine vehicle along with a messenger. He sent the message that the saint-king had become eligible to live in the heavens and so he could use the divine vehicle to reach the heavens. The old king was, however, quite insightful. He expressed his gratitude first to Indra and then to the messenger. He then enquired from the messenger, "What is so significant about heaven and how is it superior to the earth? Will I be allowed to live permanently in the heavens? If I were to be sent back, what procedure would you adopt? "

The messenger from Indra thought for a while and said, "Oh Monarch! You have been practicing deep meditation. So I would not lie to you. Heaven is full of luxuries. The comforts and luxuries in heaven go up in proportion to one's virtues. But everyone is afflicted by jealousy there. As a result, sometimes quarrels and fights do take place. The Haves feel happy looking at those inferior to them. On the other hand, the Have-nots are jealous of their superiors. None of them know how much virtue stayed in balance in their account. The day the balance of virtue goes nil, they get thrown out of the heavens. If anyone refuses to go and make a fuss over it, he will be forcibly pushed out. They return to their pavilion in deep distress. So, Great King! No one can secure a permanent residency in the heavens. It will be the same with you too. People depart from there with a heavy heart. It is inevitable for anybody. Moreover, once you enter into the heavens, you can't do any deep meditation or pursue meritorious deeds to build up your merit. All you can do is to be lost in a luxurious life in heaven and leave heaven when your merit is exhausted. That sums up the situation there. Please come and board this divine vehicle."

Arishtanemi profusely thanked the messenger for his response and said, "Oh Messenger of the Lord of Gods! I do not want any heaven. I am grateful to you, to your heaven and also to your Lord. As long as I remain in this physical body, I would like to continue my deep meditation here on the earth. If possible, I would merge with the Supreme Consciousness right in this life itself. Otherwise, being born again, I will resume my deep meditation. I do not want any kingdoms or powers either on the earth or in the heavens. Please do not misunderstand me. Bless me and kindly convey to Lord Indra my prayers for his blessings."

The messenger returned to heaven wondering about the reply of the king and reported everything that happened to Lord Indra. Lord Indra felt very happy listening to the messenger.

Indra was highly appreciative of Arishtanemi's sincerity, dispassion, and purity of mind. He thought of helping him in one way or the other. It is also one of the responsibilities of Indra to help those who meditate without expectation of any rewards. Indra, that's why, critically examines the intentions behind the deep meditation of anyone. If he considers the deep meditation being done is beneficial to the universe, he proceeds to assess whether the meditator is worthy of receiving a boon or not by subjecting them to some temptations and watches their resolve. He subjects the meditator to intense bodily and mental tests to know their worth and rewards them commensurate with their worth. It was very clear to Indra that Arishtanemi was pursuing his austerities and meditation without any selfish motives. So, he felt obliged to help the king.

Indra recalled in his mind the incident of Bharadwaja reciting Srimad Ramayana at the congregation of Gods on the Mount Meru. Indra heard Lord Brahma speaking very highly about Yoga Vasishtha in that congregation, even though the text was still incomplete by that time. So he felt curious about Yoga Vasishtha and desired to keep himself abreast with its content. He wished to constantly monitor the progress made by Maharshi Valmiki in composing that epic. Indra felt that this noble treatise would be the most appropriate teaching for Arishtanemi. So Indra asked his messenger to go back to King Arishtanemi by that very divine vehicle immediately and escort the King to Maharshi Valmiki's hermitage. Further, he asked the messenger to convey Indra's prayer to Maharshi Valmiki to preach Yoga Vasishtha to King Arishtanemi.

The messenger accordingly went back to King Arishtanemi and informed him about the instructions he received from Indra. Arishtanemi was extremely pleased with the kind gesture of Indra. The messenger then took Arishtanemi to Maharshi Valmiki and left him there after conveying Indra's request to the Maharshi and receiving his consent.

Arishtanemi prostrated before Maharshi Valmiki saying:

मुमुक्षुर्वै शरनमहम् प्रपद्ये

mumukṣurvai śaranamaham prapadye

Vairagya Prakarana

Aristanemi prayed to the Maharshi to accept him as his disciple and initiate him into philosophy. Maharshi Valmiki consented and taught the philosophy expounded in this classic work Yoga Vasishtha, to the King.

The above incident makes it clear that Yoga Vasishtha is a text meant for all those who are dispassionate in attitude and perform actions without a desire for reward. Further, the story is also illustrative of the fact that unless one develops the trait of detachment, vedantic instruction would serve no purpose.

But does it also mean that one is eligible to study Yoga Vasishtha only if he or she has completed intense practices of austerities and meditation like Arishtanemi did? Should one read Yoga Vasishtha only after he develops such a level of renunciation that he could decline going to heaven ? Is that the purpose of Maharshi Valmiki in telling us the story of King Arishtanemi right at the beginning of this valuable text? In order to relieve us from entertaining any such doubts, the Maharshi incorporated another story in the narration.

4. AGNIVESYA AND SON KARUNYA

There was a Self-realized man by the name Agnivesya. Though he was a householder, he used to meditate regularly. He had a son called Karunya, who was very intelligent. He completed his studies in various branches of learning at the Gurukul (Saintly Vedic School) and returned home. He was not yet married. Ever since Karunya reached home, his behavior had been very strange. He gave up performing even the day to day ritualistic worship. He had been very dull and had no interest in or enthusiasm for anything. His father, Agnivesya inquired from his son the reason for his attitude after observing him in that state for some days. The boy, Karunya opened up about the ‘stormy turbulence’ that was raging in his mind.

कुर्वन्नेवेह कर्माणि जिजीविषेच्छतं समाः ।
एवं त्वयि नान्यथेतोऽस्ति न कर्म लिप्यते नरे ॥

*kurvanneveha karmāṇi jijīviṣecchatam samāḥ |
evaṃ tvayi nānyatheto'sti na karma lipyate nare*

Isavasyopanishad – Verse 2

Meaning : The *śāstra-s* and the scriptures stipulate at some places that a man has to continue to perform good deeds till his death.

The scriptures also teach us that

न कर्मणा न प्रजया धनेन त्यागेनैके अमृतत्वमानशुः ।

na karmaṇā na prajāyā dhanena tyāgenaike amratatvamānaśuḥ

Khaivalyopanishad Verse 3

(Meaning: Liberation, the ultimate result, does not come from doing any number of good deeds).

The boy Karunya said with a tone of desperation: “I have read all the *śāstra-s* and the Vedas. Everywhere, I get doubts with respect to *mokśa* (liberation). So I am indifferent to any rituals or discussing Vedanta (philosophy). And, I prefer to remain silent”.

After listening to Karunya, his father, Agnivesya thought over the matter deeply. He replied to him : “My boy! You will obtain a clear and unambiguous understanding in such matters only from a study of a standard work and that is the Yoga Vasishtha authored by Maharshi Valmiki. I will preach that to you. You may make your decision after listening to it”. So saying Agnivesya taught Yoga Vasishtha to his son, Karunya. Based on this teaching, Karunya could grasp the subtle aspects perfectly without an iota of doubt. He first worked for the attainment of a pure mind through righteous deeds and later achieved liberation following *jnāna yoga* (The Path of Knowledge).

Thus, the stories of Arishtanemi and Karunya appearing at the opening of Yoga Vasishtha inform us that it is an authentic scripture which received the approval of Lord Brahma and Lord Indra, and that it benefited not only noble practitioners like King Arishtanemi but also it was useful to offer proper guidance to seekers like Karunya. We can therefore conclude that Yoga Vasishtha is a valuable spiritual text which can reliably lead us to the final goal.

5. IMPORTANCE OF THE BOOK

We may still entertain certain reservations about our eligibility to study Yoga Vasishtha, after hearing the stories described so far because they were about spiritually evolved persons with high merit. Our confidence in the book may be enhanced if we are to know the views of other sages, scholars and pundits contemporary to Maharshi Valmiki on Yoga Vasishtha . Maharshi added another story at the beginning of the book to allay such reservations.

