

Mahābhārata
As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is the eleventh part of the serial article, continuation from June 2024 newsletter.

Karna replied, “You say that I had a first mother who just dropped me. I know you as my mother, and I do not want to lose you too. All that I have is just you. It may be true that my mother is in this dream, but I do not want that mother anymore. She abandoned me, and I do not want to go back to her. You are my mother and you will always be. I am your Radheya, son of Radha. It is nice to know that I am not a *sūta*, I have always felt different.” He did not feel strange, but he did feel different and he did not want to be a *sūta*. He did not belong to that group. But he did not feel odd. His feeling was validated, and he felt that it was something clean. He thought, “Okay, that is good enough for me. My disposition is okay.” But now he wanted fame. He wanted to be big. The problem complex was inside him in spite of his breakthrough. He wanted to become the best archer. He wanted to prove himself. That was the problem of Radheya, of Karna. To learn his craft he went and introduced himself as a *sūta* to *ācārya* Drona.

Drona told Karna that the princes in his school would not accept a *sūta* as a classmate. Even though Drona wanted to teach Karna he could not admit him. It was a class of princes. Karna was angry, because again he was denied as a *sūta-putra*. He did not want to call himself differently either. Thus he was denied instruction from Drona. Karna knew Drona had learned from Bhargava, Parashurama, and he went straight to Parashurama, the one who would not teach a *kṣatriya*. A *sūta* is both *brāhmaṇa* and *kṣatriya*, and Karna told Parashurama that he was a *brāhmaṇa*. He did not want to tell a lie, yet he wanted to take advantage of somebody who knew warfare. So he convinced himself he could tell an half lie as long as he used what he learned only for the purpose of *dharma*. His argument was that he would not use his skill against people. He went to Parashurama and declared himself a *brāhmaṇa*. He asked Parashurama not to reject him, for he was his only refuge. Parashurama saw a brilliant boy who would be a good student. He said that Karna’s desires for fame and wealth and power were legitimate. Few love ar-

chery just for the love of archery.

Over the years, Parashurama taught Karna everything. He taught him how to dispatch, withdraw and reclaim *astras*. He taught him all skills, and he was very happy with his disciple and all Karna's accomplishments. He told Karna that with all the missiles he had earned nobody could touch him. One day, Parashurama was resting under a tree outside his hut. He asked Karna to bring a deerskin roll to put under his head so that he could sleep. Karna said, "Put your head on my lap and sleep." Parashurama agreed and fell asleep in Karna's lap. As they rested, a huge insect began biting Karna on the thigh. With its snout and its teeth the insect bored a whole in Karna's thigh. It was very painful and it started to bleed, but Karna would not disturb his *guru's* sleep. The warmth of Karna's blood reached Parashurama's hand and he woke up. Karna explained what had happened, and he showed Parashurama the bug. Karna thought his teacher would appreciate his composure, but it turned out differently.

Parashurama killed the bug with his sight. The bug transformed into a demon and rose into the air and told Parashurama his story. Some time ago he, in his original form as a demon, had been cursed to be an insect, one who would be returned to its original form by Parashurama. After hearing the beetle's story Parashurama turned to Karna, "No Brahmana could stand the blood and pain you did when this bug bit you. You are no Brahmana. No way. You would have screamed at the sight of the blood. You would have woken up everyone with your screams of pain. You can only be a *kṣatriya*. Are you a *kṣatriya*?"

Radheya was frightened. He said, "I am neither a Brahmana nor a Kshatriya, I am a *sūta*. Perhaps I can be either, but I called myself a *brāhmaṇa* in order to get the *vidyā* from you, not for anything else. You have taught me, and you are like my father. I want only that you bless me. No doubt I told this lie, but it was only in the interest of knowing, of being taught."

All these people, I don't know why, once they get into anger they do not come down at all - until they verbalize that anger in the form of a curse.

Parashurama said, "You cheated me from day one, and I have been foolish

to assume that you were a Brahmana. I did not even suspect your words, and I taught you everything. That means you lied to me, and therefore you have to pay for it. Do you know what will happen? Whenever you are fighting with someone who is your arch enemy and you decide you have to use the *astras* that I have given you, you will forget the *mantra* that empowers those *astras*. At the crucial time you will forget the incantations. Your memory will not serve you. You told me a lie, and I cannot be sure what *adharma* you will do. You could use these weapons for anything; I don't know what. Therefore these weapons will not serve you.

Karna was stricken, and he fell at his *guru's* feet. He begged to be saved from this; all that he had learned was now useless. This was too big a curse. Parashurama had cooled down some, but he said he could not take the curse back. He gave some relief and release to Karna. He said, "You want fame. You will gain fame. People will always remember you and praise you as a great man and a great archer." Karna went away crestfallen, crushed. He rationalized that it was not all his weapons that would be denied him, and he would be famous. It was not all his enemies who could invoke the curse. There were some features of the curse that would save him. Parushrama had both blessed Radheya and cursed him. Famous as Radheya, his mother would be repaid, and Karna wanted that.

