

The Great Indian Epic MAHABHARAT told by Sadhguru

— *Living the Story through the Eyes of a Mystic*

Preface: The author and the chronicler

The first version of Mahabharat, which was written down by Ganapati himself, had over 200,000 verses. When Vyasa wanted to tell the story and needed someone to write it down, he found no better chronicler than Ganapati. But Ganapati was bored with this kind of scholarly business. He said, "Once I start writing, you should not take even a moment's gap. When I am writing one word, the next word should already come. If you hesitate, I will leave the project. You must keep telling the story in such a way that I never have a break. Are you ready for this?" Vyasa said, "Fine, because this story is not something that I am going to make up. This story is living in me – it will just find expression. The only condition is you should not write a single word that you do not understand."

They made a very clever deal, and Vyasa narrated the story – these 200,000 verses that depict many hundreds of characters, who are not guest appearances. For each one of them, all aspects of their lives are described in enormous detail – their birth, their childhood, their marriage, their asceticism, their sadhana, their conquests, their joys, their miseries, their death, and for most of them, even their previous lives as well as their next lives. The Mahabharat is about 10 times longer than the Odyssey and the Iliad put together.

Don't judge it – Live it

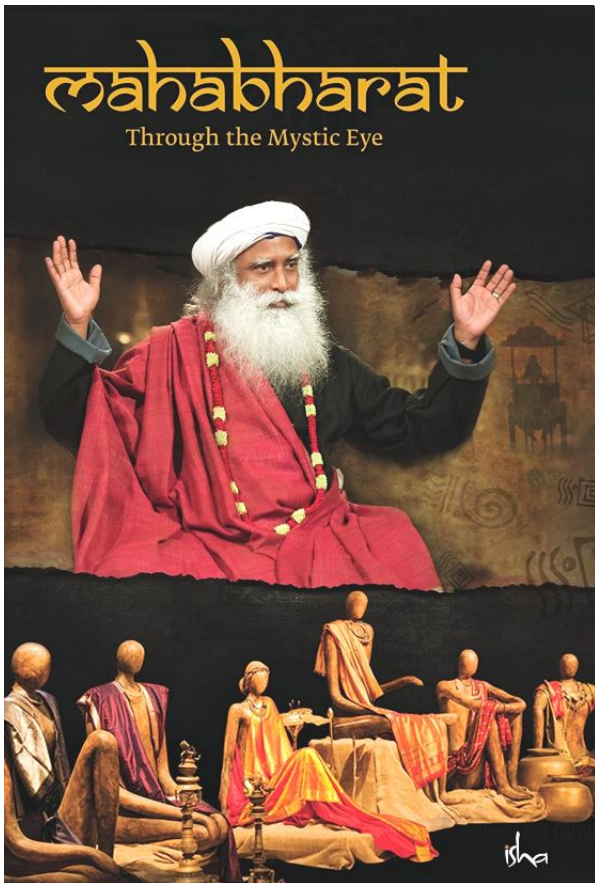
This is not about sitting here in the 21st century and make judgments on people who lived 5000 years ago – it would be most unfair. I am sure if they came alive now and looked at you, they would have horrible judgments to make about you, the very way you are. It is not about good or bad, right or wrong. This is about exploring human nature like it has never been explored anywhere else. It is simply an exploration – do not draw conclusions.

Vyasa, the one who first told the story, took up this challenge because he wanted to see that the story lives. Since then, thousands of people have written their own Mahabharat, with mild adaptations. There are adaptations to different regions in the country, different castes, creeds, and tribes. Every storyteller, looking at the crowd that is sitting in front of him, has made his own adaptations. But the story is not contaminated by adaptations. It has only been enriched by them, because in these 5000 years, no one has ever contaminated the story by trying to judge it. You should not do that either. Do not think in terms of "Who is the good guy? Who is the bad guy?" That is not how it is. These are just people.

Dharma and adharma are not about right and wrong, good and bad. It is not some kind of code of conduct for kings, priests, or the citizenry. It is a law that, if you grasp it, allows you to move towards truth. If you live the story, it is a very powerful spiritual process. If you judge the story, it can create a great deal of confusion in your life, because after this, you will not know what is good and bad, what to do and what not to do, whether to live in a family or to go to the jungle, whether to fight a war or not. If you live this story, you will understand dharma allows you to make this life process a stairway to the Divine. Otherwise, you make this life process a spiral to hell – that is what a lot of people do.

Leave aside what you know about the ending of Mahabharat. If you want to explore the beauty of your life, you have to explore the beauty of the story without thinking of the result. A story is a tremendous opportunity to go through the greatest war without getting a single scratch. It is important to go through this because for most people, human experience is largely shaped through one's thoughts and emotions.





Mahabharat Episode 1: Brihaspati's Curse and Tara's Child

Embrace the Characters to Understand the Story

You need to be absolutely involved, not looking at it like a piece of his-story but as your story, being a part of it. We want to walk through the story, not hear someone else's story. As I already mentioned, it would be completely unfair to judge people from 5000 years ago by your values, your morals, your ethics, or whatever else. I want you to think like them, be like them, experience it the way they did – not the way you think today. These were times when transactions between the planet Earth and other forms of life were very frequent.

There are various aspects of the Mahabharat that you will find simply unbelievable, but you should not disbelieve anything. Because we are in the 21st century, we value dissection more than an embrace. But right now, I want you to embrace this story and these characters, the human beings, animals, yakshas, kinnaras, ganas, devas, gods, and goddesses – all kinds. Only then will

you understand why it was the way it was, and above all, why it is relevant to you. In a state of dissection, you would miss the whole spirit of it.

Brihaspati, Chief Priest of Indra

Many thousands of years ago, there was a master priest and scholar, whose name was Brihaspati. Naturally, Indra, the King of Gods himself, hired him as his official priest. A priest was very important because it was Dwapara Yuga, a time when rituals were the most significant aspect of people's lives. They learnt to use methods and substances to impact their own life, the situations around them, and the lives of others. A remnant of this ritualistic culture still lives on in the southern part of the country. Kerala has probably kept up more ritual, and in greater purity, than any other part of the country.

Brihaspati and His Wife Tara

Brihaspati had a wife by the name of Tara. Brihaspati represents the planet Jupiter. Tara means "star." In ancient India, the woman's place in rituals was as important as the man's. This arrangement, that a man could not perform a ritual without his wife, made sure that though the physical conditions outside were harsh, still women had an equal place. A man could not receive blessings without his wife. A man could not go to heaven without his wife. A man could not attain mukti without his wife.

All the rituals were established in such a way that at no point, society could disregard women in any sense. Today, women have a little bit of freedom, but unfortunately, with this freedom, they are losing many privileges they used to have. Today women have reasonably equal rights – I am saying "reasonably" because maybe by law they are equal, but in terms of enforcement, it is still only "reasonable."

This shift towards equal rights has happened only because modern technology sort of levels the field and not because of a true transformation of humanity. In Brihaspati's time, the social norms or what was referred to as "dharma" ensured that a woman could not be used, abused, or neglected, because she was a very important part of a man's life. In terms of physical strength and muscles, he would have just wiped her out. But the spiritual dimension of life was not possible for him unless

his woman was next to him. Therefore, he had to value her.

Tara Falls in Love with the Moon God

Though he was the King of Gods' priest, Brihaspati needed Tara for whatever he did. He was holding on to her only because he would otherwise lose his employment. And he himself philandered all over the place. Seeing this, one day, Tara looked up at the full moon, and she fell in love with the moon god Chandra. Chandra himself came down to earth. They got into a big romance, and after some time, she eloped with him.

Brihaspati became furious, because it was not just about losing his wife but losing his job, his prestige, his place in society, and he would not be able to enter Devaloka, the gods' world, anymore. He called Indra and said, "I want my wife back. You have to get her back – otherwise, I will not perform your rituals." Indra interfered and compelled Tara to come back. This was the first time that someone was compelled to stick to a certain family structure. When Indra said, "You have to come back," Tara answered, "No, my love is up there." He said, "Your emotions do not matter. Your dharma is to be with Brihaspati, because unless you stay with him, my rituals will go bad." So she was brought back.

Tara's and Chandra's Child

Tara was pregnant. Brihaspati wanted to know whose child it was. Tara refused to speak. People gathered. She still refused to speak. Then from inside the womb, the unborn child asked the question, "Whose child am I really?" In appreciation of the intelligence of this child, who, while still in the womb, wanted to know what seed he was made of, people said, "You may refuse to tell your husband; you may refuse to tell the gods, but you cannot refuse to tell your unborn child." Tara said, "It is Chandra's child."

Brihaspati got very angry that his wife was carrying the child of another man. He cursed the child, saying, "May you become a neuter – neither a man nor a woman." The child was born and named Budha, after the planet Mercury. As he grew up, he lamented to his mother, "What am I supposed to do? Should I live as a man? Should I live as a woman? What is my dharma? Should I become an ascetic? Should I get married? Should

I marry a man or a woman?" Tara said, "Existence has space for all these billions and billions of stars, all the other kinds of things, and a variety of creatures who are neither men nor women nor gods nor devils. When existence has space for all that, don't you worry – for you too, there is space. For you too, there will be a life. You simply be. Life will come your way."

Mahabharat Episode 2: The Origin of the Chandravamshis

King Sudhyumna Goes Hunting

One day, King Sudhyumna went hunting in the forest where Shiva and his wife Parvati lived. Looking at the animals, she said on a whim, "My love for you is such that I feel these bull elephants, these lions with their huge manes, these peacocks with their fabulous plumes are all an insult to you. I want you to make this forest in such a way there is no other male but you." Shiva was in a romantic mood. He said, "Okay. Let everything in this forest turn female." Everything in the forest turned female. The lions become lionesses, the bull elephants become cow elephants, the peacocks became peahens, and King Sudhyumna turned into a woman!

He looked at himself – a brave king, who had come hunting in the forest, had suddenly become a woman. He cried, "Who did this to me? Which yaksha, which demon, cursed me like this?" In great despondency, he searched around. Then he found Shiva and Parvati in romance. He fell at Shiva's feet and said, "This is not fair. I am a king. I am a man. I have a family. I just came hunting, and you turned me into a woman. How can I go back like this?" Shiva said, "I cannot take back what I have done, but I can correct it a bit. We will make it in such a way that when the moon is waning, you will be a woman. When the moon is waxing, you will be a man."

The Chandravamshi Dynasty Is Born

Sudhyumna refused to go back to his palace. He stayed in the forest and became known as Ela, who for one half of the month was male, for another half of the month was female. One day, it so happened that Budha and Ela met. It was a perfect match. Both of them were male and female in

equal measure. Between them, they had many children. These children became the first Chandravamshis.

In the tradition of the kings in this country, there are Suryavamshis and Chandravamshis – descendants of the sun and descendants of the moon. They are distinctly different types of people. The sun people are conquerors – clear-cut, black-and-white kind of people. Chandravamshis are different every day. They are very emotional, artistic, and highly unreliable. The greatest of the Suryavamshis was Manu himself; then came Ikshvaku. Down the line, there were many – such as Bhagiratha, Dasharatha, Rama of Ayodhya, and Harishchandra. Here, we will talk about Chandravamshis because the Kurus are mostly Chandravamshis. That explains their emotional flare-ups out of which they acted.

Nahusha – From Emperor to Python

One of Budha's and Ela's children was Nahusha, who became a great emperor. Once, he was invited to Devaloka, Indra's palace. Indra had to go somewhere, so he told Nahusha, "Take care of my Devaloka for some time. Be here, enjoy yourself, and administer the place well." The moment Indra left, Nahusha became too proud of this little chore that was given to him, to take care of the place while Indra was gone. He sat on Indra's throne. He called just about any apsara he wanted.