Maharshi Valmiki gave a detailed description in his earlier work Ramayana, in the canto of Aranya Kanda (chapter on the forests), about the visits paid by Sri Rama to the hermitages of many holy sages during the times of his exile in the forests. A wild forest called Dandakaranya had developed dividing the northern and southern parts of India in the previous era of Tretayuga as a result of a curse given to King Dandaka by his teacher. The southern part of India became a safe haven protected by this dense forest for the demons in those days. Consequently, the Vedic culture in these parts of India suffered a setback. Many great Sages of the day strove hard to redeem the situation apolitically without the involvement of any rulers. Maharshi Agastya was the foremost of the sages at that time. He traversed on foot along the courses of the Krishna, the Kaveri and the Godavari rivers and established several temples of Agastyeswara. He rejuvenated the language and culture of the people in those areas and worked hard for the reestablishment and promotion of the *sanātana dharma* (eternal righteous values of ancient times).

In addition, he guided innumerable number of seekers on the path of Self-Knowledge. Sri Rama happened to visit Sage Agastya too during his sojourn in the forests.

While writing about this, Maharishi Valmiki mentioned three names:

सुतीक्ष्णम् चप्यगस्त्यम् च अगस्त्य भ्रातरम् तथा
suṭīkṣṇam capyagastyam ca agastya bhrātaram tathā

Ramayana, Balakanda, 1st Sarga

They are Sutiikshana, Agastya, and Agastyabhrata. To date, nothing is known about Agastyabhrata. It has now become, therefore, proverbial to refer to any highly learned scholar who fails to make a name for himself as “āgastyabhrata” (brother of Agastya).

6. śūthīkshñā

Maharshi Valmiki had not provided any details on Sutiikshna in Ramayana. Neither any mythological texts (*purāna-s*) nor any other extant literature talks of this sage. One can find the details of Sage śūthīkshñā in Agastya Samhita, a classic work that spells out the method of Ramopasana (Worship of Rama). śūthīkshñā was one of the disciples of the Maharshi Agasthya. He was living in Dandakaranya long before the incarnation of Sri Rama. Strangely, only śūthīkshñā out of all the disciples of Agastya, could not achieve the ability to focus his mind even after considerable practice. He became old and was vexed with his own plight. He went to his Guru, Maharshi Agasthya and told him about his miserable state and sought his guidance.

Touched by his sincere pleas, Maharshi Agastya told him, “My dear śūthīkshñā! Lord Vishnu is going to incarnate as Sri Rama. You will not die before you can get an audition from Him. Therefore, continue to meditate on Sri Rama, the future incarnation of Vishnu.”

śūthīkshñā was heartbroken at Maharshi Agasthya’s suggestion. He appealed : “Sir ! I am an old man. I have followed many different practices till now. Do I need to implement one more now? How can I meditate on a form that has not even manifested and will appear only sometime in the future? Further, my age has already advanced so much, what benefit will any *upāsana* (worship) bring to me? Maybe Yoga or Self-inquiry would be more appropriate for me at my age.”

Maharshi Agastya responded to him by giving a magnificent exposition on different methods of worship and how they converge in giving the result. This explanation occupies a good half of Agastyasamhita followed by a description of different ways of worshipping Rama. Instructed thus on Agastyasamhita, śūthīkshñā went about the worship of Rama for a very long time.

7. KARMA (ACTION) Vs GNANA (KNOWLEDGE)

śūthīkshñā followed the meditational practices for a considerable length of time and one day went back to the ashram of his teacher, Maharshi Agasthya and said, “Oh Eminent Master! Please tell me what is required to attain liberation-- pursuit of action or knowledge or both? You have initiated me into the method of worship but also taught me *jnāna* (Self-Knowledge). Yet you have asked me to take up the ritual of worship. Kindly make it absolutely clear whether the path of action or Knowledge is suited to the seekers like me who aspire for liberation only and nothing else.”

Maharishi Agastya replied: “ My dear śūthīkshñā ! A bird requires two wings to fly. The wings provide the thrust of air for flying. The movement of air is possible only if there are two wings.

Similarly, for the liberation of mind, man requires both the ‘wings’ of action and Knowledge. Of them, with the ‘wing’ of action comes the benefit of purity of mind and with the ‘wing’ of *jnāna*, the ignorance gets eradicated. The two benefits together take one to the goal of liberation.

Let me give you another example. If you wish to see your face in a mirror, two things are required. Firstly the dust on the mirror has to be wiped out. Secondly, light has to fall on your face. Similarly, for liberation, the dust i.e. the impurities on the mirror of your mind should be removed. This can only be obtained by action. Next, your face (the individual, *jīva*) has to be illuminated. This is done by Knowledge. So, both action and knowledge are essential.”

Since you desire to know which of these two is important, I shall tell you of a way that will bring clarity in the matter. Lord Sri Rama, whom you are worshipping, also had once the same doubt. Maharshi Vasishtha initiated Him on to the right path. Maharshi Valmiki wrote it all down in detail in his composition, Yoga Vasishtha. I will teach you the message of that *magnum opus*. That work is the most appropriate one for you to reach perfect understanding.”

When a great saint like Maharshi Agastya could vouch for the value of Yoga Vasishtha for the benefit of sincere aspirants for liberation, does one need to speak even a word more about the importance of this classic treatise in the world of spirituality?

By incorporating the stories of Bharadwaja, Arishtanemi, Karunya, śūthīkṣhṇā in the beginning itself, the great poet Maharshi Valmiki, not only made it clear on who are eligible to study Yoga Vasishtha, but also brought to our awareness the significance of the book in spiritual matters. Resorting to writing in prose when necessary, besides the usual style of poetry, sage Valmiki made sure that the salient take-home lesson of the stories is not missed by the reader.

Tradition stipulates that any scriptural text should comprise four fundamental elements which are the indispensable requisites for a work that is worthy of serious study. They are the Subject matter of the book, the Benefits that accrue from a study of it, Connection of the content discussed with the overall field of study and Target audience who is qualified to study the work. These four aspects are known by the name ‘anubandha catuṣṭaya’.

The subject in Yoga Vasishtha is Self-Knowledge; the Benefit is the attainment of Liberation; Connection is expounding the Knowledge of Self; Target is the eligible person worthy of initiation into this study. The stories narrated thus far already contain the necessary information regarding the eligibility of the reader. However, in order to make matters clearer, the Maharshi says further:

अहं बद्धो विमुक्तः स्यामिति यस्यास्ति निश्चयः ।
नात्यन्तमज्ञो नोत ज्ञः सोऽस्मिञ्छास्तेऽधिकारवान्

aḥaṃ baddho vimuktaḥ syāmiti yasyāsti niścayaḥ |
nātyantamajño nota jñāḥ so'smiñchāstre'dhikāravān

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 2, Sloka 2

Meaning: One should have a strong resolve that “I am enticed in this life. I want liberation from it.” . He should also possess some knowledge about this enticement and liberation. Only such a person is entitled to read this book. A commoner completely ignorant of such philosophy is not at all worthy of it. Also, a philosopher who knows all the philosophy does not require this book.

Thus Maharshi Valmiki says that this book has been exclusively written for those who fall in-between these two extreme ends. The Sage adopted a style of writing that befits this aim of addressing the seeker who is in an intermediary position. What he desires to teach is conveyed clearly through a number of stories. He also adopts simple sentences of prose for making sure that the point is brought home unambiguously. As a result, the book has become very voluminous; but it leaves no scope for doubt or incertitude in our minds. Because of the fact that the intricate philosophy is narrated in the form of absorbing stories, the reader’s interest is always retained. Because of this reason, this great epic has received admiration from several noted teachers including those of the modern times like the Paramacharya of Kanchi mutt, Malayala Swami, Sri Ganapathi Sachchidananda Swamiji, Ramana Maharishi and others.

8. SPELLS ON SRIHARI

Sri Rama is said to be the divine incarnation of Lord Vishnu. How then does a need arise for some human being to teach Him the essence of philosophical truth? This is a doubt that may come to anyone. King Arishtanemi who was initiated by Maharishi Valmiki too got such a doubt. He humbly appealed to his Guru, “Reverend Teacher ! On one hand, you say that Sri Rama is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. On the other hand, you also say that He has been initiated into Vedanta by Maharishi Vasistha. Is Rama really bound by the cycle of birth and death? Is He not the incarnation of the Ever-free, Pure and Supreme Srihari? If He is eternally free, He doesn’t need any initiation. If He is bound by *samsāra* (worldly life), He is like any of us. If so, why speak so highly about Him?”