Later, Karna was coming back from the forest – you know, *karma* catches you up all the time. As Karna was coming he saw an animal, just walking in the forest. He thought it was a wild animal, and he was a natural archer. He picked up an arrow and shot. Then he went and looked and saw that he had shot a cow. It was the cow of a poor Brahmana who had been given the cow as *dakṣiṇā* somewhere. Now the cow was dead, and killing a cow is a *pāpa*. Killing a cow or a *brāhmaṇa* – you cannot even think of it. The poor Brahmana said, "You killed a cow which did not even know you were around. My cow was truly defenseless and innocent. Do you know what is going to happen? When you are helpless, because you killed a helpless animal, when you are fighting for your life, you will find that you have become helpless. Your chariot wheel will just stick to the ground. You will stand helpless. Another curse – *śāpa*."

Karna's eyes were dry; he could no more shed tears. He went back to Radheya, the only thing that made his heart full. He told of all the things that had happened, and he left out the curses and the bad things. He told all that he had learned, and his mother was very happy.

The scene now turns to Hastinapura where Duryodhana and his brothers and the Pandavas had studied the arts of warfare. Drona wanted to show to the court and all the people what he had taught his disciples. Therefore he organized a tournament and invited all the important dignitaries to the stadium. The people gathered, and one pavilion was filled with Dhrtarashtra, Kunti, Krpa, Gandhari, Bhishma, Drona, who was all in white, Ashvatthama and the rest of the royals. All of Duryodhana's clan and all of the Pandavas came. They all came to show what they had learned. It was then that something happened that turned the course of the lives of the people.

A highlighting of the institution of guru, not the person guru, is placed in the Mahabharata before this public tournament organized by Drona. Drona had been approached by the son of Hiranyadhanus, the one who has a golden bow, the chieftain of the Nishada hunter community. His son was named Ekalavya, and Ekalavya asked Drona for instruction in the archery *vidyā*. Drona said, "Well, I would like to teach one as sincere and capable and lovable as you, but I cannot because I am already teaching these princes. I find that teaching the princes plus you, Ekalavya, would not work. You would stand out; you would in fact be out. These hearty people would not include you. I am sorry but I cannot teach you."

Ekalavya was disappointed, but he did not give up his pursuit. He had seen Drona with his own eyes. He made a likeness of Drona. Ekalavya created an altar for Drona with the image he had made, and daily he would practice *dhanuvidyā*, the discipline of archery, as though the *guru* were instructing him. That is the institution. The *guru* doesn't really have to teach a *vidyā* where practice and repetition are key elements. Ekalavya diligently did that practice required for *dhanuvidyā*, and he became an expert. That grace worked for him.

Once, the Pandavas and all Duryodhana's clan, went to the forest to hunt.

The Pandavas had taken along with them a hunting dog. The hunters were all dressed and fully equipped for their adventure. The dog was a princely dog and, running ahead of the men, the dog saw a stranger in the forest. The dog had sighted a man dressed in a deerskin. The dog, unfamiliar with what he saw, thought it was some kind of forest animal and began barking, barking, barking. From a distance, the guy dressed in deerskin raised his bow and stitched the mouth of the dog shut with five clean arrows, without hurting the dog much. It was just enough to close its mouth. The dog ran back to his masters the Pandavas. It was some kind of a poetry in archery, you know.

The hunters exclaimed that whoever had done this to the dog had done something extraordinary. Already Drona had declared that no other archer was equal to Arjuna. Arjuna became upset that there might be someone who could challenge his status. Gradually he became curious as to who this exceptional person was who dwarfed them all in archery. Arjuna led the hunters out to find out who was this special person. In fact the dog led them to this person. The princes approached and asked him, "Hey, did you shut the mouth of this dog?"

"Yes," said the fellow, "he was barking too much."

"Where did you learn this? What is your name?" inquired Arjuna.

"I am Ekalavya, a disciple of Drona" said the archer.

The Pandavas went to Drona and said he should see this boy who said he was Drona's disciple. Arjuna especially told him, and he told him that the sense of accomplishment he had gained from Drona's praise was tarnished by the presence of a better disciple. Arjuna asked Drona when he had taught this Ekalavya.

Drona said, "I never taught this Ekalavya."

"He says you are his teacher," says Arjuna.

Drona followed Arjuna to Ekalavya. When Ekalavya saw Drona he fell at his feet; he was so happy to see the *ācārya*. Every day he had been seeing him in that particular image on his altar, now he was seeing him in person. Ekalavya was delighted.

“It seems you said you are my disciple,” said Drona.

Ekalavya answered, “Yes, I am. Don’t you remember me? I came and asked you to teach me, but you said that I was not a prince. You said it could not be. But I did not give up. I was not upset. I came back and I created an altar and I created an image of you and I have been practicing and you have blessed me. Everything that I know, as much as it is, is all your blessing. You have taught me, Drona.”

Drona knew then that this fellow was greater than Arjuna and everybody else. Drona thought that perhaps he should ask for *dakṣiṇā*. He wanted *dakṣiṇā* from Ekalavya.