That was not enough – his eyes fell on Indra's wife Shachi. He started compelling her, "Now I am sitting on the throne. I am Indra. You are mine." She tried to avoid him in many ways, but still he tried to force himself upon her. Shachi said, "Yes, now you are Indra. The only thing is the Sapta Rishis, the seven sages, should carry you to me on a palanquin. Then I will be yours." Nahusha ordered the Sapta Rishis to carry him on a palanquin to Shachi's palace, which they did.

Nahusha falls from Devaloka

He was full of pride and in too much rush. He felt they were not walking fast enough. So he kicked Agastya Muni, who was holding the right side of the palanquin, in the head and said, "Go faster." Agastya looked at him and said, "The whole thing has gotten into your head. You have become so base, you are unfit not just to be in

Devaloka – you are unfit to even be a human being. Become a python." A python is a very base animal. Nahusha fell down from Devaloka in the form of a python. We will come back to the python later.

Nahusha had children – the two important ones are Yati and Yayati. Yati is known for his character and his phenomenal intellect. He took one glance at the world and said, "I don't want to have anything to do with this," withdrew into the Himalayas, and became an ascetic. Yayati became a king.

Devas and Asuras in Constant Battle

As already mentioned, Brihaspati was the priest for the Devas, and did rituals for them. Shukracharya was the priest for the Asuras. The Devas and Asuras constantly fought in the Gangetic planes. The Devas were trying to descend from the higher regions, and the Asuras were trying to move up from the desert into the more fertile heartland of India. In these constant battles, the Asuras had an advantage – they had Shukracharya. He had immense capabilities. And he had the power of Sanjeevini. With the Sanjeevini mantra, he could revive whoever died in the battle.

At the end of each day, all the Asuras who had died in the battle were revived and again, they were ready to fight the next morning. How do you fight an army like this who, if you kill them, don't stay dead? Because of Shukracharya, they got revived again and again. The Devas were desperate. So Brihaspati's son Kacha came down to Shukracharya, bowed down to him and said, "I am the grandson of Angira, and the son of Brihaspati. I come from a good lineage. Please accept me as your disciple."

Kacha Becomes Shukracharya's Disciple

The Asuras warned Shukracharya, "This guy is from the opposite camp. Obviously, he has come to learn the secret of Sanjeevini. Let's kill him right now." Shukracharya said, "No, the boy has done no harm to us. And he has the necessary qualifications to be my disciple. I cannot refuse him." The dharma of the day said that if someone deserves to be taught, he cannot be refused.

Kacha was received as a disciple, and he proved to be a worthy disciple. He served his master, took every instruction, and was very much

a part of everything. Shukracharya had a daughter whose name was Devyani. Devyani looked at this young man and slowly fell in love with him. But he was not focused on this young girl. Whatever she did, she could not draw his attention for even a moment. He could not be distracted from the purpose for which he had come, and the Asuras knew he had come for the Sanjeevini.

The Asuras Assault Kacha

One day, Kacha was grazing his master's cattle in the forest. The Asuras pounced upon him, killed him, tore him into bits, and threw him to the wild animals. When in the evening, only the cows came back but not the boy, Devyani was heartbroken. She went to her father and cried, "Kacha has not come back. Someone has done something to him. Wherever he is, you must bring him back to life." Giving in to his daughter's plea, Shukracharya used the Sanjeevini to bring Kacha back to life.

When he was asked what happened, Kacha described how the Asuras pounced on him and killed him. Shukracharya said, "Be careful. The Asuras don't like you, because you are from the enemy camp. Still I am treating you as my disciple." After a few days, Kacha went to pluck flowers for the morning worship. The Asuras caught hold of him, killed him, ground his flesh and bone, mixed it with salt water in the sea, ground his organs, and mixed a little bit of it in Shukracharya's wine. Unknowingly, Shukracharya drank it.

When Kacha again did not turn up in the evening, Devyani hollered. But Shukracharya said, "It looks like it's his destiny to be dead. He is dying too often. There is no point in bringing him back. Someone of your intelligence, someone of your breeding, someone of your exposure to life should not be crying about life and death. This is something that happens to every creature. Let him be dead. Reviving someone too often is not good." But Devyani was heartbroken. "Either Kacha comes back or I will drown myself in the lake." Not willing to allow that to happen, Shukracharya said, "Let's do it one last time."

Kacha Learns the Sanjeevini Mantra

When Shukracharya tried to use the mantra, he felt a rumbling in his stomach. It was Kacha. Shukracharya got furious. "Who did this? Is this also the Asuras' work? How can they do this?"

From within his stomach, Kacha narrated the whole story – how the Asuras killed him, ground him, mixed him with salt water, and how they took the organs, ground those, and mixed some of it with the wine. Shukracharya became very angry. "This is going too far, that they put him in my belly now. Either I have to let him stay dead, or, if I bring him back to life, I have to die." He thought, "Maybe I must resign this job and join the Devas. I am being treated too badly. How dare they put this boy in my belly?" But Devyani cried. She said, "I am neither willing to live without Kacha nor without you. If one of you dies, I will drown myself."

Shukracharya told Kacha, "You have succeeded in the mission for which you came. You wanted to know the secret of Sanjeevini, and you are a deserving candidate. Now I will teach it to you. Then I will use it to revive you. You will burst out of my body, which will lay me dead. Then you use the Sanjeevini mantra, bring me back to life, and you start a new life elsewhere." Shukracharya used the Sanjeevini mantra, and like a rising moon, Kacha grew in his stomach and burst out of him. Shukracharya fell dead. A scream went up from Devyani. Then Kacha used the Sanjeevini mantra and brought Shukracharya back to life.

As he was leaving, Devyani said, "You cannot leave. I have loved you." But however much she begged, Kacha said, "I am your father's disciple. On that level you are like my sister. Another thing is, I just came out of your father's body, so he is also my mother. That way also you are my sister. So there is no way," and he walked away.

Mahabharat Episode 3: Curses or Blessings?

Devyani and Sharmishtha

Devyani was close friends with Sharmishtha, the daughter of the Asura king of that area, Vrishaparva. A certain incident occurred that, in a way, became the root of the Kuru Dynasty. The two young girls went to the river to bathe. Sharmishtha was an Asura princess, Devyani was the daughter of Shukracharya, a priest. That means she was from a Brahmin clan, which in those days were considered as the highest among the social groups. That is why the two girls kept their clothes and jewelry separately when they went to bathe.

While they were playing in the river, the clothes were blown about in a big wind and were mixed up. When the two girls came out of the river, naturally in a hurry to get dressed, Sharmishtha by mistake put on parts of Devyani's clothes. Then, half in jest but half establishing her superiority, Devyani said, "How come you are wearing the clothes of your father's guru's daughter? How does it feel? And how is it appropriate?"

Sharmishtha realized the mistake. But being a princess, she flew into a rage and said, "Your father is a beggar. He bows down in front of my father. You live from what my father doles out. You better know your place." And she pushed her into a pit. Devyani fell down. Sharmishtha left her there and went away in a huff.

When Devyani came back home, she plunged into her father's lap and cried for revenge, saying, "You have to teach this princess a lesson." For insulting his daughter, Shukracharya demanded the princess should become a maid to his girl. The king had no choice because without Shukracharya, who could bring the dead back to life, he would be lost.

Throughout the story of Mahabharat, there are curses and boons. But you do not know whether a curse is a boon or a boon is a curse, because life has its own way of mixing things up. A curse becomes a boon – a boon becomes a curse. So Sharmishtha was cursed to be a maid to Devyani. Then Devyani's marriage was arranged with Yayati. She insisted that Sharmishtha should follow her as her personal maid to her new home.

Devyani had already had her revenge on Sharmishtha and should have left it there, but she wanted to rub it in some more. So Sharmishtha came with her as her maid after the marriage. Yayati and Devyani lived together as husband and wife, and they had a son whose name was Yadu. The Yadavas come from this Yadukula.

Although Sharmishtha was Devyani's maid, being a princess, she carried herself with a certain dignity. She made herself even more attractive than Devyani. Inevitably, Yayati fell in love with her. A secret love affair happened, and they had a child. That child was Puru, who became one of the fathers of the Kuru dynasty.

Yadu, as Yayati's first son, should have naturally become the king, but he did not because of a certain misdemeanor. When Shukracharya realized that Yayati had betrayed his daughter and

had a child with the maid, he cursed him: "May you lose your youth." So Yayati became an old man.

He could not come to terms with this. When Yadu grew up and became a fine youth, Yayati asked him, "Give me your youth and let me enjoy it for a few years. Then I will give it back to you." Yadu said, "Nothing doing. First you cheated my mother. Now you want to cheat me out of my youth. No." Then Yayati cursed Yadu: "May you never become the king."

Yayati's second son Puru, who was born to Sharmishtha, voluntarily offered his youth to his father, saying, "Father, enjoy the youth. It doesn't mean anything to me." Yayati became youthful again and lived as a young man for a period of time. When he felt he was done with it, he gave back the youth to his son Puru and made him the king.

Mahabharat Episode 4: Shakuntala and the Birth of Bharata

The Birth of Shakuntala

From Puru, a few generations down the line, there was Vishwamitra, a king, who was also known as Kaushika. Seeing the power the rishis and the sages had, he somehow felt the power of the king is too little in comparison. Therefore, he wanted to become a sage, though he was born a king. He went into the forest and started doing serious austerities.

Seeing the intensity with which he was going for it, Indra felt, if Vishwamitra achieved what he was aspiring for, his own supremacy would be in danger. He sent one of his "honey-trap agents", the apsara Menaka. Menaka's job was to seduce Vishwamitra and distract him from his austerities and sadhana. She was successful and bore a girl child.

After some time, Vishwamitra realized that all he had earlier earned through his sadhana, he had lost because of this distraction. He became furious and walked away, abandoning mother and child. Being an apsara, Menaka was just a visitor in this world with a limited visa! She wanted to go back. Since she could not leave the girl with the father, because the father did not want her, she

left the girl on the banks of river Malini and went away.

Some Shakun birds there noticed this little girl, somehow took to her, and protected her from other creatures. One day, Sage Kanva came that way and saw this strange situation where a little infant was being protected by birds. He picked up the child, took her to the ashram, and brought her up. Because she had been protected by the Shakun birds, he called her Shakuntala. She grew up into a fine young woman.

One day, King Dushyanta went on a campaign. On the way back from the battle, he wanted to feed his soldiers. He went into the forest and indiscriminately killed as many animals as he could to feed the army. When he shot a very large male stag, his arrow found its mark, but still the stag ran away. Dushyanta followed it and found it in the hands of Shakuntala. It was her pet stag, and she was nursing it with great compassion. When he saw this, he fell in love with her, stayed back for some time, and with Kanva's permission, married her there.

Then Dushyanata had to go back. His whole army was waiting at the edge of the forest. He told Shakuntala that he would go and set things right in his kingdom and come back afterwards. As a mark of remembrance and of the consummated marriage, he took off his official ring and put it on Shakuntala's finger. Naturally, it did not fit properly. He left saying, "I'll come back for you."

Shakuntala was constantly in a dream state – this forest girl had suddenly become a queen, an empress! One day, Sage Durvasa came to Kanva's ashram. He was an angry man. He addressed Shakuntala, but she did not respond – her eyes were open, but she could not see anything. He felt insulted and said, "Whoever is holding your attention right now, may he forget you forever." She suddenly came to her senses and cried, "It cannot be! Why did you do this?"

People in the ashram explained to Durvasa that Shakuntala got married to the king, and that she was waiting for him to come back and take her with him. "She was daydreaming – please pardon her," they said. By then, they had provided hospitality to Durvasa, and he was a little cooler. He said, "Okay, let me correct it. Yes, he has forgotten you, but the moment you show something that reminds him of you, he will remember."

The Birth of Bharata

Shakuntala waited and waited, but Dushyanta never came. She bore a child whom she called Bharata. It is his name that the nation carries today. This nation was named Bharat or Bharatvarsh after this emperor for his many, many qualities. He was an ideal human being.