Maharshi Valmiki gave a very convincing reply to Arishtanemi’s questions. He said: “Oh King! Rama is undoubtedly the incarnation of Srihari. He took birth as a human being ostensibly under the pretext of certain spells cast on Him.

He assumed ‘ignorance’ also as a part of experiencing the effects of one of the curses. Therefore, there arose a need at that time for initiating Him into Self-Knowledge. In the process, all the seekers of liberation were benefited.

Srihari suffered four curses.

The First Curse:

Once Lord Vishnu visited Brahmaloaka. The presiding Lord Brahma and others accorded him a grand welcome. But Maharshi Sanatkumara who was also present there, stayed aloof and quiet. Lord Vishnu knew that Maharshi Sanatkumara did not have any desires. But desirelessness should not lead one to be so egoistic as to be indifferent towards the elderly. Hence Lord Vishnu thought of teaching him a lesson.

Lord Vishnu showed His annoyance at his indifference and cursed him to take birth as Kumaraswamy, to be lustful and get married to two women. Sanatkumara woke up from his meditative state with the thundering words of Vishnu. Sanatkumara was not an ordinary man. He riposted a quick curse on Vishnu. “Oh Vishnu! You are proud of omniscience. I was in a state of samadhi and was unaware of the surroundings. You did not observe me properly. On top, you were angry and cursed me. So, may you become ignorant for a time, losing your omniscience!”

The Second Curse:

In one of the wars between the gods and demons, Lord Vishnu happened to chase the demons away. The demons were frightened and sought refuge from the wife of Maharshi Bhrigu. She gave them shelter in her home. The entire lot of demons were conveniently present at one place and it was therefore advantageous to Vishnu to finish them there at one stroke. If the demons were not exterminated, they would later escape and would create havoc to the whole universe. But Bhrigu’s wife stood guard at the door preventing Srihari from entering her house. Though she was the wife of a saint, she opposed Srihari and was helping the vicious demons. So Vishnu thought of ignoring the sin that might accrue to Him if He killed Bhrigu’s wife in the interest of the universal good. He killed her, entered the house and slew all the demons. Maharshi Bhrigu was aware that his wife committed a mistake by trying to protect the demons. Yet in his uncontrollable sorrow of losing his wife, he cursed Srihari, “Oh Srihari! May you also suffer like me from the pangs of separation from your wife!”

The Third Curse:

Once, a maiden called Brinda from Goloka sought a boon to live with Srihari. In her intense love for Srihari, she missed asking Vishnu to take her as his wife. Radhadevi, the consort of Vishnu, was mad at Brinda for entertaining such impious desires. So she cursed Brinda to become a demon. In a later birth, Brinda became the wife of demon king Jalandhar. She led a pious life committed to her husband. Her husband Jalandhar, however, was a wicked and cruel demon who used to pillage the people in all the worlds. Because of the piousness of Brinda, Jalandhar escaped death and he could not be killed. So, it became necessary to make a dent in her piousness by succumbing her to adultery.

In spite of knowing the dangerous consequences He would face, Lord Vishnu assumed the guise of Jalandhar and seduced Brinda. Now that Brinda lost her piousness because of the adulterous relation with Vishnu, Jalandhar faced death in a war. Brinda then understood that she was deceived by Lord Vishnu. In a fit of sorrow, having forgotten her own mistake of asking for copulation with Vishnu in a past birth, she faulted Vishnu to be the cause of her widowhood. So, she cursed Him: “Just as you caused me to lose my husband, may you also be tormented by losing your wife.”.

The Fourth Curse:

Long ago, a householder by name Devadatta used to live on the banks of the river Payoshni. He was an ardent devotee of Lord Narasimha (an incarnation of Vishnu with a lion's head and a human body).

Pleased with his deep meditation, Lord Narasimha eventually manifested before him. Normally, the gods would be visible only to those who were the worshippers. The gods would be invisible to others. But this time, strangely, Devadatta's wife also could see Lord Narasimha. She was frightened by the fierce image of Lord Narasimha. She fainted and died on the spot. Devadatta, however, completely forgot himself in the joy of seeing his favorite deity. When he came back to his senses, he realized that his wife died on witnessing the scary form of the Lord. Overtaken by the deep sorrow of losing his wife, he lost his discretion and blamed the Lord for her death. He cursed the Lord that He too should suffer separation from His wife.

Three of the four curses pertain to the separation that the Lord had to suffer from His consort. Out of love for His three devotees, the Lord did not mind their curses. He went through the suffering of separation from His wife by taking birth on earth as a human being. Sri Rama was that human form of the Lord Vishnu. And Sri Rama went through the suffering of separation three times. The first time was when Ravana abducted his wife Sita during their exile in the forests. Though they were united after vanquishing Ravana, Rama had to again abandon his wife when rumors were spread casting doubts on the chastity of Sita. The second separation took place at a time when Sita, was pregnant with his children (twins). Later they were united when Rama performed a sacrificial ritual. The third and final separation came about with Sita merging into the earth soon after. Thus the three curses were fulfilled.

9. DETACHMENT OF SRI RAMA

As per the first curse of Sanatkumara, Lord Vishnu had to suffer a phase of ignorance. He benevolently accepted to go through a period of ignorance concerning Self-Knowledge when he was a boy of 12 to fulfill that curse. He needed the teaching of Maharshi Vasishtha at that time to recollect his true Self.

The story in brief is as follows:

The four brothers, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna completed their studies by the time they were 12 years old. They learnt the four Vedas, six the sixty-four arts. They acquired exemplary skills in several martial arts, war strategy and related matters too. It looked as though their taking up the studies under a Guru was a mere formality and all the branches of knowledge unfolded by themselves to them without much effort.

The young lads returned home as full-fledged scholars and were enjoying their holidays free from any obligations. Things were all going well for a time; but Sri Rama began to face some imperceptible change within himself.

One day Rama approached his father, King Dasaratha, and expressed a desire to take up a pilgrimage tour. His father could not understand the reason behind Rama's wish. Dasaratha wondered if his sons should go on a pilgrimage at such a tender age. He was in a dilemma whether to give his consent or not. So, he asked the Royal Priest, Maharshi Vasishtha, for his advice. Maharshi Vasishtha observed the change in Rama's attitude. The Maharshi could decipher that Rama was going through a phase of self-doubt and introspection. The Maharshi encouraged King Dasaratha to send Rama on a pilgrimage along with his brothers.

Rama accompanied by his three brothers and a retinue visited several holy centers, *Ashram-s* (hermitages) of Rishis and many other pious places.

Why did Maharshi Vasishtha advise King Dasaratha to send Rama and his brothers on pilgrimage ?

Anyone seeking Self-Knowledge has to first obtain purity of mind that comes with the performance of sacrificial rituals, and such other procedures. Rama had not by then reached an age that warranted him to take up those deeds. Yet, he attained the philosophical awareness of Self-inquiry. The question was what should Rama do for obtaining the purity of mind which was an essential prerequisite ?

Many cannot perform sacrificial rituals to purify their minds, because some might have crossed the eligible age, some due to unfavourable circumstances and many in the Kaliyuga (The epoch of Kali) due to inaccessibility to suitable facilities. The way out for such persons is to visit sacred and ancient pilgrim centers on the earth. Elders and Seers relate each of the pilgrimage centers with the capacity of bestowing to the visitors specific benefits equivalent to the performance of a particular sacrificial ritual. The verse given below was quoted by Shri A Swami in his Commentary in support of this claim:

एते भौमम् मय यज्ञह् तिर्थ रुपेन निर्मितह्

ete bhaumam maya yajnah tirtha rupena nirmitah||

(Sloka quoted by the commentator)

Meaning: The centers of pilgrimage on this earth are the manifest forms of sanctified yajna-s created by Brahma.