Ekalavya said, “I am willing to give whatever you want.”

“I want your right thumb. Give me your thumb,” said Drona seriously.

“Oh, this is nothing,” declared Ekalavya. He took an arrow, a crescent shaped arrow, and cut his thumb and placed the bleeding digit in front of Drona and said, “Here you are.”

Drona was pleased. The beauty of it was Ekalavya was equal to his teacher's request. Arjuna was upset when Drona asked Ekalavya for this *dakṣiṇā*. It was an acknowledgement of their connection. When Drona was pleased with Ekalavya’s response, in Arjuna’s eyes Drona became an ordinary man. To Arjuna's eyes, Drona had fallen. But in the eyes of Ekalavya, Drona was still a teacher. This is an amazing story told in-between the other stories perhaps to present what the institution of *guru* was. Otherwise this story of Ekalavya is an interlude, with no connection whatsoever except that he was great.

We return to the tournament. Arjuna’s devotion to Drona had been great. Bhishma was taking care of the kingdom on behalf of Dhrtarashtra, but Dhrtarashtra was the king. Drona went to King Dhrtarashtra, who was sitting with Bhishma and Kṛpa and all the other royal retinue at the public gathering, and said he wanted to present the talented and newly skilled princes to everyone.

“These people are now accomplished graduates,” said Drona. Drona referred to all the Kauravas - all of them are Kauravas really - Pandavas and Kurus.

“They all have gained *vidyā*; therefore I would like to present them to you,” said Drona.

Dhrtarashtra was very happy, and unhappy also. Unhappy because he could not see the display of marksmanship that was going to come and could not share fully in the family’s great day. A new stadium had been built, called "a place where you can see." It was used for a theatre, or for any show. A great arena was made. The invocation to the earth was done, and all the deities were invoked. A proper sight, a plain, was chosen, and one side of the new grandstand was enclosed for all the *rājās*. One section was reserved for women, and there were many galleries for the public. In the center was the stage which was designed to show off the participants and performers.

The people were all seated, and Drona came in with his disciples. Drona and his son Ashvatthama entered first, like the moon with the mouse nearby. You know, you can see the moon and mouse together. In a cloudless sky, how beautiful they are. That is the description in the Mahabharata. There was all-white Drona, it is true. His clothes, his hair, everything about him was all white. Even his *yajñopavīta*, the sacred thread he wore over his left shoulder and under his right arm was white. Generally the *yajñopavīta* is the casualty, because it sits right on the body. Every day you may not be using soap and water. The *yajñopavīta* becomes colored, especially when these fellows are doing *pūjās* in the big temples. If he were to see their *yajñopavītas*, Bhagavan would run away because the sacred thread can get so dirty. It is the one that takes everything. But Drona's was pure white.

Drona’s *yajñopavīta* was as clean as his beard. He also wore a white *mālā*. He was garlanded. With his son Ashvatthama, Drona entered. Mahabharata paints an image of the blue sky, completely free from clouds. The Moon appeared with Mars. Ashvatthama was not small; he was Arjuna’s age. Drona addressed the crowd, and then he invited the princes to come on stage. They demonstrated mock fighting, simple exercises to show the skills of the disciples. They had been taught how to wield the mace, for which Duryodhana was famous. Bhima was

equally famous for that. Then those two squared off against each other. Duryodhana of course wanted to destroy Bhima. He saw this as another chance for advantage, even though it was a demonstration bout. Duryodhana took it very seriously and began attacking Bhima. Certainly Bhima was not going to just take it. Bhima got wild, and it became more and more violent.

Drona saw the escalation and called his son Ashvatthama and clearly told him to go and stop these fellows. Drona wanted Bhima and Duryodhana separated. Ashvatthama went and told the two that the *ācārya* has ordered them to stop. Ashvatthama got between the two of them and stopped the fight. Duryodhana stepped back fuming, and Bhima was very much upset at Duryodhana's immoderate attack.

“This is purely a time to show your talents, how much you have learned. That is all that is intended here, not a real bout. You have to wait until later for that,” is what Ashvatthama said. The two rivals ended up sitting down, and Arjuna was asked to come and display his skills.

Arjuna, the effulgent son of Indra, like even Narayana, is portrayed by the author in a beautiful description of poise and command and attentiveness. Then with a huge noise, the roar you know when the hero enters the cricket match or any game, Arjuna was welcomed. Arjuna stepped up and showed off various moves he had mastered. He fired the *agnāstra* and showed all the power of the fire it produced. He used the *varuṇāstra* to demonstrate its ability to spread water over any threat. Another *astra* created a wall of clouds that could obscure an entire field. He fired another and disappeared; he just disappeared. One *astra* allowed him to look small, another to look big. He showed the great variety of tools he had for warfare. Arjuna appeared riding in the front of a chariot. You blinked your eyes and he was in the middle. Blink again and he was not in the chariot at all. Then he was back at the helm. All that he did was *māyā*. It was quick, and it was all part of the whole thing. It was not simply a casual athleticism on display.

To be continued...