Bharata grew up in the forest. One day, Kanva told Shakuntala, "You should go and remind King Dushyanta that you are his wife, and that you have a son. It is not appropriate that a king's son is growing up without being in touch with his father." Shakuntala took this young boy and set out for the palace. They had to cross a river. She was still in a dream of love. When they were crossing a river in a boat, she put her hand out, just to feel the water, and the oversized ring slipped into the river. She did not even realize it.

She was innocent of the ways of the kings and palaces. In the king's court, when Dushyanta asked, "Who are you?" she said, "Well, don't you remember? I am your wife Shakuntala. This is your son." Dushyanta became furious. "How dare you! Who are you to even say such things?" She was ousted from the place. She did not understand what happened. "He loved me so much! And now, he completely blanked out his memory?"

She went back, distressed. For the first time, she had had a brush with society, and then this happened. She went deeper into the forest behind the ashram and lived with her son in the wilderness. Bharata grew up with the wild animals – very brave, very strong, very much a part of the earth upon which he lived.

Later, after Dushyanta found his ring again, he came hunting in this forest. He saw a young boy playing with full-grown lions, riding elephants. He looked at him and asked, "Who are you? Are you some kind of superhuman being? Are you a god? Have you come from elsewhere?" The boy said, "No, I am Bharata, the son of Dushyanta." The king said, "I am Dushyanta. How come I don't know you?" Then Kanva came and explained the whole story. Finally, Dushyanta took Shakuntala and Bharata to the palace.

Mahabharat Episode 5: Shantanu Meets Ganga

Bharata had many sons but when they grew up, he said, "They cannot make good kings for my citizens." This was the first time a king showed a wisdom where just biological connections were not good enough to be a king. Just because you are born to a king, you need not be a king. He manifested this. This was greatly valued. Bharata was celebrated for his balance of mind, impartiality, and his sense of inclusion with his citizenry, and this is one reason why his name was given to the nation.

He found a boy named Vithatha, who was born to Mamata, Brihaspati's brother's wife. Brihaspati, in a moment of absolute indiscretion, had forced himself upon Mamata and Vithatha had been born. Bharata chose this boy as the king. Vithatha became a great king and ruled for his lifetime with great wisdom and balance. From Vithatha down, fourteen generations later comes Shantanu, and now we are coming down to the story!

Shantanu was the great-grandfather of the Pandavas and Kauravas. Shantanu in his previous life, was known as Mahabhishek. He lived a full life and entered Devaloka. He was sitting in Indra's court when goddess Ganga came visiting. It so happened that in a moment of unawareness, her dress fell and her upper body was exposed. As was the proper behavior at the time, everyone averted their gaze. Mahabhishek, who was new to Devaloka, kept staring at her. When Indra noticed this impropriety, he said, "You are unfit to be in Devaloka. Go back and be born as a human being again." Then Indra noticed that Ganga seemed to be enjoying the attention. He said, "This is completely inappropriate. You seem to be enjoying the attention. You also go back and be born as a human being. Go through all the pains and pleasures of being human. When you are free from this pride, you can come back."

So, Shantanu is to meet Ganga, but he is not aware of it because he does not have his memories of previous lives. But Ganga had retained her memories and was trying to draw him towards her. But being a king he was wandering all over. Shantanu was a fine hunter and when he went hunting, he became so one with that act, for him his hunt was his worship.

Once, for weeks on end, he was out hunting by the Ganga but he was so deeply engrossed in his

hunt that he paid no attention to the river. Being a king, whenever he was thirsty or hungry, the people who served him were always around. But one day, thirst overtook him and there was no one around. Then, he thought of the river and came to it. At that moment, Ganga arose from the river as a woman, and when he set eyes upon her, he fell completely in love with her. Shantanu pleaded with her to marry him. Ganga agreed, but she set a condition, "I will marry you, but no matter what I do, you should never ask me why I am doing it."

There is a history of women setting conditions like this. Puru, the first of the Kurus, fell in love with Urvashi, an apsara [a celestial being] and when he asked her to marry him, she said, "There are two conditions. One condition is, "I have some pet goats. You must always see that these goats are protected, no matter what. If you have to use your whole army, you must protect my goats. The second condition is, nobody else should ever see you naked."

It so happened that the devas wanted Urvashi to return, so they came and stole the goats when Urvashi and Puru were in bed. When she screamed, "My goats, somebody is taking them away!" Puru got up and ran to catch the thieves. Indra saw his chance and sent forth lightning. The whole area was lit up and Puru was seen naked. Urvashi immediately said, "You broke the conditions. I am leaving." And she left never to come back.

Over a period of time in history, as certain things change, the woman loses this ability to set either reasonable or unreasonable conditions upon the man. You can see it in the story of the Mahabharat itself, how society slowly transformed itself from being matriarchal to patriarchal.

To get back to the story, Shantanu was so madly in love with Ganga that he agreed to anything she asked. So Ganga became his incredibly beautiful and wonderful wife. And then she became pregnant.

Mahabharat Episode 6: The Birth of Devavrata

Ganga delivered a fine son, but immediately, she took the child, walked to the river and drowned the child. Shantanu couldn't believe this. His heart burst out but he remembered that if he

asked her why she had done this, she would leave. This man who had been floating around in joy and love was grief-stricken and became afraid of his wife. But still, he loved her so much and they continued to live together. Another child was born, but without a word, she took this child and drowned him too. Shantanu was on the verge of insanity, but he remembered Ganga's condition. This continued and seven children were drowned.

When the eighth one was born, Shantanu followed Ganga helplessly to the river. When she was just about to drown the child, he grabbed the infant and said, "Enough. Why are you doing such inhuman things?" Ganga replied, "You have broken the condition. It is time for me to go. But I owe you an explanation, so let me tell you why."

A long time ago, Sage Vasishtha was living in his ashram, where there was a certain cow named Nandini, who had divine qualities. One day eight vasus were holidaying in the area. The scripture goes about describing the vasus as people who flew around in vimanas or some kind of crafts. These crafts were self-driven. They even go to the extent of saying how the surface of the crafts was so smooth, like the surface of liquid mercury. They say there were lights inside these crafts, but no fire or oil. The light burned by itself.

These vasus were hanging around and they walked through Vasishtha's ashram, where they saw Nandini. One of the vasu's – whose name was Prabhasa – his wife said, "I want that cow." Unthinking, Prabhasa said, "Come, let's get the cow." One or two of them said, "But this is not our cow. The cow belongs to a sage. Why should we take it?" Prabhasa's wife replied, "Cowards always come up with excuses. You can't get the cow so you're coming up with dharma." Hearing this, Prabhasa became very macho and with the help of his companions, they went and stole the cow.

When Vasishtha realized that his dear cow was being stolen, he caught them and cursed them, "How dare you! You come as guests. We treat you well. And in the end you want to steal my cow and go. May you be born as human beings with all the limitations. Let your wings be clipped that you cannot fly. You have to walk upon this earth, you have to carry physical bodies, you have to be born and you have to die like everybody else." These eight vasus then begged Ganga, "Make sure we are born in your womb. Make our lives upon that planet as brief as possible."

Ganga told Shantanu, "I was only fulfilling their desire. They just wanted to be born and be done with the curse. I saved seven of them but you saved the eighth one. Anyway, this is Prabhasa who instigated the theft. Maybe he deserves a longer life upon this planet, but because he is an infant, I will take him with me. When he is sixteen, I will bring him back. I will make sure he has finished his education. All that is necessary for him to be a good king, I will teach him and leave him with you when he is sixteen." Saying this, she took the child and left.

Shantanu became listless and lost. He walked about forlorn and lost interest in his kingdom. One who had been a great king became a frustrated, depressed man. He simply walked around not knowing what to do.

Sixteen years later, Ganga returned with the boy, who was named Devavrata, and handed him over to Shantanu. Devavrata had learnt his archery from no less than Parashurama himself. He learnt the Vedas from Brihaspati. He had learnt everything from the best possible teachers, and was fully ready to be a king. When Shantanu saw him, all his depression went away and he took to his son with great love and enthusiasm, coronating him as the Yuvraj or as the crown prince.

Devavrata took up the administration and was doing everything well at Shantanu's behest, so he became free and happy once again. One day, Shantanu went out hunting and again fell in love!

Mahabharat Episode 7: Devavrata Becomes Bhishma

Matsyagandhi, the Fisher Princess

Once, Uparichara, the king of Chedi, was in the forest, hunting for weeks on end. During this time, he begot a child upon a fisher girl. She delivered twins, who were named Matsyaraja and Matsyagandhi. The king took the boy with him and left the girl with the fisherfolk. Living among the fisherfolk, she was known as Matsyagandhi, which means "smelling of fish."

Matsyagandhi grew up into a dark, dusky woman. The chief of the fisherfolk, who was known as Dasa, had brought her up well. Once, the ashram of Parashara – a man of immense knowledge and a realized being – was attacked and he was in-

jured to a point where his leg was very badly hurt. He managed to escape somehow, and with great effort made his way to a small island where the fisherfolk lived. Seeing his condition, the fisherfolk took him in. He was placed under the care of Matsyagandhi.

She was naturally drawn to him because he was such a towering personality of immense knowledge and wisdom. All the time, she had been struggling within herself because her twin brother was living in the palace, and she was living among fisherfolk. She thought if she associated with the sage, she may get somewhere. They lived on a small island in the river and she bore him a son. Because he was born on an island, he was called Dwaipayana. And because he was dark, he was called Krishna. Later on, Krishna Dwaipayana came to be known as Veda Vyasa, the compiler of the Vedas, who also told the story of Mahabharat.

Parashara took the boy and went away. Before he left, he gave Matsyagandhi the boon that the fishy smell went away and she got a heavenly fragrance that no human being had ever smelt before. She smelt like a flower that did not belong to this world. Because of this phenomenal fragrance, they changed her name to Satyavati, "smelling of truth." And this became her attraction.

Shantanu Begs to Marry Satyavati

One day, Shantanu looked at this woman and fell in love with her. He went to Satyavati's father and asked for her hand in marriage. When Dasa, the chief of the fisherfolk, still a little king in his own right, saw the emperor begging for his foster daughter's hand, he thought this was a good time to make a deal. He said, "I would be willing to give you my daughter in marriage only if her children will become the future kings of the Kuru Dynasty." Shantanu said, "That is not possible. I have already crowned my son Devavrata. He is the best king that the Kuru Kingdom can have."

The wily fisherman looked at the king, saw he was hopelessly in love, and said, "Then forget about my daughter." Shantanu begged him. The more he begged, the more the fisherman realized he had him on the hook. Time to draw in the big fish. He said, "It's up to you. If you want my daughter, her children should become the future kings. Otherwise, go live happily in your palace."

Shantanu went back to the palace – once again depressed. He could not get Satyavati off his mind. Her fragrance invaded him in such a way that once again, he lost interest in the affairs of the kingdom, and simply sat around. Devavrata looked at his father and said, "Everything is going great in the kingdom. What is it that is bothering you?" Shantanu just shook his head and put it down in shame, unable to tell his son what the matter was.

The dutiful son that he was, he went to the charioteer who took Shantanu hunting and asked him, "Ever since this hunt, my father is not the same man. What happened to him?" The charioteer said, "I don't know what exactly happened. I took him to this fisherfolk chief's house. Your father walked into the house as a king, with great enthusiasm, full of love. When he walked out, he was like a ghost."

Devavrata Becomes Bhishma

Devavrata himself went there to find out what had happened. Dasa said, "He wants my daughter. All I am saying is her children should be the future kings. It's a simple condition. The only problem is you are standing in the way." Devavrata said, "That is not a problem. I need not be the king. I promise I will never be the king. Let Satyavati's children be the kings." The fisherman smiled and said, "As a young man, out of your bravado, you can say these things. But later, when you have children, they will fight for the throne." Then Devavrata said, "I will never marry and have children to ensure that Satyavati's children will have the right to be the kings."