Maharshi Valmiki said at the beginning of the text, Yoga Vasishtha, that both ‘*karma*’ (action) and ‘*jnāna*’ (Knowledge) were required for attaining liberation. Because this was an inviolable fact, we may infer that Maharshi Vasishtha made it possible for Rama to perform yagnas in the form of visits to holy shrines and pious places, thereby obtaining purity of mind, prior to taking up the study of scriptures.

The children of Dasaratha went back to their routine after returning from their pilgrimage. Sri Rama used to offer his daily prayers and then proceed to his father’s court in order to learn the intricacies of statecraft. No specific responsibility was given to him nor did any occasion arise for him to assume responsibility. He used to go hunting along with his brothers in the afternoons. He spent the remaining time with his friends.

As days went by, Rama stopped attending the Royal court proceedings in the mornings. He cut short even the company of his brothers. He lost weight and became thin and pale. He often sat alone in his room lost in deep thought. He performed his daily ritualistic ablutions only after much persuasion by his servants. Dasaratha was worried about Rama’s condition and queried him often about his problem. But Rama never revealed his problem to his father.

King Dasaratha discussed the issue with the Maharshi Vasishtha, who appraised Dasaratha that great men did not get angry over trifles nor would they experience joys or sorrows. He said that Sri Rama was a great individual. Therefore there had to be a strong reason for his depression. Dasaratha was upset even more after listening to Maharshi Vasishtha. The entire royalty was concerned about Rama's state. In the meanwhile, Rama was losing his vim and vigor day by day.

At that time, Maharshi Viswamitra arrived unexpectedly at the court of Dasaratha. He requested for the services of Sri Rama to protect his sacrificial rituals. He desired that Rama should lead the fight against the demons who were desecrating his Yagnasalas. Dasaratha tried to avoid committing his son for this job, as he felt that Sri Rama was too young to deal with the ferocious demons. Sage Viswamitra was annoyed at King Dasaratha's response. Maharshi Vasishtha was alarmed at the clash developing between Maharshi Valmiki and King Dasaratha and intervened to convince the King of Prince Rama's potential and persuaded him to accede to the request of Maharshi Vishwamitra. As a result, King Dasaratha dispatched a messenger to fetch Rama and Lakshmana to the court such that they are suitably instructed to accompany Maharshi Viswamitra on the adventurous assignment.

The messenger went to Srirama, but returned alone and reported to the King -

“Oh King! I am unable to understand Rama's attitude. When I informed him of my errand, he appeared to be wavering on whether to come here or not. Sometimes he seems to be inclined but soon he changes his mind and refuses to come along. His behavior has been very strange ever since he returned from the pilgrimage trip. He does not perform even the daily obligatory prayers etc. He feels very bad even at the sight of luxurious goods. He repeatedly tells his friends that all the worldly comforts are unreal and one should not indulge in them. He donates away whatever is available to him. Whenever he comes across Brahmin scholars, he exults in saying that the world is impermanent. He gets visibly irritated if one talks of relationships like that of father, mother, or other relatives. His brothers are also in his line. Oh King! Children cannot be allowed to go on in this manner. Please get help, use the services of knowledgeable experts and save your children from this mood.”

Maharshi Viswamitra also listened to the words of the messenger. He thought over the matter and advised the King as follows:

“Dasaratha! I see that Sri Rama's state speaks of pure sense of dispassion and it does not indicate ignorance. Please get Sri Rama here. I will dispel all his doubts. He will obtain profound bliss”. Dasaratha passed necessary instructions to the messenger again. As the messenger was about to go back to Rama, Rama was noticed to be coming over to Dasaratha's court by himself.

Rama, on entering the royal court, offered his obeisance to all the elders there as per the custom. Dasaratha seated him comfortably by his side and said, “My Son! You are very wise, but you seem to be worried like an ignorant man. If there are any problems, you should discuss with your elders and not behave like an unwise person to keep your problems to yourself. Such isolation can lead to great harm”.

Both the Maharshis Vasishtha and Viswamitra supported what Dasaratha said. Viswamitra further posed a few more probing questions to Sri Rama.

Sri Rama heaved a sigh and spoke of the storm going on in his mind. “Revered Sir! I do not know how I was born. Ever since my birth, I learnt whatever my elders taught me. I pursued whatever education was provided to me. I travelled to different places. I went on pilgrimages. As I accumulated more and more knowledge through study and observed the world around me, I came to comprehend the meaning of this life even less than before. Everyone struggles in this world to secure comforts and luxuries. It seems to me that ‘life’ is nothing but running after comforts. That appears to define what the world is.

**किं नामेदं बत सुखं येयं संसारसंततिः ।
जायते मृतये लोको म्रियते जननाय च ॥**

*kiṃnāmedaṃ bata sukhaṃ yeyaṃ saṃsārasaṃtatih |
jāyate mṛtaye loko mriyate jananāya ca ||*

(Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 12 Sloka 7)

People go on talking about happiness. What is happiness? So many take birth in this world. What for? Only to die ? And why do people die? To be born again ? I do not find any sense other than this in this journey of life. I am said to be a ruler in this world. Who is a ruler and who is the ruled?

**किं मे राज्येन किं भोगैः कोऽहं किमिदमागतम् ।
यन्मिथैवास्तु तन्मिथ्या कस्य नाम किमागतम् ॥**

*kiṃ me rājyena kiṃ bhogaiḥ ko'haṃ kimidamāgatam |
yanmithyaivāstu tanmithyā kasya nāma kimāgatam ||*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 12, Sloka 15

“What is the use of this kingdom for me? Are the luxuries of Royalty so essential? What are these luxuries? Who am I actually? What is this world? Am I an illusion or the world ? Whichever of the two is an illusion, the end result is the same .

Whatever is an illusion, let it be so. How does it matter to the other? There is neither harm nor any advantage to the other if one of them is unreal?

“If I am an illusion, what is the purpose of having a kingdom for me ? Why even have a body? If this is an illusory world, why should I go after the illusory comforts of this illusory world? So, O Maharshi! From whatever angle I look at the present situation, I do not find any meaning or sense in the activities of this life. A traveler in a desert may mistake a mirage to be an oasis and run for it. How long does he run? He will eventually understand its falsity. Then, even if he sees large rivers, he would not run for them anymore. Now my situation is like that.

“Who is it that takes a birth in this world? What is it that dies? It looks to me that some things appear for a time and then disappear. Whatever prevails in this world keeps appearing and disappearing. Every one born has to die after a while. What is the gamut of birth and death?

**अचेतना इव जनाः पवनैः प्राणनामभिः ।
ध्वनन्तः संस्थिता व्यर्थं यथा कीचकवेणवः ॥**

*acetanā iva janāḥ pavanaiḥ prāṇanāmabhiḥ |
dhvanantaḥ samsthitā vyartham yathā kīcakaveṇavaḥ ||*

Vairgya Prakarana, Sarga 12, Sloka 20

Let me say how the situation appears to me. There is a forest of bamboo shrubs. The bamboos that are aged develop cracks in them. When a speedy breeze enters the cracks, creaky sounds are produced. The meaning of the sounds made by people when they talk is no different from the creaky sounds that emanate from the bamboo bushes. Just as the wind passes through the cracks in the bamboos, life-breath enters the bodies of humans. Because of that people are able to make sounds like these bamboos. What value can be attributed to human speech beyond such sounds ?

“Maharshi! As I notice the pitiable state of this world, I cry within and shed tears.

निजलोकभयादेव गलद्वाष्पं न रोदिमि ॥

nijalokabhayādeva galadvāṣpaṃ na rodimi ||

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 12, Sloka 22

I am not giving vent to my feelings, for fear of disturbing the peace in our household.”

Opening up this way, Sri Rama narrated methodically how he observed everything very keenly in the world, how subtly he investigated each issue and what inferences he drew from his analysis.

A sage and a poet that he was, Maharshi Valmiki dedicated an entire chapter of his book Yoga Vasishtha to a description of Sri Rama’s detachment. Yoga Vasishtha is truly exceptional in its examination of each topic from every conceivable angle. It provides a comprehensive multidimensional outlook. Sometimes the narration may sound repetitive; but a closer look reveals subtle variation in the nuance of the treatment even in repetition.

