

Leadership lessons from the Yaksha Prashna

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Based on the translation by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, Republished by The Matheson Trust

Introduction

Maharishi Vyasa (also called Veda Vyasa or Krishna Dvaipayana) is generally considered the author of Mahabharata. He narrated the story and Lord Ganesha is said to have agreed to write it only if Vyasa never paused in his recitation. Vyasa in turn agreed on condition that Ganesha took the time to understand what was said before writing it down!

Vaisampayana was a pupil of Vyasa, from whom he learned the *Jaya*, the original 8,800 verses of the epic. He later expanded the *Jaya* to 24,000 verses under the name *Bharata*, which he recited to King Janamejaya at his *sarpa satra* (snake sacrifice). It took many more centuries to compose all the 100,000 verses of the Mahabharata.

Yaksha Prashna is one of the five most important dialogues in the Mahabharata, the others being the Bhagavad Gita, the Vidura Niti, the Sanat Sugatiyam, and the Vishnu Sahasra Namam. These are called the Five gems or Pancharatnas.

The Bhagavad Gita, the dialogue between Arjuna and Lord Krishna is the best-known of the Five gems.

The Vidura Niti is the conversation between Vidura and King Dhritarashtra about how to manage worldly affairs and prepare for the life after death.

The Sanat Sugatiyam is a dharma capsule on immortality as disclosed to Dhritarashtra by a celestial sage, Sanatsugata (considered identical to the well-known Sanatkumara) summoned by Vidura. He felt that the sage would answer the questions better.

The Vishnu Sahasra Namam is narrated by many Hindus every day. When Yudhishtira asks Krishna some questions about God, Krishna directs him to Bhishma who is now preparing for death, lying on his bed of arrows. It is Bhishma who narrates the Vishnu Sahasra Namam.

The Pandavas and the enchanting lake

Now on to the Yaksha Prashna. Duryodhana's cunning scheme had worked and the Pandavas had to go and spend 12 years in the forest followed by one year incognito. If their identity was revealed during this one-year period, another period of 12-year exile would begin.

The Yaksha Prashna story comes as the Pandavas were approaching the end of the 12 years of exile. The time had come for the Pandavas to live incognito. As they were discussing their next course of action, the Pandavas came across a Brahmin who complained that a deer had carried away on its antlers his Arani. Arani is a pair of wooden blocks to generate fire by friction. (Those days, we did not have matchsticks or lighters. You had to light one fire with another or use the Arani.) As a result, the Brahmin was not able to perform his Vedic sacrifices.

The Pandavas readily agreed to help the Brahmin. Setting out to retrieve the Arani, they followed the hoof-marks of the deer. As they went after the mysterious deer, Yudhishtira, became exhausted and thirsty. His brother Nakula went to fetch water and found a beautiful lake, without any living creature except a crane. When he attempted to take water from the lake, the crane told Nakula that the water of the lake would turn into poison if he drank it without satisfactorily answering his questions. Nakula did not pay heed to this warning, hurriedly drank the water and instantly died. Sahadeva, coming in search of his brother, also found the same lake, saw Nakula dead, and was again warned by the crane. But Sahadeva too ignored the crane and died after drinking the water. Similarly, Arjuna, and Bhima met the same fate.

Yudhishtira and the Yaksha

Since none of the brothers had returned, Yudhishtira went in search of them. He came to the lake and found his brothers lying dead. Before searching for the killer of his brothers, the thirsty Yudhishtira decided to drink some water from the lake. But the crane warned him: "These thy brothers, O king, repeatedly forbidden by me, would forcibly take away water. It is for this that they have been slain by me! He that wisheth to live, should not, O king, drink this water! O son of Pritha, act not rashly! This lake hath already been in my possession. Do thou, O son of Kunti, first answer my questions, and then take away as much as thou likest!"

Yudhishtira realized that it was wiser to wait. He responded: "I do not, O Yaksha, covet, what is already in thy possession! -----Virtuous persons never approve that one should applaud his own self. Without boasting, I shall, therefore, answer thy questions, according to my intelligence. Do thou ask me!"

The crane revealed itself as a Yaksha (a nature spirit) and asked many questions with philosophical and metaphysical ramifications. This dialogue between the Yaksha and Yudhishtira is embodied in the Madhya Parva of the Mahabharata.

Yudhishtira could answer all the questions of the Yaksha. Pleased with his answers, the Yaksha said, "Thou hast, O king truly answered who is a man, and what man possesseth every kind of wealth. Therefore, let one only amongst thy brothers, whom thou mayst wish, get up with life!" The Yaksha was stunned when he chose Nakula. Surely Bhima and Arjuna were greater warriors and more important to Yudhishtira.