The fisherman was just having his meal, carefully taking the bones off the fish. He looked up and said, "Young man, I appreciate everything that you are saying. But you do not know the ways of life. You may not marry, but you may still have children." Then Devavrata took the extreme step of castrating himself. He took a vow: "I will never have children. I am incapable of having children now. Does this satisfy you?" Finally, the fisherman said yes. Everyone said, "This is the harshest thing a man can do to himself." So they called him Bhishma, one who was terribly harsh on himself, without anyone forcing him to take such a step. And so, Shantanu married Satyavati.

Mahabharat Episode 8: Amba's Plight

So, Shantanu took his son's life away, just as Yayati wanted his son's youth. Shantanu had two children with Satyawati. The first one was known as Chitrangada, the second was known as Vichitraveerya. Chitrangada, an arrogant young man, went out one day into the forest. He encountered a gandharva – a being with extraordinary skills who came from elsewhere – who was also named Chitrangada. When this gandharva asked the boy "Who are you?", he proudly said, "I am Chitrangada." The gandharva laughed and said, "How dare you call yourself Chitrangada? I am Chitrangada. You better change your name. This is my name. You are unfit to carry my name." The young prince stood up and said, "How dare you say that! It looks like you've lived too long. Come, let us fight because my father has named me Chitrangada and this is my name." They fought, and in a moment the boy was dead.

The Strange Man

Now there was only one son left – Vichitraveerya. "Vichitra" means strange or distorted, "veerya" means masculinity. He was a strange or distorted masculinity. We don't know exactly what that means. He was either unwilling to get a wife or incapable of getting a wife. Getting a wife or getting a child isn't something we should look at in today's context. It was the most important thing at that time because being a king, the first concern is that they must have sons. Otherwise, who would be next in the lineage? Every day, they were going into battle. Whoever you may be, you may get killed. If you get killed, did you have a son or not was a very important aspect. That was why they were always thinking about taking a wife and having a son because if you didn't have a son, your whole empire would go somewhere else.

Vichitraveerya was unwilling to take a wife. Bhishma was unwilling to take a wife. Chitrangada was dead. So the Kuru dynasty was at a standstill. In this situation the king of Kashi announced the swayamvara of his three daughters – and they did not send an invitation to the Kuru house. The Kuru dynasty was the biggest and most respected in the region but they did not get an invitation because the king of Kashi did not want his girls to be married to Vichitraveerya, about whose masculinity there were rumors. Bhishma could not take this affront because he is committed to the Kuru dyn-

asty above his own wellbeing – above anyone's wellbeing. So he decided to attend the swayamvara.

Bhishma Kidnaps Amba

A swayamvara meant a young woman was allowed to choose her own destiny. When a princess had to marry, they would set up a kind of an event where anyone in the Kshatriya clan who thinks they are eligible could attend, and the woman could choose her husband. It was her choice. No one could intervene.

All three daughters of the king of Kashi – Amba, Ambika and Ambalika – had come to the swayamvara at once. Amba was already in love with the king of Shalva whose name was Salva, and she was to choose him. The simple way of indicating her choice was that the woman would be given a garland, and she would look around at all the men and when she chose one man, she garlanded him and that man became her husband. Amba went to Salva and garlanded him.

Just then, Bhishma walked in. The other warriors sitting there feared him because he was a great warrior. At the same time they knew he had castrated himself and he would never marry. So they taunted him, "Why has the old man come here now? Is he looking for a bride? Or does the Kuru clan not have a warrior who can come and take a bride? Is that the reason he has come?" Bhishma flew into a rage that his nation and clan were being ridiculed. So he kidnapped all the three girls and took them with him. The other warriors gave battle but he defeated all of them. Salva himself fought because his bride was being abducted, but Bhishma defeated and humiliated him and took all three girls away.

This is a change that has happened from previous generations, where a woman could set conditions. Now a woman was being grabbed and taken. Amba was all teary-eyed. As they were journeying towards Hastinapur, the capital city of the Kurus, Amba said, "What have you done? I was in love with this man and I had already put my garland on him. He is my husband. You can't take me like this."

Bhishma replied, "I have taken you. What I take belongs to the Kurus." So she asked him, "Will you marry me?" Bhishma said, "No, you will marry Vichitraveerya." But Vichitraveerya married only

Ambika and Ambalika. He refused Amba saying, "She placed the garland on someone else. She has given her heart to someone. I will not marry this woman."

Amba's Plight

Amba was completely confused, "What am I supposed to do now?" Bhishma apologized to her and said, "I will arrange for you to be sent back to Salva." Amba was quite happy with this and went back to Salva – but she was in for a shock. Salva refused her saying, "I am not here to take charity from somebody. I lost the battle. The old beast defeated me and now he is trying to give me a charity bride. I will not take you. Go back."

Amba had now been refused in both places. She returned to Hastinapur and insisted that Bhishma marry her, "You've destroyed my life. You took away the man I love, you brought me here forcefully and the person I am supposed to marry will not marry me. You must marry me." But Bhishma just refused. "My allegiance is to my nation. I have given my word that I will not marry and that's all."

In total desolation, Amba walked out. I want you to imagine, it's 5000 years ago, a princess rejected from everywhere, she cannot go back to her father, she has no husband. Her man is not taking her back. She just went out not knowing where she is going, in absolute desolation.

Mahabharat Episode 9: Amba Thirsts For Revenge

Amba moved from despair to desperation, from desperation to anger, from anger to rage, from rage to a thirst for revenge. She went from place to place seeking someone who could kill Bhishma. But no one was willing to have a fight with Bhishma because of his prowess. Another aspect is, when Bhishma took the vow to never marry and castrated himself, Shantanu had said, "For what you have done for me today, I will give you a blessing. These 18 years I have been a brahmachari and I have done tapasya. All the merit that I have earned within myself, all the energy that I have picked within myself, I will make it into a blessing and offer it to you, that in your life you can choose your death. You can choose when

you will die." With this blessing on his side and the kind of warrior that he was, no one was willing to take him on.

Bhishma Fights Parashurama

Then Amba went in search of Parashurama. Parashurama was Bhishma's teacher for arms training, especially archery. When she went and prostrated herself before Parashurama and expressed her plight, Parashurama said, "Don't worry, I will fix this for you." He called Bhishma. Bhishma came and prostrated himself. Parashurama said, "Enough! Enough of your vow. Just marry this woman." For the first time Bhishma said, "You are my guru. If you ask me to take away my own head, I will do it but do not ask me to break my vow. I have taken a vow that I cannot break."

You will see throughout the story, there are men who will take a vow, and no matter what – life or death, it doesn't matter what it causes – they want to keep that word. Why this is so is, these are times when people are striving to bring civilization from a totally uncivilized existence. In this effort, a man's word is the most important thing. There are no constitutions or penal codes written down. In such a condition a man's word is the most important thing. If I say something, I do it and do it at any cost. When there is no law, a man's word is the only law.

But Parashurama is not used to disobedience. He is obedient-obedient! When his father asked him to take away the heads of all his brothers and his mother, without a thought he lopped off all four heads. His father was pleased with his obedience and said, "Ask for a boon. What do you want?" Parashurama said, "I want my mother and my brothers to come back to life." So his father gave them back their lives.

Disobedience is one thing that Parashurama cannot take because that is how he has grown up. When he saw Bhishma is unwilling to obey, he went into a rage and the two of them had a duel – an extra-ordinary duel. But Parashurama had taught Bhishma everything he knew and found that he could not beat him. Both of them fought bitterly for days on end and when they found that no one could be the winner, Parashurama threw up his hands and told Amba, "You have to find somebody else."

Karthikeya Intervenes

Amba moved into the Himalayan region and went into deep austerities. She sat upon the snow-clad peaks and went into a deep state of sadhana, calling for Karthikeya, the son of Shiva, who is a great warrior. In her mind, she thought Karthikeya would be the one person who would be able to kill Bhishma. Karthikeya, pleased with her austerity appeared and when she said, "You must kill Bhishma" he replied, "My time of killing is over."

If you do not know this, Karthikeya came down south and in his quest for justice went about slaughtering everything that he saw as injustice. He came to the place which is now known as Subramanya in Karnataka. For the last time he washed his sword and said, "Never again this sword will see blood". He gave up violence and went up the mountain, which is today known as Kumara Parvata, and left his body there. In his disembodied state, when Amba called him, he said, "I cannot kill Bhishma but looking at your plight and your devotion, I will give you a blessing." He gave her a garland of lotuses and said, "Take this garland. Whoever wears this garland will kill Bhishma."

Now, with great hope in her heart, once again Amba went with this garland in her hands – these garlands have always been a disaster for her. The first time she took a garland, something else happened. Once again she took a garland – a lotus flower garland – and walked from town to town, village to village, "Is there anybody who is willing to wear this garland and kill Bhishma?" But no man was willing to touch it.

Her journey with the garland continued and she came to the court of King Drupada, the king of Panchala which was the second largest empire in Bharatvarsh. But Drupada did not even want to come anywhere near Amba because by now Amba's reputation had spread everywhere. Like a ghost she was walking from village to village, town to town, thirsting for Bhishma's blood. When Drupada refused to see her, out of total frustration, she hung these lotus flowers on one of the columns in Drupada's palace and once again desolate and depressed, went straight up to Himalayas. These lotus flowers continued to remain fresh and Drupada was so afraid of this garland, he did not let anybody touch it. Every day they lit lamps and worshipped the garland but

nobody touched it, nobody wanted to have anything to do with it.

Shiva's Boon

Amba continued her journey to the Himalayas. She sat there in great austerity. Slowly, the young woman's beautiful body wilted down to just bones. She sat there, mere bones and skin and called for Shiva. Shiva himself appeared. She said, "You must kill Bhishma." Shiva replied, "Is it not best that you get to kill Bhishma? Then you will enjoy the revenge more than me killing him" Suddenly her eyes brightened up and she said, "How is it possible? I am a woman and he is a great warrior, how can I kill him?" Shiva replied, "I will bless you, in your next life you will kill him." Then Amba said, "But in my next life I will not remember all this. So I will not know the sweetness of revenge." Shiva said, "Don't worry. I will make sure that you remember. When the time comes you will remember. You will know the sweetness of revenge. For all that you have suffered, you will have it." So she sat there and left her body, to come back later.

Mahabharat Episode 10: The Yadava Clan and Krishna's Birth

So far, we have looked at the story of Yayati's son, Puru, and his lineage. Puru also had a brother Yadu, who came down south to where the present town of Mathura is. Different tribes lived there, and none of these tribes believed in having a monarch or a king. They were ruled by a council. Yadu married into the Naga tribe, and since he had been cursed by his father never to be a king, he joined the governing council. All these clans together became known as the Yadavas because Yadu became the chief of the council.

A few generations down the line, Vasudeva was born. Vasudeva's sisters were Preetha and Srutadevi. Preetha was given in adoption to her uncle Kuntibhoja, who did not have children. He loved this girl so much that he gave his own name to her. Instead of calling her Preetha, he called her Kunti.

Vasudeva had two wives, Devaki and Rohini. Devaki had a brother whose name was Kamsa. Kamsa was born out of a rape. Everywhere else, the tradition and the dharma of the day was, it

does not matter how a child was born, if a child was born to a mother who belongs to a certain clan he became a legitimate part of that clan. But the Yadavas rejected Kamsa. They called him an illegitimate child. They refused to include him into the governing council though he was a great warrior because he was too obnoxious and vulgar in his ways. But he struck a friendship with another great king of the east who was Jarasandha. With Jarasandha's support, Kamsa gathered numbers around himself and for the first time in the history of the Yadava clan, he dismissed the council, wore a crown and proclaimed himself king.

Once he became the king, he was the undisputed power. He went about doing things in his own crude ways. People suffered a lot but they couldn't do anything because Jarasandha was a very big force. As Kamsa's tyranny went on, he was cursed that he would be killed by Devaki's eighth child. So he imprisoned Devaki and Vasudeva and as each child was born, Kamsa would hold its legs and smash it on the floor.