10. STRUCTURE OF YOGA VASISHTA

A seeker aspiring to obtain the Knowledge of the Self goes through usually six phases. First, he has to develop intense detachment (*vairagya*) towards the visible and also the invisible worlds. *vairagya* leads him to intense yearning for liberation – called ‘*mumukṣatva*’. He then begins an inquiry into the creation of the visible world and its real status. This stage is known as ‘*utpatti*’. From his inquiry into the origins, he comes to know about the state of the reality of this universe. This is the stage of ‘*sthiti*’. As he moves on with his investigation, he discovers that the universe retracts into the dimensionless “Absolute.” This process is known as ‘*upaśama*’. What remains after *upaśama* is “whatever that Is (The Ultimate)” into which the world has retracted. For instance, a wave has risen from the sea. No sooner, it subsides and retracts into the sea. Similarly, this whole world also merges back into that “Absolute.” This is called ‘*nirvāṇa*’, the Ultimate position.

Accordingly, Maharishi Valmiki divided his exhaustive work comprising 32,000 verses (nearly 8,000 more than what his first work, Ramayana contained) into six Chapters. They are:

1. *vairāgyaprakaraṇa* – gives a detailed discussion on detachment
2. *mumukṣavyavāhāraprakaraṇa* – contains the details on the conduct of a seeker
3. *utpattiprakaraṇa* – details the creation process of this universe.
4. *sthitiprakaraṇa* – explains the sustenance status of this universe in detail.
5. *upaśama prakaraṇa*– explicates on how the acquisition of the true Knowledge serves as a lever to understand the process of retraction of the whole universe into the Absolute.
6. *nirvāṇa prakaraṇa*– expounds at length about the attainment of liberation. This chapter has two parts, viz. the first part or *pūrvārdha* and the second part or *uttarārdha*.

11. WHAT IS VAIRAGYA ?

The principal pillar on which the entire philosophical edifice of Advaita develops is detachment. Accordingly, Maharshi Valmiki provides us a comprehensive exposition on Detachment in the context of Sri Rama’s experience. What is *vairāgya* ?

The Sanskrit word ‘*rāga*’ means love. The antonym of it is ‘*virāga*’. *vairāgya* is *virāga*. Many consider the opposite of love to be hatred. Thus ‘*virāga*’ is taken to mean hatred. But is it really so? A few people may hate their spouses and think it is ‘*vairāgya*’. In a fit of disgust they may even join a band of unenlightened ascetics. Some others, unable to face the swarm of difficulties and sorrows enveloping them, become swami-s (mendicants). Still some others, thinking that liberation is a position of magnificent bliss, and that it can be achieved by deserting their spouse and family, join the gangs of ascetics out of greed.

None of such actions is ‘*vairāgya*’. Because a man embracing renunciation out of anger against his wife, will want to be a householder back again the moment his anger subsides. If one becomes a renunciate (sanyasi) because he has been unable to withstand the difficulties or face the problems of life, he would crave for comforts and would like to give up sanyasa when good times return. If one that takes up sanyasa runs to occupy a prestigious position, it is clear that he has not lost his ambition for fame. It is obvious that a person, even if he wears the apparel of a hermit, is clearly fond of high status in the society and not in renunciation or detachment. Therefore, none of these actions fall under ‘*vairāgya*’.

12. RIGHT INQUIRY

An in-depth investigation into the ultimate reality leads one to realize that this world is ephemeral and impermanent. As a consequence of this, one is propelled to take up the next step in the inquiry. It is to find out the relationship between himself and the world he interacts with. Right inquiry conducted without any bias results in complete disinterest in worldly objects. Such a disinterest developing after a thorough analysis is called “*vairāgya*.”

Even after knowing that the world is impermanent, it is not uncommon for a man to think that one may experience the good things of life at least as long as they last. But the question is, is there a single good thing in this visible world that is worthy of experiencing? Once again, this question demands a serious inquiry.

In order to arrive at a fully convincing answer, one has to find out by himself the truth of the matter by thoroughly probing into each issue.

How does a thorough probe proceed? Everything in this world has some good as well as some bad parts within it. Moreover, what is good or bad depends on the perspective from which a thing is viewed. Obviously, every value judgement is highly contextual. It has only relative validity. Then, what is it that is absolutely good or bad? This requires an assessment of things from an absolute point of view. How does one go about it? It is rather difficult for the ordinary folk to bite into it. Hence, Maharshi Valmiki shows the way through an example. He illustrates by narrating how such an inquiry went on in the mind of Sri Rama. The Sage describes the process in such great detail that he devoted nineteen cantos (*sarga-s*) – from the 13th to the 32nd in the first chapter titled *vairāgya prakaraṇa* for this topic! But we shall here provide a brief sketch in order to give a feel of his approach.

13. WEALTH

The Sage tells us in the 13th sarga about Rama’s thinking with regard to wealth. Sri Rama found from his analysis that acquiring or losing wealth are both causal to unhappiness. Saving money is as much of a problem as spending it, according to him. He deliberates on the ills of wealth from about 20 different angles and finally sums up his analysis in the following words:

न श्रीः सुखाय भगवन्दुःखायैव हि वर्धते ।

na śrīḥ sukhāya bhagavanduhkhāyaiva hi vardhate |

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 13, Sloka 10

“Wealth does not give comforts even in this world. Therefore, wealth is a source for eternal sorrow.”

14. LONGEVITY

After wealth, people generally ask for longevity. Everyone wishes to live long. What is the purpose of a long life? One doesn't know the answer. But under the belief that he would live long, he undertakes a work. Working harder every day thus contributes to his own sorrow.

भारोऽविवेकिनः शास्त्रं भारो ज्ञानं च रागिणः ।
अशान्तस्य मनो भारो भारोऽनात्मविदो वपुः ॥

*bhāro'vivekinaḥ śāstram bhāro jñānam ca rāgiṇaḥ |
aśāntasya mano bhāro bhāro'nātmavido vapuḥ ||*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 14, Sloka 13

What does a man achieve from a long life? He will read many *śāstra-s* (scriptures). Some people may even get them by rote but hardly assimilate anything. The scriptural knowledge will be merely a burden, like the load of a bundle of firewood on the head, for such persons. They struggle to retain the text in memory by repeated recitation.

Even if by chance a little understanding is achieved, they would like to derive some or other benefit out of it. These greedy people are constantly worried about obtaining adequate rewards for their knowledge. Consequently, their own knowledge becomes their burden. As a result, both, i.e. those who got the *śāstra-s* by heart and those who acquired some partial understanding, do not have peace of mind. A mind without peace is like an organ in the body with an affliction. A mind without peace is ever busy with an unending stream of meaningless thoughts. Such a mind will only be a burden.

The main cause for all the trouble is his ignorance of who truly he is. He does not know what he studies in the scriptures, why he thinks or where is the end for his desires. Hence, every action he takes becomes a burden for him. Ultimately, he finds that his own body is a burden for him. What then is the purpose of achieving longevity for this body?

[Thus did Rama analyze the human craving for longevity and the hollowness of such a desire.]

15. EGO

[Sri Rama next examines the ego.]

Ego comes in two shades. One is familiar to everyone – the pride of one’s own self. The other ego is the belief that ‘I am the body.’ This ego is at the root of the first one. Because of this belief, many crimes are committed by human beings.

The belief that ‘I am my body’ is the long time enemy of man. Because of this belief, people lose their sense of equanimity. It prevents people from considering others as their own self. Consequently, peace of mind eludes everyone. If a man thinks that everyone in this world is like himself, he would have realized that everybody passes through happy and sorrowful times. But his ego comes in the way of coming to such an understanding. Because of the absence of this understanding, the haves dominate over the have-nots under the illusion that it would bring them more happiness. It may give them short-lived happiness but ultimately, they end up in misery. Further, the weak may resort to sycophancy in order to curry favors from the strong. But that too misfires eventually. So, thinking of others as either superior or inferior to oneself results only in sorrow. The principal reason behind the perception of inequalities is one’s own sense of ego.

The nihilistic view of the Buddhists is far better in this respect. Though their philosophy of nihilism does not hold waters, at least it pleads for the equality of all beings and exhorts people to think of coexistence on a level playing field.