Yudhishtira explained: "I will never depart from my duty. Let Nakula, therefore, revive! My father had two wives, Kunti and Madri. Let both of them have children. This is what I wish. As Kunti is to me, so also is Madri. There is no difference between them in my eye. I desire to act equally towards my mothers. Therefore, let Nakula live. "

The Yaksha was so happy with Yudhishtira that he brought back to life all the four Pandavas.

Finally, the Yaksha revealed himself to be Yama-Dharma, the God of Death and none other than Yudhishtira's father. He also admitted that it was he who had stolen the Arani disguised in the form of the deer. He blessed Yudhishtira saying he had adhered to Dharma (righteousness). So the Dharma would protect them and no-one would recognize them when they went incognito during the Ajnata Vasa.

Here we look at a few questions, that are more relevant to our times and the answers that the great Yudhishtira provided.

The questions

What is faster than the wind?

The mind is faster than the wind.

What is that which if controlled, leadeth not to regret?

The mind, if controlled, leadeth to no regret.

What are more numerous than the grass?

Our worries are more numerous than grass.

Comments: We think and think the whole day and get lost. If only we could control our mind and concentrate on the task in front of us. If only we could leave our worries behind, be more optimistic and focus on the present. There is a whole body of literature today on mindfulness. But Yudhishtira had figured this out thousands of years back.

What is that which, when renounced, makes one agreeable?

Pride, if renounced, makes one agreeable.

Comments: Today, psychologists consider Agreeableness to be a very important personality trait. An agreeable person is perceived as kind, sympathetic, cooperative, warm, and considerate.

What enemy is invincible?

Anger is invincible.

What is the greatest wonder?

Day after day countless people die. Yet the living wish to live forever. O Lord, what can be a greater wonder?

Comments: Industry leaders think they will remain leaders forever. They find it difficult to imagine that they will be disrupted one day. It is ok for them to think of others getting disrupted! But their own future is guaranteed. This complacency is what makes change management so difficult in large successful organizations.

What is the best of all laudable things?

The best of all laudable things is skill.

What is the most valuable of all his possessions?

The best of all possessions is knowledge.

What is the best of all gains?

The best of all gains is health.

What is the best of all kinds of happiness?

Contentment is the best of all kinds of happiness.

What man should be regarded as learned?

He is to be called learned who knoweth his duties.

Comments: Knowledge and skills are what helps us to make an impact in the work place. Health enables us to contribute in a sustained manner over long periods of time. If we want to have a long and successful career, we need good health. Knowledge by itself is not enough. Some very knowledgeable people cannot deliver, are very unproductive, lack focus or are very poor team players. The reason is they do not know their duties! They do not try to understand what is expected of them.

By what, birth, behavior, study, or learning doth a person become a *Brahmana*?

It is neither birth, nor study, nor learning, that is the cause of Brahmanahood. Without doubt, it is behavior that constitutes it. One's behavior should always be well-guarded, especially by a Brahmana. He who maintaineth his conduct unimpaired, is never impaired himself. Professors and pupils, in fact, all who study the scriptures, if addicted to wicked habits, are to be regarded as illiterate wretches. He even that hath studied the four Vedas is to be regarded as a wicked wretch scarcely distinguishable from a Sudra if his conduct be not correct. He only who hath his senses under control, is called a Brahmana!"

Comments: Yudhishtira was essentially saying that emotional intelligence is more important than IQ. We can read books and pick up a lot of knowledge. But if we are arrogant or impatient or we learn just to show off our knowledge, then we are no better than the ignorant.

Recall the famous story of the Brahmin who renounced his family, went to the forest and did penance. One day a bird disturbed him and he reduced it to ashes. It took a dutiful housewife and a butcher to teach the Brahmin that all his knowledge and penance were of no use. More important than knowledge is a good attitude and the right behavior.

Concluding Notes

This is how Vaisampayana concludes this section, "Having said these words, the worshipful Lord of justice, who is the object of contemplation of all the worlds, vanished therefrom; and the high-souled Pandavas after they had slept sweetly were united with one another. And their fatigue dispelled, those heroes returned to the hermitage, and gave back that Brahmana his firesticks. That man who pursueth this illustrious and fame-enhancing story of the revival of the Pandavas and the meeting of father and son (Dharma and Yudhishtira), obtaineth perfect tranquility of mind, and sons and grandsons, and also a life extending over a hundred years!"