When the seventh child came, Vasudeva managed to smuggle it out and replace it with a still-born child that they found elsewhere. This seventh child was smuggled across the Yamuna river to Gokula and given to Rohini, the other wife of Vasudeva. The name of this child was Balarama.

Then, when the eighth child was to be born, they hired occult people who put the soldiers guarding the prison to sleep. Vasudeva took the just-born child across the river to Gokula. There, Nanda's wife Yashoda had delivered a girl. Vasudeva placed this just-born male child there, took away the female child and brought it back.

When Kamsa came the morning after, Devaki pleaded, "It's just a girl. It is not a boy who is going to grow up and kill you, this is a girl. She will get married and go away. Please spare her life." Kamsa replied, "Nothing doing, why take a chance?" He just picked up the infant, twirled her, and threw it up.

But the girl didn't fall down. She took on a different form and said, "The one who is to kill you is still around. I am not the one." Kamsa was terrified. He sent out his soldiers with orders that any child born in this region, within three months of age, should be killed. Soldiers went out, slaughtering every infant within three months of age. But Krishna was thriving, just a few months old.

So, in the Yadu clan, Vasudeva has two wives, Devaki and Rohini. The only surviving child for Devaki was Krishna. And Rohini had Balarama and Subhadra. Among Vasudeva's sisters, Shrutadevi married Damagoshya. The other sister Preetha or Kunti, married Pandu of the Kuru clan.

Mahabharat Episode 11: The Origins of the Pandavas

Pandu married Kunti, the adopted daughter of Kuntibhoja, and Madri, the princess of Madra. One day, Pandu went hunting, and he saw a pair of deer making love. Unconcerned, he thought they were an easy target, and he shot them. He was such a good archer that he shot both of them with a single arrow, as he intended to do. Fatally struck, the stag, which happened to be a sage who had taken this form, said before he died, "There is a law among hunters not to kill a pregnant animal or an animal that is making love because it means the future generation is in the making. You broke this law. For having done so, if you ever touch your wife with any kind of desire, you shall have a violent death." So the situation was that Pandu had no children yet; he had two wives, but he could not go to them because of this curse.

For a king and for the future of his kingdom, not having children was a big problem. Who was going to be the future king? The moment others saw there was no strong prince in succession to the throne, just about anyone would get ambitious. This was a political problem.

Once again, as in the previous generation, the Kuru clan did not have progeny. Pandu got so frustrated with this situation that he gave up all his power and authority and went to live with his wives in the forest. He interacted with the sages who were around and tried to keep himself busy, tried to forget that he was a king, but this deep frustration kept on growing within him. One day, when it reached its peak, he told Kunti, "What shall I do? I want to kill myself. If none of you bear children, the Kuru clan will be lost. Dhritarashtra also does not have children. Besides, he is a king in name only, and since he is blind, his children anyway should not be kings.

When he expressed his frustration to a point where he wanted to commit suicide, Kunti re-

vealed something about herself. She said, "There is a possibility." He asked, "What?" She said, "When I was a young girl, Sage Durvasa came to my father, and I was his hostess. He was so pleased with me that he gave me a mantra. He said with this mantra, I can call for any god I wish and I can bear his child. So if you really wish, I will do this for you." She did not tell him that she had already called someone in the past. Pandu was more than eager. He said, "Please do it. Whom shall we call?" They thought for a moment; then Pandu said, "We must call Dharma. We must have Dharma's son as the king of the Kuru clan." Dharma is also known as Yama, the Lord of Death and Justice.

Birth of Yudhishtira and Bhima

Kunti withdrew into the forest and called for Dharma, and Dharma came. She bore a child, who was named Yudhishtira and considered as the first of Pandu's sons. A year had passed when Pandu became greedy and said, "Let us have one more child." Kunti said, "No, we have a son and the Kuru clan has progeny. This is enough." He said, "No, we must have one more child." He begged and pleaded, "What will they think of me if I have only one son. Please have one more." "So who should be the father?" Pandu said, "We have Dharma, but we also need strength. So let us call Vayu, the God of the Winds." She withdrew and called for Vayu. Vayu came. Because he was such a fierce presence, they could not stay where they were. He took Kunti and went away.

There is a beautiful, detailed description in the Mahabharat of how they initially crossed the mountains, then the oceans, before they flew into Ksheera Sagara, which means "ocean of milk" – the Milky Way. He showed her that the Earth is actually round. He told her that when it is day in Bharatvarsh, on the other side of the globe, it is night. And when it is night here, it is day there. And that there was another great civilization on the other side of the planet, what kind of people lived there, and what their skills and capabilities were. He said that there were also great sages, seers and warriors in that land. Kunti bore another child, the son of Vayu – Bhima, who, as he grew up, was described as the strongest man in the world.

Arjuna's Birth

After some time, Pandu said, "I know I am greedy, but after seeing these two beautiful sons, how can I resist? I want one more son – just one more." Kunti said, "No, no." Time passed, but Pandu would not leave her. She finally said, "Okay, who?" He said, "Let's get Indra, the king of all gods – none less than that." She invited Indra and bore a child by him – Arjuna, the greatest archer and warrior. The Mahabharat refers to him as the Kshatriya, which means the warrior. There has never been another warrior like him, and there never will be.

Madri's Jealousy

The three divine children grew up and started displaying phenomenal skills, capabilities, and intelligence. All the focus was upon them and their mother Kunti. Pandu's other young wife, who neither had a husband to call her own nor children, grew increasingly bitter. One day, Pandu noticed that Madri was no more the sweet bride he had married – her face looked venomous. He asked, "What is the matter? Aren't you happy?" She said, "How can I be happy in this place? It is all about you, your three sons, and your other wife. What is there for me?" After an initial argument, she said, "If you can ask Kunti to teach me the mantra, I will also bear children. Then you will pay attention to me too. Otherwise, I am just an appendage."

Pandu understood her plight. He went to Kunti and said, "Madri needs a child." Kunti said, "Why? My children are also her children." He said, "No, she wants children of her own. Can you teach her the mantra?" Kunti said, "I cannot teach the mantra, but if it is necessary, I will use the mantra, and she can call for any god that she wants." She took Madri into a cave in the forest and said, "I will use the mantra. Think of the god that you want." The young woman was confused, "Whom shall I call? Whom shall I call?" She thought of the two Ashvins, who are not gods but demi-gods. Ashva means horse – the two were divine horsemen linked to the clan who were horse experts. Madri had twins of these Ashvins – Nakula and Sahadeva.

The Five Pandavas

So Kunti had three children – Yudhishtira, Bhima, and Arjuna. Madri had two children – Nakula and Sahadeva. But Pandu still wanted more children. For a king, the more sons he had, the better. When battles happened, the number of sons may decrease, so it was best to have as many as possible if you wanted to conquer, or even just rule the land. Kunti said, “This is it. No more children for me.” Pandu pleaded, “Okay, if you are not willing, use the mantra for Madri.” She said, “Nothing doing,” because the queen who had the maximum number of sons would be the main queen. She had three sons, Madri had two, and she didn’t want to give away this arithmetic advantage. She said, “Nothing doing. We are not using the mantra anymore.”

The sons of Pandu were referred to as Pandavas. The boys grew up as pancha Pandavas, the five Pandavas. They were the king’s children and members of the royal clan, but they were born and grew up in the forest for about 15 years.

Mahabharat Episode 12: The Kaurava Brothers – Born Under a Bad Sign

Dhritarashtra was blind by nature – his wife Gandhari was blind by choice. He was desperate for her to have a child before his brothers’ wives had one, because the firstborn of the new generation would become the king. He whispered all kinds of endearments in Gandhari’s ear so that she would somehow bear him a son. Gandhari became pregnant. Months rolled by, nine turned into ten, eleven – still no delivery. They became anxious. Then they got the news – Pandu’s first son, Yudhishtira, was born. Dhritarashtra and Gandhari went into a depression.

An Ominous Birth

Since Yudhishtira was born first, naturally, he would become the king. Eleven, twelve months went by, and Gandhari still had not delivered. She said, “What is this? Is this dead or alive? Is this human or is this a beast?” Out of frustration, she beat her stomach, but still nothing happened. Then she asked one of her servants to bring a stick and beat her stomach. After that, she aborted, and a dark piece of flesh came out. The mo-

ment people saw it, they were terrified because it was not like human flesh – there was something evil and ominous about it.

Suddenly, the whole city of Hastinapur was horrified because they heard terrible sounds – jackals were screaming; wild animals walked the streets; bats were flying in the day time. The signs were clear that something wrong was going to happen. The sages who observed this turned away from Hastinapur. The news spread that the sages had all left. Vidura came and told Dhritarashtra, “We are heading for big trouble.” Dhritarashtra was so anxious to have a child that he said, “Leave it.” And because he could not see, he asked, “What has happened? Why is everyone screaming, and what are all these sounds?”

100 Pots, 100 Sons

Then Gandhari called Vyasa. Once, when Sage Vyasa had come from a long journey and Gandhari had tended to his wounded feet and had taken care of him very well, he had promised her, “Whatever you wish, I will make it yours.” She had said, “I want 100 sons.” He had said, “Fine, you will have 100 sons.” Now, after the abortion, she called Vyasa and said, “What is this? You blessed me with 100 sons, but instead, I deliver a lump of flesh that does not even look human – it is something else. Discard it in the jungle. Bury it somewhere.”

Vyasa said, “Till now, nothing I have said has ever gone wrong, nor is it going to go wrong now. Bring that piece of whatever.” He took it into the cellar and asked them to bring 100 earthen pots, sesame oil, and different kinds of herbs. He cut this piece of flesh into 100 pieces and put them in the pots, sealed them, and kept them in the cellar. Then he noticed a small piece was left. He said, “Bring me one more pot. You will have 100 sons and one daughter.” He put this small piece in the additional pot, sealed it, and also kept it in the cellar. Another year went by. That is why it is said Gandhari was pregnant for two years – one year in her womb, one year in the cellar.

The Boy with Serpent Eyes

After a year passed, the first pot broke, and out of it emerged a huge baby boy with serpent eyes. That means he did not blink – his eyes were steady, unseeing, and straight. Again, ominous

sounds and signs occurred; what should happen in the night happened in the day. The blind Dhritarashtra felt something was wrong and asked Vidura, "What is happening? Something is wrong. Is my son born? Please tell me." Vidura said, "Yes, you have a son." Slowly, all the other pots started hatching – all the sons came out, and from one pot a little girl.

Vidura said, "You have 100 sons and one daughter. But I am telling you – have your first son killed." Dhritarashtra said, "What, you ask me to have my firstborn killed? How is that?" Vidura said, "If you have your firstborn killed, you will be doing a great service to yourself, to the Kuru clan, and to humanity. And you will still have 100 children – 99 sons and one girl. They will be harmless without this firstborn. With him, they will be the destruction of the world as we know it."

Omens Ignored

In the meantime, Gandhari picked up Duryodhana, their firstborn. She did not hear all these sounds. She did not feel all these omens. She was ecstatic that her first son was born – a huge baby. She was eager to nurture him and make him grow. Then Vidura said, "The wise have always said an individual may be sacrificed for the good of the family, a family for the good of the village, a village for the good of the country. Even the world itself may be sacrificed for the sake of the immortal soul."

"Oh, my brother, this monstrous child of yours has come from the depths of hell to corrupt and destroy the soul of mankind. Kill him now. I swear, his brothers will be harmless and you can enjoy them – 99 princes! But him, you must not leave alive." But Dhritarashtra's attachment to his own flesh and blood was way bigger than his wisdom. So Duryodhana grew up with his 100 siblings in the palace of Hastinapur, while the Pandavas grew up in the forest.