The ego, the root cause of sorrows, has entered me also. But I am pushing it away and keeping it at bay, on the strength of my discretion.

नाहं रामो न मे वाञ्छा भावेषु न च मे मनः ।
शान्त आसितुमिच्छामि स्वात्मनीव जिनो यथा ॥

*nāhaṃ rāmo na me vāñchā bhāveṣu na ca me manaḥ |
śānta āsitumicchāmi svātmanīva jino yathā ||*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 15, Sloka 8

I am not Rama. I have no desires. I have no thoughts in my mind. Though, I do not exactly know who I am, I also feel like the Buddhist philosophers that all the people are equal, no one being higher or lower. I try to remain peaceful without enmity towards anybody.

Though, following the Buddhistic thought of equality of all people, I have been able to get rid of my ego completely. I am unable to fully understand who I really am. I feel very sad that my ignorance is worrying me. So, I beseech you to teach me that which in your judgment is best suited to me.

[Note: As a reference to Buddha was made in the above narration, some scholars argue that Yoga Vasishtha should be ascribed to a post-Buddhistic period. What is to be noted here is that all the preachings of Bhagavan Buddha, the son of Shuddhodhana, were not his own.

Buddha himself declared that what he taught had been in existence for a long time. It was not that the Buddha initiated them. He only helped in the propagation of what already existed. From the evidence found in “Dhammapitakam” and also in the Jathaka stories (stories describing the previous births of Shuddhodhana) we can infer that there were several Bouddha Acharyas (teachers) in existence much before the Buddha was known to history. So, mere reference to the preachings of Buddha, should not lead one to the conclusion that Yoga Vasishtha should be dated to a period later than Shuddhodhana-Buddha. We may understand that such preaching of equality of all people was prevalent in the age of Sri Rama and that Sri Rama showed appreciation of the same.]

16. MIND

[Sri Rama next probed into the nature of mind. This is described in the 16th canto. He says that there is not much difference between the mind and a stray dog!]

Like a dog on the street, the mind runs hither and thither as if it's doing some important work. Neither has it any work nor its running has any meaning! Controlling the mind is as difficult as caging a lion.

Out of the horrendous acts the mind does, the most harmful one is not to allow us to accept that the one and the same Consciousness dwells in all of us. It brings about a dualistic view at every opportunity and thrusts it on us. I have already mentioned that the differentiating dualistic view leads us inevitably to sorrow. The mind normally goes by whatever it is accustomed to. But if it is exposed to a new temptation, it forgets all the good behavior it was habituated to. It may be possible to swallow an entire ocean, one may uproot Mount Meru and balance it on one's own head, burning embers could possibly be gulped, but it is impossible to control the mind.

If you ask me why is the desire to control the mind, I submit that, from my observation and analysis, it is clear to me that it is the mind alone that is responsible for the entire universe and the matter therein.

चित्तं कारणमर्थानां तस्मिन्सति जगत्त्रयम् ।
तस्मिन्क्षीणे जगत्क्षीणं तच्चिकित्स्यं प्रयत्नतः ॥

*cittam kāraṇamarthānāṃ tasminsati jagattrayam |
tasminkṣīṇe jagatkṣīṇam taccikitsyam prayatnataḥ ||*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 16, Sloka 25

Mind is responsible for all the visible things in this world. As long as the mind exists, there exist the three worlds. If the mind is withdrawn, the universe too folds up. *suṣupti* (deep sleep) is the best proof for this. So, at any cost, everyone should treat the affliction of the mind, which happens to be the root cause for the entire universe.

17. AVARICE (trṣṇā)

[*trṣṇā* is excessive greed. Sri Rama had already observed that the relationship between mind and greed was like that of a husband and wife. They are associated very closely. He explores *trṣṇā* further in the 17th *sarga*.]

Greed is like dark nights. Dark nights make the human eyes blind. But they open the eyes of the bats which hang upside down. Similarly, the ‘dark night’ of avarice muffles our discretion and raises the bat-like feelings of love and hatred.

However mighty an ox be, it surrenders once the noose is tightened. Likewise, man inescapably surrenders to greed. Greed does not leave any virtues in him. It makes people ignorant. It is like a frightful disease. It does not allow anyone to sit at ease even when put in the most comfortable mansion and makes him run to the wilderness.

Everyone in this world wants robust health. It is also because of *trṣṇā*. Lust for women is also the result of *trṣṇā*.

**रोगार्तिरङ्गनातृष्णा गम्भीरमपि मानवम् ।
उत्तानतां नयन्त्याशु सूर्याशव इवाम्बुजम् ॥**

*rogārtiraṅganātrṣṇā gambhīramapi mānavam |
uttānatām nayantyaśu sūryāśava ivāmbujam ||*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 17, Sloka 45

A man, even of haughty looks, suddenly becomes woe be gone, once his health gets affected. Similarly, a man who appears very dignified easily succumbs to the temptations of a woman and falls at her feet. *trṣṇā* is so powerful that it can blow away even a well-established nobleman or a great scholar or an awe-inspiring warrior as if he were a blade of grass.

Trṣṇā is not an ordinary disease. It is an obnoxious pox. Medication will only worsen it. Doctors advise against administering any medicines to such diseases. They counsel to ignore the disease so that it would subside by itself. It is the same way with *trṣṇā*.

तृष्णाविषूचिकामन्तश्चिन्तात्यागो हि कथ्यते

trṣṇāviṣūcīkāmantraścintātyāgo hi kathyate

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 17, Sloka 43

Just as there is a mantra for the disease smallpox, there is a mantra as a remedy for *trṣṇā* also. The mantra for both the problems is to give up thoughts over enjoyable things. Because elders say that running after objects is at the root of *trṣṇā*. (Later on in Bhagavatgita also the same thing was emphasized in the following sloka

ध्यायतो विष्यत्पुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते
स्नात्सन्ज्यते कामः कामात्क्रोधोभिजायते ॥

*dhyāyato viṣyatpūnsaḥ saṅgasteṣūpajāyate
sngātsanjyate kāmāḥ kāmātkrodhobhijāyate ॥*

Bhagavadgita, Chapter 2, Sloka 62

If we go on thinking about a thing, we develop a bond with it. A bond in turn breeds a desire for it. A desire fortified is *trṣṇā*.

18. BODY

[Sri Rama analyzes the nature of the human body in the 18th *sarga*.]

It was already said earlier that all desires are detrimental. Sri Rama had already discussed the desire for longevity in the 14th *sarga*. Longevity concerns the body only. What was the need of examining the body once again specifically? The issue in relation to the body is taken up repeatedly because of the special attachment humans possess to their body.

“*jīvan bhadrani paśyati*” is an adage meaning that if we manage to stay alive, some day dame luck may come to us by herself. People firmly believe that the body is the basis for defining all the comforts so much so that everybody loves his/her body. So Sri Rama expounds on the nature of the body in 62 verses. He finally concludes:

सततभङ्गुरकार्यपरम्परा विजयिजातजयं हठवृत्तिषु ।
प्रबलदोषमिदं तु कलेवरं तृणमिवाहमपोह्य सुखं स्थितः ॥

*satatabhaṅgurakāryaparamparā vijayijātajayaṃ haṭhavṛttiṣu |
prabaladoṣamidaṃ tu kalevaraṃ tṛṇamivāhamapohya sukhaṃ sthitaḥ ॥*

Vairagya Praklarana, Sarga 18, Sloka 62

There are certain things in this world, which compete with each other in the rate of their degradation. Some things like lightning, clouds, castles in the air etc. succeed easily in such a competition. The body outscores even those in the speed of its disintegration. The body could excel over them because it has not only the defects found in those things but also some additional flaws as well. So, I have come to the conclusion that this body is not even as worthy as a blade of grass.

19. CHILDHOOD, YOUTH AND OLD AGE

[Next, Sri Rama takes up a detailed look at the different stages of aging of the body -viz. childhood, youth and old age - and related matters in the *sarga*-s 19th to 22nd.

Some opine that because of its innocence, childhood is blemishless. Some others consider the little children as absolutely divine. Yet others say that it gives tremendous happiness to look at small kids. But the question is not about how others feel while looking at children. The important point for in-depth examination is what type of experiential understanding an individual (*jīva*) has during childhood. Looked at from this perspective, childhood is a period of ignorance, uncertainty, wants, angst etc. It is characterized by several defects like foolishness, inability, dependence on others, lack of knowledge and so on. Rama asserts that there is very little happiness for the individual in that phase. Therefore, he determines that:

शैशवे गुरुतो भीतिर्मातृतः पितृतस्तथा ।
जनतो ज्येष्ठबालाच्च शैशवं भयमन्दिरम् ॥

śaiśave guruto bhīrirmātrtaḥ pitṛtastathā |
janato jyeṣṭhabālācca śaiśavaṃ bhayamandiram ||

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 19, Sloka 30

Childhood is an abode of all fears.

Sri Rama continued his investigation to find out whether these shortcomings of childhood disappear as one would become a youth. He felt that adulthood too typically comprises not only those very defects but some more too. The additional defects he noticed were ambition, pride and jealousy, likes and dislikes and lust. He surmised that being young and to be without those drawbacks was as impossible as having a forest in the skies. So, he concluded that youth was also not a period of happiness.]

[Note: Young age is the time when men and women are attracted to each other. Lust plays a prominent role at that age. Because of their passion, they commit many mistakes. It does not mean that an accusing finger is being shown toward the females when the matter is discussed in relation to “man.” It is not in the Indian culture to blame the ladies for the basic instincts of human beings. It is also wrong if a lady is assumed to be merely an object of enjoyment by the man. In spiritual texts, whenever a discussion of the sexual relations arises, we should understand that it is about the mutual attraction of both the genders and that all such discussions are applicable equally to both men and women.]

Sri Rama considered also the sexual desire of men for women in his analysis. He summed up his findings to say:

आपातरमणीयत्वं कल्पते केवलं स्त्रियाः ।

āpātaramaṇīyatvaṃ kalpate kevalaṃ striyāḥ |

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 21, Sloka 8

Both men and women develop a natural attraction to each other without much thought and there is no true love within that.

Thereafter Sri Rama considered life in old age. After examining from different angles, he stated thus:

**अपर्याप्तं हि बालत्वं बलात्पिबति यौवनम् ।
यौवनं च जरा पश्चात्पश्य कर्कशतां मिथः ॥**

*aparyāptaṃ hi bālatvaṃ balātpibati yauvanam |
yauvanam ca jarā paścātpaśya karkaśatāṃ mithaḥ ||*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 2, Sloka 1

A human being in his childhood is interested in playing and before that interest is fully satiated, youth overtakes him. Even before the sexual desires and other enjoyments of the youth are fulfilled, old age overtakes him. See how different stages of man's life themselves act unkindly against each other!

वार्धके वर्धते स्पृहा ॥

vārdhake vardhate sprhā ||

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 22, Sloka 8

No sooner old age comes, no strength remains; but desires continue to grow.

Hence, Sri Rama declared that the old age would predominantly be occupied by sorrow, infatuation, separation, tragedies, distress, and insults.

Thus did Sri Rama determine that all the worldly things including the physical body as well as subtle body were full of shortcomings and defects. The significance of losing interest in the subtle body meant that he had no interest even in the comforts that could be enjoyed by the subtle body. The comforts that can be enjoyed only with the subtle body are those that are available in subtle worlds like heaven.

Maharshi Viswamitra could clearly assess from Rama's detailed exposition that he had already crossed the first stage, *ihāmutra phalabhoga virāga*, on the path of seeking.

ihāmutra phalabhoga virāga is the first of the four eligibility requirements that one has to qualify in the pursuit of Self-Knowledge. These are known as the *sādhana catuṣṭaya sampatti* (The Fourfold Aids of Seeking). They are:

- i. *ihāmutra phalabhoga virāga* (Renunciation of the worldly desires and desires pertaining to Heaven).
- ii. *nityānitya vastu viveka* (Discrimination between the eternal(Truth) and the ephemeral (the objects of the world).
- iii. *śamādi ṣaṭka sampatti* (Attainment of The Sixfold Treasures like the control of the internal organs, control of the external organs etc.).
- iv. *mumukśatvam* (Compelling Desire for Liberation).

Sri Rama continued with the narration of his conclusions from the critical examination of the reality of things in the world. His presentation on the nature of time comes next.

20. TIME

I talked about different stages in a man's life from childhood onwards . They occur due to the passage of time. Time promotes every illusion in this world. Time provides the support for desires. When I think of a want, I equip myself in the present with necessary ways and means for the fulfillment of my want, and then time gives me scope to enjoy the fruits in the future for what I do in the now. Thus time has a great contributory role in compounding the desires of the people. But time may also take away all the pleasures of people. There is nothing else in this world as cruel as Time. There is nothing that Time cannot devour.

[Rama mentions with a wry sense of humor that Time behaves as irresponsibly as a Prince without any Royal duties. Thus he makes fun of the attitude of the Princes living at his time. Sri Rama elaborately analyzed the nature of Time in four *sarga*-s. Finally, he pronounces that he has completely lost all charm for the worldly life after examining the nature of Time.]

21. NOTICING THE DEFECTS

Sri Rama did not mince words in describing the transitoriness of all the visible things in this world in the 27th *sarga*. Sri Rama established in the 28th *sarga* that all those things, which were believed to give pleasure, ultimately caused sorrow only. He averred that there was nothing in this world that could really bring true happiness.

Sri Rama further said that there seemed to be no end to the cycle of life and death. While one might feel happy being born as a human being as a result of one's past virtuous deeds, one could see the truth that the same being might be born later as a beast if he or she committed a serious sin. He expressed that the Trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra were also sliding down towards self-destruction. After a thorough inquiry from different angles, Sri Rama was unequivocal in expressing the sense of utter detachment in his mind. He said:

इति मे दोषदावाग्निदग्धे महति चेतसि ।
प्रस्फुरन्ति न भोगाशा मृगतृष्णाः सरःस्विव ॥

*iti me doṣadāvāgnidagdhe mahati cetasi |
prasphuranti na bhogāsā mṛgatṛṣṇāḥ sarasviva ||*

Viragya Prakarana, Sarga 29, Sloka 1

Thus I see only blemishes in everything in this world. These accumulated defects turn into a forest fire (*dAvAgni*) and its heat has burnt my mind. So no seeds of desire for enjoyment of this worldly life sprout in my mind.

नाभिनन्दामि मरणं नाभिनन्दामि जीवितम् ।
यथा तिष्ठामि तिष्ठामि तथैव विगतज्वरम् ॥

*nābhinandāmi maraṇam nābhinandāmi jīvitam |
yathā tiṣṭhāmi tiṣṭhāmi tathaiva vigatajvaram ||*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 29, Sloka 8

Neither I wish to die nor I wish to live. I wish to be just as I am. That seems to be the best way out of this suffering.

I am bewildered to see people falling to the temptations in life, though they are fully aware of the evils. I do have some discretion; yet, I am unable to get a firm hold on it. I am afraid that my mind too might succumb to the temptations. I am still not sure of the discretion I have and the wisdom I possess. My position is very similar to that of a wife who is married to a weak husband. Such a wife will live forever with the fear that the husband may not be able to protect her. So also is my fear about my mind.”

Baring his heart thus, Rama made an ardent appeal to both the Maharshis for guidance. Citing King Janaka, he said that a few virtuous people in this world, in spite of being involved in worldly affairs, appeared to live in perfect peace. He wondered how it could be possible. He desired to know the means to achieve it.

यथा जानासि भगवंस्तथा मोहनिवृत्तये ।
ब्रूहि मे साधवो येन नूनं निर्दुःखतां गताः ॥

*yathā jānāsi bhagavamstathā mohanivṛttaye |
brūhi me sādhave yena nūnam nirduḥkhatām gatāḥ ||*

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 31, Sloka 19

“Great Sages ! Please teach me the way those great men could attain a sorrow-free state.”