Mahabharat Episode 13: Dharma – Individual and Universal Laws

Dharma and Adharma

The whole epic of Mahabharat revolves around two fundamental aspects – dharma and adharma. When you say "dharma" and "adharma," most

people think in terms of right and wrong, correct and incorrect, good and bad. There are different ways to look at dharma and adharma. A kshatriya, a warrior, has his own kind of dharma. A brahmana, a teacher, has his own kind of dharma, and so do a vaishya and a shudra. This is a sophisticated way of looking at life. Not only do different groups of people have their own dharma – each individual has his or her own dharma. You will repeatedly hear Bhishma and everyone else say, "This is my dharma." If everyone has their own dharma, their own law, then one could ask, where is the law? The Kurukshetra war did not happen because everyone had their own law and they became contrary to each other. The war happened because people broke their own dharma. This is a way of looking at life, where everyone can have their own dharma, but still there is a common thread of dharma that no one can break. That way, everyone can live their lives in their own freedom but still not clash with each other. This fundamental thread of dharma allowed the possibility of civilized existence.

"Fishy Justice"

Before dharma was established, there was something called as matsya nyaya. There is a story around it. One day, a little fish happily moved around in the Ganga. But then a little bigger fish came from elsewhere. The small fish became a part of the bigger fish, and the bigger fish was happy. Another day, an even bigger fish came and ate up this other fish. Like this, bigger and bigger fish came and ate up the smaller fish. Then the big fish went to the ocean. It started eating up smaller fish and became so huge that if it just wagged its tail, the ocean rose and hit the Himalayas. It became a threat to the world. This story needs to be understood in the right context. Even today it is true that every fish is trying to get bigger than what it is. If all the fish are growing at a similar pace, there will be a civilized society. But if one fish becomes super big, the fundamental laws and civilization of society tend to crash. That big fish's whim will be the law. From matsya nyaya, which means fishy justice, they strived to get the society to a place where every individual can have his freedom and pursue his own law without breaking the fundamental thread of law in society.

Dharma in the Mahabharat

Mahabharat was a situation where a few fish had grown too big and did not respect the fundamental thread of law that would allow each individual their own freedom. When they talked about law or dharma, they did not just refer to it as a civil code, not just for peace in the society, not just for human beings to find expression to their talent, love, and freedom. Dharma is about organizing life in such a way that everyone is moving towards their ultimate nature. If you are progressing towards your ultimate, original, divine nature, then you are in dharma. If you are not progressing, even if you do not harm anyone, you are not in dharma. This is the context of dharma in the Mahabharat. When someone says, "This is my dharma," it means, they may not like it, it may not be convenient for them, but this is the way for them to reach their ultimate nature. When Bhishma said, "This vow is my dharma. I will not break it, no matter if the Kuru lineage and the empire fall apart – though I am willing to give my life to this empire." What he meant is that this was the way he was going to attain, and that he would not give it up. You heard what Vidura said – "For the sake of a family, you can sacrifice an individual. For the sake of a village, you can sacrifice a family. For the sake of a nation, you can sacrifice a village. For the sake of the world, you can sacrifice a nation. For the sake of the ultimate nature, you can sacrifice the whole world." This is the context in which they looked at dharma. They clearly saw that the ultimate nature is the ultimate goal and of ultimate significance.

Bhishma's Power

Based on this, they formed all the laws. They considered even the simple laws of day-to-day life as a stairway towards their ultimate nature. Bhishma took this terrible vow – we call it "terrible" not because he became a brahmachari, not because he incapacitated himself, not because of his personal discomfort or loss, but because he put the Kuru lineage and nation that he loved so much at stake. He put at stake what meant most to him, saying that this is his dharma and the way for him to attain. As we go along, you will see various situations where Bhishma seems almost superhuman. If a man is willing to transform the seed of life that is within him – a single cell that is able to create another human being – into a life

force, then it becomes like a nuclear force. A single atom can create so much energy. At various times, people said they could not fight with Bhishma because he was a brahmachari. They could not kill him because he had transformed every seed in his body into a life force, which made him something like mortal by choice. It is from this background that they said Bhishma had the power to choose the time of his death. He was not immortal, but he could choose the time and place of his death, which is almost as good as immortality. Immortality can only happen if someone curses you. Can you imagine what kind of torture it would be if you had to live forever? Immortality is a curse. The choice of being able to die when you want to die is a boon.

Mahabharat – Way Ahead of Its Time

This is a process of tapping upon one's own energies, and of tapping upon the energies in nature. Another example in the Mahabharat are the astras – powerful weapons. They said that the smallest particle in existence can be made into the biggest force on the battlefield. That sounds like an atomic bomb, even though they were still using bows and arrows. They also talked about the impact of certain astras, saying things like, "Even if you do not use this astra to destroy the whole world, the babies in their mother's wombs will still be scorched." Either they had an unbelievably fabulous imagination, or they actually had this kind of knowledge. Did they have these kinds of weapons, did they witness them somewhere, or did someone come from somewhere else and tell them these things? We do not know, but you need to look at this story with a certain care. It is not just about some people fighting, a guy wanting a kingdom or a wife or a child. There are many dimensions to it.

Mahabharat Episode 14: Dharma and Karma – What's the Connection?

Participant: Sadhguru, you said that everyone can have their own life, freedom, and dharma without colliding with someone else's dharma. But is it not the other way around nowadays, that we build our dharma based on our personality and thus crash into each other?

Sadhguru: That is why I said it is a very sophisticated thought. If we have simple needs and we construct our dharma around them, invariably we will collide with someone. That is why people created their individual dharma in such a way that their ultimate aspiration does not collide with someone else's, but to operate on the street, in the house, in the marketplace, there is a common dharma that everyone needs to follow. In road traffic, it is established that all of us drive on one side of the road, depending on the direction we are going. This is a common dharma that you should not break just because you have a different individual dharma.

Your individual dharma is about you reaching your ultimate nature. Essentially, it is an internal process and therefore will not collide with anyone else's dharma. In contrast, the codes and rules of the outer world are the common dharma that everyone has to stick to. When we question that, there will be collision and conflict. Dharma is many-tiered (vielschichtig). To live in a family, there is one kind of dharma. To be an ascetic, there is another kind of dharma. To be a king, there is yet another kind of dharma. To be a merchant, there is another kind of dharma, and so on. But for you as a being, you have the freedom to choose your own kind of dharma and stick to it. Ultimate liberation does not happen by doing something in particular, but by hanging on to something in an unwavering manner – Nishchala Tatvam, Jeevan Mukti. If you change direction every day, obviously you will end up in circles.

Participant: Sadhguru, when you are talking about ultimate nature and dharma – I understand dharma as a set of laws. Why not deal with life and things as they come, rather than having a set of laws?

Sadhguru: Life does not just come – life is constantly being created. Either you created it yesterday and it is befalling you today, or you are actively creating it today. Nothing comes by itself. There are two aspects – dharma and karma. To perform the right kind of karma, you need a dharma. Otherwise, every day, every moment, your actions will be a series of confusions. Dharma establishes the way you perform your karma, so that you create your life in the direction that you want to go. Creating your life is not about choosing your house, car, husband or wife. These things are secondary. The most important thing is what kind of being you

will be. This decides the quality of who you are, the quality of your life, and if you live well, the here and hereafter. With whom you are, what you have around you, whether you live in a palace or not, whether you eat food or gold makes no difference. Except that if you eat gold, you will die soon! First of all, you do not know where life is. You are knocking on all the wrong doors, which is not going to work. Establishing your dharma is to ensure that your karma does not deviate from the fundamental life process. It should constantly remind you that your dharma is to be in a certain way.

Establishing Your Dharma

This is about the laws of the universe, the dharma of the universe, because everything that you do, the way your heart beats, the way you breathe, the way your system performs is deeply connected with the rest of the universe. If you consciously follow the laws of the universe, you will function in a phenomenal way. Right now, you do not feel good either in body or mind because you do not follow the fundamental laws of the universe, unconsciously. But whether this happens consciously or unconsciously, the result is the same. This is the way of existence. Whether you consciously fall off the roof or you unconsciously do so, it hurts the same. It is just that if you consciously fall, you may try to land on your feet, while otherwise you may land on your head. But apart from that, the experience of pain and suffering will not be different. Even if you unconsciously go off track, you are still derailed. Dharma is not going to work for someone who thinks he understands it. It is only going to work for one who implements it, who becomes it.

First Dharma, Then Karma

Bhishma said, "My dharma is harsh – I have taken it and I have become it. No matter what, even if it costs my life, I cannot change my dharma because it has become me." If you are like this, by establishing your dharma, you establish your way of being. Yogasthah Kuru Karmani means, first establish your way of being – then act. First your dharma – then your karma. Now you create too much karma without knowing your dharma – this is the problem.

Karma is not only in the things you are doing in the world – it is in the many nonsensical things you are doing in your head. This is karma. Karma means action. There are four levels of karma – physical action, mental action, emotional action, and energy action. Every moment of your life, you are doing the four dimensions of karma. If you eat, you are doing it; if you walk, you are doing it; if you are fast asleep, you are still doing the four dimensions of karma – every moment of your life, in wakefulness and in sleep. For this karma not to take you away from wellbeing, you must establish your dharma.

If you have not established your dharma, karma will take you away from wellbeing because most of your karma is unconscious. But if you establish your dharma, then your karma naturally follows the pattern – your karma will have an order, a direction, a goal, and a fulfillment. If you have not established your dharma, your karma wanders all over the place. Whatever you see – your mind, emotion, and body may run behind it. That way, you become a confused being. When your being leaves this body, it will not even know where to go, because it is confused. I am not talking about a confused mind, which you know very well – I am talking about a confused being. The being is confused because there is no dharma. When you exit this body and this being does not know which way to go, that is ultimate suffering. That is the worst thing that can happen to a human being. And it is happening large-scale, unfortunately, because people do not establish any kind of dharma for themselves, thinking this is freedom.

Discarding Genetic Games

If, in the name of freedom, we repeal the road rules as to on which side you should drive, if everyone can drive wherever they want, people will not become free – they will only get stuck. Freedom does not come by breaking rules – freedom finds expression only if there is a clear-cut path. So, do not think things just come in your life and you can handle them as you feel like. That is not spontaneity – that is compulsiveness. Even for spontaneity, you need a footing. If there is no footing, there is only compulsiveness, not spontaneity, because the very way your body is structured is not determined by you. Your body still looks like that of our forefathers in Krishna's Dwapara Yuga. Though people may have mixed

in between, still the genetic material of these forefathers is playing games with you.

The genetics of people who lived here even a million years ago are still playing games with you today. Going beyond what is playing up from within and establishing your own dharma is not a simple thing. Saying, "This is my dharma" means you are going beyond your father, beyond your forefathers, and whoever else. You are discarding your genetics and establishing your own path. Bhishma saw that his father had certain behavior patterns, that he was a compulsive "falling-in-lover." Periodically, he fell in love, but that was not Bhishma's karma, nor was it his dharma. "I will never deviate from my dharma. My life is dedicated to the nation, and that is all I am." He broke away from his genetic pattern and established his own way. This is what spiritual sadhana is about – establishing your own dharma in such a way that the past does not take over your life. You know, when someone told Jesus that he wanted to go and bury his dead father, Jesus said, "Leave the dead to the dead."

This looks like the most inhuman, uncompassionate thing to say when a man has lost his father, but that is what he said, because he not only meant to leave the dead father but all the dead ancestors who are dancing inside of you. If you do not leave the dead to the dead, not only do you not have your own dharma, you do not even have a life of your own. Someone else is trying to live through you. Establishing your own dharma means leaving the dead to the dead and carving out a new path for yourself. This is freedom.

Mahabharat Episode 15: The Pandavas Enter Hastinapur

The Pandavas – At Home in the Forest

The five Pandava brothers grew up well in the forest. With the right kind of guidance, being exposed to wilderness is the best education one can get. Sages and seers took care of their education, but above all, Mother Nature brought them wisdom and strength. They grew up strong, patient, wise, and well-versed in the art of weaponry.