Rama asserted that he would not do anything, nor would he eat, wear clothing, or talk to anyone till he learnt the way to deal with his problems. He gave a decisive ultimatum: “I will even stop breathing gradually till I can find the way!”

22. APPLAUSE BY THE MAHARSHIS

Thus ended the narration by Sri Rama in the congregation of noblemen, Saints, Maharshis and others. Maharshi Valmiki provided an exhaustive list of all the great men, saints and sages who were present at Dasaratha's court at that time.

They were all astonished by the in-depth presentation on an inquiry into the essence of Truth by a lad who was hardly 12 years old with an acumen that rivalled knowledgeable Pundits. The Sages like Narada, Vyasa, Viswamitra, Vasishtha, Pulaha and so on were very much pleased and blessed him heartily. Gandharvas, Siddhas and others showered flowers from above on Rama as a mark of their admiration. The assembled dignitaries held their breath anxiously awaiting the response from the Maharshis Viswamitra and Vasishtha.

[Note: One may wonder how Maharshi Vyasa was present in the Royal Court of Dasaratha at the time of these proceedings. Sri Rama belonged to *tretāyuga* and Vyasa to *dwāparayuga*. Some modern scholars would even argue that Yoga Vasishtha, therefore belongs to a period later than Bhagavad-Gita.

The fact is that the term Vyasa is the title of a position. It is not the name of a person. Currently it is the '*śvetavarāha kalpa*', the first of the series, running in the 51st year of Lord Brahma. Of it, so far six '*manvantara*-s' have passed and the 7th, the '*vaivaswata manvantara*,' is presently on. Of this '*vaivaswata manvantara*,' 27 *mahāyuga*-s have passed and the 28th is going on now. In the 28th *mahāyuga* – *krta*, *treta* and *dwāpara yuga*-s have already passed. The celebrity born at the end of *dwāpara yuga* who assumed the position of Vyasa is Krishna Dwaipayana or *Badarāyana*. It has been said in the Mahabhagavatha that this Veda Vyasa will assume the honored position as one of the seven Rishis in the forthcoming '*sāvarṇi manvantaram*'. Further, it is said in our Epics that at the end of every *dwāpara yuga*, one Vyasa Bhagavan will be born and he will have a very long life and that he will occupy important high positions in the future ages.

So we need to be careful in attributing the name 'Vyasa' to any specific individual. To understand clearly, the reader should know the cycle of *yuga*-s (Epochs and Periods of time).

There are four *yuga*-s: *kr̥tayuga* - *treta yuga* - *dwāparayuga* - *kaliyuga*

Four *yuga*-s make one *mahā yuga* (Greater Era).

Time goes in cycles repeating these *yuga*-s much like the same seven day cycle in each week or the same twelve months repeat every year.

Hence, it is not correct to think that the Vyasa of the previous *dwāparayuga* attended the congregation of Rama, when Vyasa's name is mentioned. We have to understand that one of the Vyasas of the past epochs attended the congregation.

Sri Rama himself raised a question about this matter in a later *sarga*. We shall have a more detailed explanation when we come to that part.]

Sri Rama remained unaffected by the praises showered on him. Maharshi Narada urged Vasishtha and Viswamitra to reply to Sri Rama's queries. They took his counsel as a directive. Maharishi Viswamitra responded first.

The first Chapter titled *vairāgya prakaraṇa* in Yoga Vasishtha ends here. This chapter is just a prelude to what Maharshi Valmiki is going to pen in far more detail in the upcoming chapters. The second Chapter opens with the sermon given by Maharshi Viswamitra. It serves the purpose of an introduction to the substantially weighty discourses of Maharshi Vasishtha that come up in the later Chapters.

A point to be noted here is regarding the pre-requisites - *sādhana catuṣṭaya sampatti* (The Fourfold Aids of Seeking) - that have to be met before undertaking a serious spiritual study. Maharshi Valmiki declared publicly that Sri Rama had already achieved the first two, viz. *ihāmutra phalabhoga virāga* and *nityānitya vastu viveka*.

How about the remaining two? Did Rama fulfill them also?

A poet does not always tell things in a direct manner; he tells them with an elan and beauty that can hardly be surpassed. Maharshi Valmiki was not only a philosopher but also an unparalleled poet. So we find that the Sage talks about the achievement of *śamādi ṣatka sampatti* and *mumukśatvam* by Rama in an indirect manner. He stated that Rama was in an extremely detached state of mind and that he emphatically said that he would not eat, wear clothes or talk to anyone until he learnt the subtle philosophical truths. From these words we can clearly infer that Rama had total control over his inner and outer organs of the body (i.e. *śamādi ṣatka sampatti*). His declaration that he would gradually even stop breathing indicates how intense was his aspiration for liberation (i.e. *mumukśatvam*). Thus Maharshi Valmiki established that Rama was fully ready for initiation into the 'ātma vidya' (Self-Knowledge), having achieved the Fourfold Aids of Seeking.

23. REVIEW OF THE CHAPTER ON DETACHMENT

Sage Valmiki, the Poet and Author of the magnum opus Yoga Vasishtha, divided this classic Advaita text into six chapters. The chapters are:

1. *vairāgya prakaraṇa* – 1500 verses
2. *mumukśavyavāhāra prakaraṇa* – 1000 verses
3. *utpatti prakaraṇa* – 7000 verses
4. *stithi prakaraṇa* – 3000 verses.
5. *upaśama prakaraṇa* – 5000 verses
6. *nirvāṇa prakaraṇa* – 14500 Verses

The first two chapters are of an introductory nature. The real meat of the Advaita teaching commences from the third chapter. An important point to be borne in mind is that the study of a philosophical text is unlike reading a novel or fiction. In order to experientially understand the depths of the philosophy, the reader has to have attained stainless detachment.

On the pretext of establishing that Sri Rama, the main student receiving the teaching, was already endowed with supreme detachment, Maharshi Valmiki begins the first chapter of the book with an exposition on what exactly is detachment (*vairāgya*) and what is its nature? The Sage also introduced the broad outline of the plan of teaching, and a few technical terms and concepts in the first chapter.

All classic philosophical scriptures conform to a specific structure. It is called the Fourfold Intention. It comprises:

1. *viṣaya* – the subject matter of the book
2. *adhikāri* – the target reader who is qualified to study the work
3. *sambandha* – the connection between the subject and the content of the book
4. *prayojana* - the benefits accruing from a study of this text.

Maharshi Valmiki clearly spelt out the above four aspects in his own style in the first chapter of the book. Through the story of Bharadwaja, the Sage indicated the subject matter of the work to be a presentation of the means of remedying the sorrow and suffering of mankind. He established through the stories of Arishtanemi, Karunya, and Suthikshna the eligibility requirements of a student who can benefit from a study of this scripture. He said:

नात्यन्तमज्ञो नोत ज्ञः सोऽस्मिञ्छास्तेऽधिकारवान्

nātyantamajño nota jñāḥ so'smiñchāstre'dhikāravān

Vairagya Prakarana, Sarga 2, Sloka 2

Meaning: (The seeker who can study this text would be) neither a total ignoramus nor a complete Knower of Truth.

Maharshi Valmiki illustrated the connection between the topic of the study and the total work with the story of Lord Vishnu. He told us about the four curses received by Lord Vishnu, how, as a consequence to the curse by Sanakumara, He would be enveloped by ignorance as a twelve year old boy by the name Rama, how He would develop detachment spurred by His own internal good quality (*satvaguna*) and then would proceed to keenly observe the world thereby attaining eligibility to obtain the Knowledge of the Self. Thus the Sage not only establishes the connection between the aim of the work and the content of the book but also describes in detail about detachment which is the fundamental requirement in the study of Vedanta.

Maharshi Valmiki demonstrates the path for the development of detachment in the seeker through the dialogue between Rama and Maharshi Viswamitra. Every aspect of worldly life gets examined in minute detail during that conversation. At every stage it clearly shows that there is nothing worthwhile to be pursued in worldly life.

Sage Narada recognizes the mature state of Rama who lost interest in the pleasures of life in this world and also the next world. The chapter ends with the Sage Narada encouraging the Maharshis Viswamitra and Vasishtha to impart the Knowledge of the Self to Rama.