Pandu – Desire Seals His Fate

Since their father Pandu was cursed that if he ever approached his wives with the desire of intercourse, he would die, he had arranged for his wives to bear children through other means. For sixteen years, he stayed away from his wives, engaged with sages and saints, pursued knowledge, practiced the sadhana of brahmacharya, and became a powerful being. But one day, when he reached a secluded river in the forest, Madri, his second wife, just came out of the water after bathing. When he saw her naked, he was so drawn to her and beyond himself that after all these years, he lost control and went after her.

Madri, who knew about the curse, offered strong resistance, but destiny pulled him to her, and he died in her arms. She screamed in terror – terror not only because her husband died, but also because it was his desire for her that killed him. Kunti heard the screams, rushed to the place, and when she saw what had happened, she flew into a rage. Emotions between the two wives, which had been suppressed all these years, came to the surface.

After some time, Kunti calmed down for the purpose of securing her children's destiny. And Madri, out of sheer guilt and despair, decided to enter the funeral pyre, believing that she had to accompany her husband. For a while, Kunti pretended she wanted to go in Madri's stead, but in her heart, there was cold determination. She ruthlessly did whatever she needed to do as a queen. Then, accompanied by the rishis, Kunti and the five Pandavas walked towards Hastinapur, after a little over sixteen years.

The Pandavas Return to Hastinapur

When the news that these long-lost cousins were coming back reached Hastinapur, the capital of the Kuru kingdom, Duryodhana was overcome by a wave of jealousy and hatred. He had grown up believing that he would be the future king. Since his father was blind of vision and blind with emotion towards him, in a way, he was already the king, and he was used to having things go his way. But suddenly, a competitor appeared who seemed to be the legitimate heir to the throne. He could not tolerate that at all. He started inciting his brothers, who, compared to him, were insipid and lacked the necessary fire to rule a nation. He

found the most suitable ally was Dushasana, the number two among the one hundred brothers.

Both of them were in a rage even before the Pandavas arrived. People had loved Pandu, who, though he was not officially crowned as the king, was the king for all practical purposes. He was the one who brought wealth to the nation, who conquered lands for them, and who took care of the administration. For sixteen years, he had been in a self-imposed exile, and now he was dead. The fact that his children, who they had never seen before, were coming back stirred a lot of excitement.

Out of curiosity and love, the whole citizenry gathered. When the Pandavas approached the city along with their mother Kunti, a cry rose from the crowd. The boys had grown up strong in the jungle, stronger than they would have been had they grown up in a palace. The one hundred Kaurava brothers, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Bhishma, Vidura, and all the elders stood at the city gate to welcome them. Dhritarashtra, who, right from his childhood, had heavily depended upon Pandu to see the world and to be helped, who was always treated with compassion by his younger brother, had mixed emotions. He believed that he loved his brother, and he could not understand the emotions that he was going through now that he knew that his children would not be the kings.

Duryodhana – The Rise of Hatred

The Pandavas and Kunti were welcomed. The death rituals for Pandu were performed. And the moment the boys entered the palace, destiny started unfolding itself, particularly between Bhima and Duryodhana, because these two boys were the strongest of the lot. Bhima was built like a giant and Duryodhana pretty well matched him in physical strength. Bhima was excited about being in a palace for the first time in his life. The bubbling, blundering simpleton that he was, he was all over the place, making practical jokes and poking fun at everyone, and at every opportunity, thrashing every one of the Kaurava brothers, including Duryodhana.

Their first official clash occurred when they got into the wrestling ring. Duryodhana absolutely believed that no one could ever knock him down. He was the strongest among the hundred brothers and no one else of his age could rival him in the

wrestling ring. When he saw Bhima winning match after match and endearing himself to everyone, Duryodhana thought the best thing to put him in place would be to invite him for a wrestling match at the palace, in the presence of the whole family. It would be a friendly match for others but a fight to death for the two of them. But Bhima knocked him down right away, without a fight. Duryodhana was shattered. The shame of defeat fueled his anger and hatred to a point that he could neither contain nor conceal them anymore.

Duryodhana started plotting against Bhima's life. In the meantime, Shakuni, his uncle, entered the palace as an advisor. In India, the name Shakuni is synonymous with deceit. Shakuni was Gandhari's brother. After Gandhari and Dhritarashtra got married, Bhishma realized that Gandhari was technically a widow, and people started talking. She married a goat that then was sacrificed in order to avert the curse that her first husband would die within three months of their marriage. Bhishma got so angry that the Kuru clan had been deceived like this that he put Gandhari's father and all her brothers under house arrest. It was too much of hospitality – like at the Hotel California – the guests could never leave. And the dharma of the day was that the bride's family, when coming for the first time to the house into which the girl was married, could not leave, as long as they were being served.

Shakuni – Living for Revenge

Over time, the portions of food became smaller and smaller, to a point that they all started losing weight and becoming weak. Like in today's luxury hotels, there is a huge amount of tableware in front of you, but when they lift the serving dome, you will find only very little food on the plate. That is the kind of hospitality they received. After some time, the father and the brothers were all skin and bones. It became obvious that their in-laws wanted to starve them to death. But technically, they were still being served, so they could not leave – that was their dharma.

They decided among themselves that all of them except one would fast unto death. They gave all their food to Shakuni, who was the most intelligent one of them, so that he could survive and take revenge on these people who were killing them softly. It is said that as his brothers died one by one, his father encouraged him to eat

the organs of his dead brothers, so that he would become strong and able to avenge them. When his father died, he would have to do karma for him in their homeland. At that time, he could leave the place.

So Shakuni sat there, cut open his brothers' bodies, and ate their livers, kidneys, and hearts. From his deathbed, his father took the walking stick that was lying by his side and whacked Shakuni's ankle so hard that it cracked. Shakuni screamed in pain and asked, "Why?" His father said, "I broke your ankle so that you will always limp and never forget why you were fed with your brothers' organs. Every step you take, it will serve you as a reminder that you must live only for revenge." After his father's death, Shakuni left with the single purpose of destroying the Kuru House. He came back as their adviser and found appreciation and friendship with Duryodhana, who thought Shakuni was brilliant.

Before his death, his father told Shakuni, "When I die, cut my fingers and make dice out of them. I will use my occult power to make sure these dice always roll the way you want them to. No one can ever beat you in a game of dice – this will come in handy for you one day." So Shakuni cut the fingers of his father and made dice out of them. He did not have the build of a fighter, but armed with these dice, he believed he could conquer the world.

Shakuni and Duryodhana Conspire

Shakuni found favor with Duryodhana, who was filled with hatred and jealousy, and Shakuni continuously nourished that. Duryodhana himself was not very deceitful, but hot-tempered. He used to speak his mind too often, especially in front of his father. When Shakuni saw this, he told him, "Duryodhana, God gave man speech not to express himself, but to hide what is on his mind." That is the kind of mindset Shakuni had. Shakuni constantly nurtured the poison in Duryodhana's heart and made sure that it spread into every cell of his body. Then he told Duryodhana, "If you have an enemy, there is no point in pinching him, abusing him, or spitting at him – it will only make him stronger. Only a fool would do that. The moment you recognize someone as your enemy, kill him." So Duryodhana asked him, "How do I kill my cousin brother in the palace?" Shakuni suggested various plans.

Mahabharat Episode 16: Duryodhana's Murder Plots

Duryodhana went to his father Dhritarashtra and complained, "I have made so many attempts to murder Bhima, but somehow, he is always getting away." Dhritarashtra gasped – within the palace, his son was trying to kill his cousin. Both were just sixteen years of age. One day, Shakuni advised Duryodhana, "It won't work like this. It is better we set up the assassination outside the palace where there is more freedom to do what we want to do. Inside the palace, you have to do it subtly, but your cousin is too much of a bull to kill him like that." He continued by saying, "Speech is not to express your heart – speech is to hide what is on your mind. Befriend Bhima. Love him. Don't wrestle with him – hug him. Don't scowl at him – smile at him. He's a fool – he will fall for it."

This is how Duryodhana, a brave, fearless, no-two-ways kind of man, became deceitful. He had always been filled with jealousy, hatred and rage, but it was Shakuni who taught him the art of deceit. So Duryodhana befriended the five brothers, particularly Bhima. They all thought Duryodhana really had a change of heart, and that he loved them. Only Sahadeva, the wisest of the lot, did not fall for it and kept his distance.

This is how Sahadeva had acquired his wisdom: One day, while sitting in the forest at the campfire, their father Pandu told the boys, "These sixteen years, I have not only stayed away from your mothers, I have done the sadhana of brahmacharya, which has given me enormous inner power and a tremendous amount of insight, vision and wisdom. But I am not a teacher. I do not know how to transmit all this to you. But the day I die, all you have to do is take a piece of my flesh and eat it. If you make my flesh a part of your flesh, you will have the wisdom that I have gathered without having to work for it."

Sahadeva's Wisdom

When Pandu died and his cremation was happening, overcome by emotions, almost everyone completely forgot about this. Only Sahadeva, the brooding youngest of the lot, when seeing an ant carrying a small piece of Pandu's flesh, remembered what his father had said. He grabbed this little piece of flesh from the ant and ate it. His wisdom and strength grew. He could have be-

come a sage among kings, but Krishna saw that this wisdom would stop the flow of destiny. That is why he intervened and told Sahadeva at some point, "This is my command: never express your wisdom. If someone asks you a question, always answer them with another question."

From then on, Sahadeva always answered questions with questions that very few had the wisdom to understand. Those who understood saw how wise he was. Those who did not understand thought he was only trying to create ambiguity about everything. A whole shastra, called "Sahadeva's Wisdom," accrued from that. Even today, in South India, if someone is acting too wise, they say, "He is acting like Sahadeva." This is because people thought he was trying to act wise by answering in questions. But in reality, he was following Krishna's command to never reveal his wisdom and always answer questions with questions, so that they did not understand that he was answering them, unless they had the wisdom to grasp what he meant.

A Poisonous Mistake

Only Sahadeva was able to look into Duryodhana's heart, and he saw pure poison. The other four brothers were too enamored with him. Duryodhana showered gifts on them. The one gift that Bhima really cared for was food. Duryodhana fed him as much as he wanted. Bhima's gluttony was such that the moment food was served to him, he forgot everything else. Whoever gave him food was his friend. He was eternally hungry, so he ate and ate and became bigger and bigger.

One day, Duryodhana suggested a picnic. Shakuni carefully worked out the plan. They arranged a pavilion on the riverbank in a place called Pramankoti. All of them went there, and food was served in excess. Duryodhana played the host to the hilt. He came to every Pandava and fed them by hand. Bhima was served a similar quantum of food as all the others together. Everyone splurged. The fools were smitten – only Sahadeva sat in a corner and watched.

When it was time for the dessert, Bhima was served a full plate of it. It was poisoned with a particular type of venom that would slowly take effect. Bhima ate the whole plate. Then they all went to the river. They swam and played around. At some point, Bhima came out of the water and lay down on the river bank. Everyone else went back to the pavilion to continue the fun and tell

stories. After some time, Duryodhana went back to the river and found Bhima semi-conscious. He tied up Bhima's hands and legs and rolled him into the river. Bhima sank down to a place that was full of venomous snakes.

The snakes bit him hundreds of times and their venom acted as an antidote to the venom that he had already consumed. This is common knowledge in South Indian Siddha Vaidya, where venom is treated with venom, which is also how vaccines work in modern medicine. When the antidote started to work, it slowly revived him. When the snakes saw that, they accepted him as one of them. The king of the Nagas took this boy, who was the son of Vayu, aside and said to him, "See, you have been poisoned. Fortunately, they rolled you into the river. Had they left you on the riverbank, you would be dead now."

This is the way of deceit – it will try to overdo things. They could have just left him at the riverbank to die, but they did not want to take a chance, so Duryodhana rolled him into the river and achieved just the opposite of what he had intended. The Nagas said to Bhima, "We will give you an elixir that no one else knows, except in this part of the world," and they prepared a combination of various types of venoms, mercury, and certain types of herbs. It is known as Nava Pashana or nine deadly poisons in South India today, and is used as medicine.

Preparing Nava Pashana takes extraordinary care – one drop too much of one thing or one drop less of something else could kill a man. They carefully prepared the elixir and gave it to Bhima. After consuming it, his strength rose to almost superhuman levels. In the meantime, the other four brothers noticed that Bhima was missing and were distraught. They realized that they had been conned, but they could not openly express it because Duryodhana seemed to be heartbroken. He was running around, pretending to look for Bhima, and crying, "Where is my beloved brother, my only companion?" Sahadeva said, "They have done him in." With the awareness that they had been taken in by gifts and food, and now lost their brother because of that, the four brothers went back home in utter shame. They told their mother Kunti what had happened.

Bhima's Return

Kunti sat down and sank into meditation for three days. Then she said, "My son Bhima is not dead. Look for him." The four brothers and their friends ranged the forest, dived into the river – they searched everywhere, but they could not find him anywhere. Eventually, they gave up. Kunti began to doubt her vision that he is still alive, and they prepared for the fourteenth day death ritual for Bhima. Duryodhana arranged for a big ceremony in memory of Bhima. He hired cooks and prepared a huge meal to break the mourning on the fourteenth day, as was the tradition. In his heart, he was celebrating – on the outside, he was mourning.

Then Bhima came back to the palace, to the joy of his brothers and his mother. Duryodhana and his brothers could not believe it, and Shakuni was in terror. He did not know if Bhima was alive or if he was a ghost. Bhima was just about to go on a rampage when Vidura came and advised them, "This is not the time to bring your enmity out in the open. Right now, they are still trying to do it undercover, which means you still have some safe space. If you show enmity, they will outright kill you in the palace. You are just five. They are one hundred plus a whole army of soldiers."

Bhima and his brothers contained their rage. After fourteen days in the Naga Loka, the elixir had made him strong, but it had also made him enormously hungry. When he saw that they had been in the process of preparing a big meal but then abandoned the task when he, the presumably dead, had come back, he put all the cut vegetables that were there in a cauldron and made a dish. In the Aryan culture, it is the norm that certain vegetables are not mixed, but he put everything together and made a dish out of it, which even today is one of the favorites in certain parts of South India, where it is called aviyal, which means mixture.

The enmity between the two parties grew. The five brothers were on guard and started building their own defenses, bringing their own people into the palace. Until then, they had not understood the intrigues of the palace – they had behaved like boys. But now, they entered a serious fight for a kingdom.

Mahabharat Episode 17: Karna – Doomed from Birth

As a young girl, Kunti once pleased the sage Durvasa with her hospitality, and as a token of appreciation, he gave her a mantra with which she could call any god she wanted. One day, she wanted to try it out. She went outside, saw the sun coming up gloriously, and spontaneously said, "I want the Sun God." The Sun God came and impregnated her, and she bore a child.

Being an unwed mother of fourteen years of age, she did not know how to face the social situation. She put the child in a wooden box and let him float in the river, not knowing what his fate would be. She struggled with that, but she was a woman with a sense of purpose. Once she was clear about the purpose, she would do anything. Everything was warm about her, except her heart.

Adhiratha, a charioteer in Dhritarashtra's palace, who happened to be at the riverside, noticed this ornate box, picked it up and opened it. When he saw the little infant, he was delighted. He was childless and considered this as God's gift to him. He took the box with the baby to his wife Radha. Both of them were overjoyed. Looking at the nature of the box, they knew it could not be from an ordinary home, that a queen or king must have abandoned this baby. They did not know who, but they were too glad they got this child, who filled their childless life.

Karna, as he came to be known, was a child of destiny, and that too, an extraordinary one. As an infant, he already had golden earrings and a kind of natural armor around his chest. He looked phenomenal. Radha brought him up with utmost love. Being a charioteer, Adhiratha wanted to teach him how to drive a chariot, but Karna was burning to become an archer. In those times, only Kshatriyas, members of the fighting class, were entitled to receive training in martial arts and weapons. This was a simple way of protecting the power of the king. If everyone learnt how to use weapons, there would be no control over their usage. Not being a Kshatriya, Karna was not accepted by any teacher.

Rejected by Drona

At that time, Parashurama was one of the most proficient warriors in the land. He was also Drona's teacher. Prior to handing over his astras

to Drona, Parashurama put a condition that Drona should never teach a Kshatriya anything about these powerful weapons. Drona promised him this but went straight to Hastinapur and sought employment with the king to teach the Kshatriyas how to use these weapons. That is how he was – an ambitious man; principled but unscrupulous. He knew all the dharma, shastras, rules, and scriptures, but he had absolutely no scruples. A great teacher, but a crooked and greedy human being.

Before Drona came to Hastinapur, both the Pandavas and the Kauravas were trained by Kripacharya in martial arts. One day, the boys were playing ball. In those times, balls were not made of rubber, leather, or plastic – they were usually made of weeds that were rolled up tightly. The ball accidentally fell into a well. They saw it floating in the well but no one had a clue how to get it out, because the well was deep and did not have steps.

Drona came by, looked at the situation, and asked, "Are you not Kshatriyas?" They said, "Yes, we are." "Then don't any of you know archery?" Arjuna said, "Yes, I am an archer, and I want to be the greatest archer in the world." Drona sized him up and replied, "If you are an archer, why can't you get this ball out?" They asked, "How can we get a ball out from a well with archery?" He replied, "I will show you."

He took a stiff blade of grass and shot it into the ball. It stuck out from the ball, and he shot a succession of blades into each other, so that they formed a kind of rod with which he could pull out the ball. The boys were amazed at his skill – it almost seemed like magic. They asked him to teach them how he did it. Drona said he would not, unless they accept him as their guru. The boys took him to Bhishma. Bhishma immediately recognized Drona – he knew who he was and he appreciated his competence. He employed him as the Rajaguru, which is a teacher of future kings.

The training under Dronacharya started, and with it, the competition between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. After a few years of training, they all grew to become great warriors. With the lance or the spear, Yudhishtira was the best. With the mace, Bhima and Duryodhana were equal. They would fight themselves to exhaustion without one being able to beat the other. When it came to archery, Arjuna stood out. In swordsmanship and horse riding, Nakula and Sahadeva dominated.

The Suta Putra's Deception

In his desire to become a great archer, Karna went to Drona, but the latter rejected him, calling him a suta putra, which literally means “son of a charioteer” and implied that he was low-born. This vilification stung Karna deeply. The constant discrimination and insults he faced turned a very honest and forthright man into an extremely mean one. Every time he heard someone call him suta putra, his meanness rose, to levels that were uncharacteristic of his original nature. Since Drona rejected him for not being a Kshatriya, Karna decided to go to Parashurama, who was the greatest martial arts teacher.

In those times, martial arts included not only hand-to-hand combat but all kinds of weapons training, with a particular emphasis on archery. Karna knew Parashurama would accept only Brahmanas as disciples. In his eagerness to learn, he put on a fake sacred thread, went to Parashurama, and pretended to be a Brahmana. Parashurama took him as a disciple and taught him everything he knew. Karna learnt extremely fast. No other disciple had that kind of natural skill and competence. Parashurama was greatly pleased with him.

At that time, Parashurama was already old. One day, when they were training in the forest, he felt very tired and faint. He told Karna that he needed to lie down. Karna sat down so that Parashurama could put his head on Karna's lap, and Parashurama dozed off. A blood-sucking worm crawled into Karna's lap and started sucking on his thigh. He was in great pain and bleeding, but he could not remove the worm without disturbing his guru's sleep, which he did not want to do. Slowly, the blood started to reach Parashurama's ear, and this sensation woke him up. He opened his eyes and saw that he was full of blood. “Whose blood is this?” he asked. Karna said, “It is mine.”

Then Parashurama noticed the open wound on Karna's thigh, with the blood-sucking worm biting deep into the muscle, and still, this boy just sat there, unmoving. Parashurama looked at him and said, “You cannot be a Brahmana – if you were, you would have screamed. You must be a Kshatriya to bear this kind of pain and not even wince or move.” Karna said, “Yes, I am not a Brahmana. Please don't be angry with me.” Parashurama flew into a rage, “You idiot, you think you can come here, wear a false sacred thread and de-

ceive me to get all this out of me? I will curse you.” Karna begged, “Please – I am not a Brahmana, but I am not a Kshatriya either. I am a suta putra, so it was only half a lie.”

Longing for Glory

Parashurama did not listen to him. The moment he saw the situation, he rightly presumed that Karna was a Kshatriya, and he said, “You have deceived me. You will enjoy what I have taught to you, but when it really matters, you will forget the mantras that you need, and that will be your end.” Karna fell at his feet and begged, “Please don't do this. I am not a Kshatriya, and I had no intention of deceiving you. It is just that I have been dying to learn and no one else was willing to teach me. You were the only one who would allow a non-Kshatriya to learn.”

Parashurama's temper cooled and he said, “But still, you lied. You should have explained the situation to me. You should have debated with me. But you should not have lied to me. I cannot take back the curse, but I see your longing is not for archery, kingdoms, or power – your longing is just for glory, and you shall have it. People will always remember you as a glorious warrior, but you will neither have power nor a kingdom, nor will you be known as the greatest archer. But your glory will live for always, and that is all you are longing for.”

With this curse on him, Karna wandered on. He was glad he received this training, glad about his own talent – but where to express it? Only a Kshatriya could enter a battle or a competition. He could shoot anything blind, but he could not show off his skills. All he sought was glory, but it was denied to him. Despondent, he walked southeast and sat on the seashore, somewhere near Konark in the present state of Odisha, at the spot where the sun's grace could be best received.

Double-Cursed

He started performing austerities and sat in meditation for days on end. There was nothing to eat, but in spite of that, he continued to sit and meditate. When he got very hungry, he caught a few crabs and ate them, which nourished him but only increased his hunger. After a few weeks of sadhana, his hunger was bigger than anything else. In this state, he noticed an animal moving in

the bushes. He thought it must be a deer, took his bow and arrow, shot it blindly, and heard the arrow hit the mark. He pictured satisfying his hunger with venison. But when he went into the thicket, to his horror, he found it was a cow.

Killing a cow was considered the worst that an Arya could do. Horrified, he looked at the cow, and the cow looked back at him with a soft, gentle glance, before closing her eyes for good. He was distraught – he did not know what to do. Just then, a Brahmana came by, looked at the dead cow, and started wailing. He said, “You have killed my cow! May you be cursed. You look like a warrior, so I curse you that when you are in battle and it really matters, your chariot will sink into the earth so deeply that you cannot recover it anymore. And you will be killed when you are helpless, as you killed this helpless cow.” Karna fell at his feet and begged, “Please – I was too hungry. I did not know it was a cow. If you want, I will give you a hundred cows instead.” The Brahmana said, “This cow was not just an animal for me. She was dearer to me than anything else. For this offer to replace the irreplaceable, I curse you even more.”

With this double curse, Karna moved on, not knowing where to go. He could shoot a speck of dust with his arrows, but what was the use? He was not a Kshatriya – no one would let him join a contest, let alone a battle. He kept wandering around, aimlessly.

Mahabharat Episode 18: When Arjuna Met Ekalavya

Arjuna’s only goal in life was to be the best archer in the world. He was a great warrior, but a very withdrawn man. While very disciplined and absolutely focused, he was terribly insecure throughout his life. His concern was always that someone else would become a better archer than he. He did inhumane things to prevent that.

On a certain day, a boy named Ekalavya came to Drona. He was not an Arya but a Nishada, which is one of the indigenous tribes of India. This is how the scriptures describe him – when he walked, he was like a panther. He was dark-skinned, dreadlocked, a graceful human being with enormous strength. He expressed his wish to learn archery. Drona said, “You are not a Kshatriya, so I cannot teach you.”

The boy fell at Drona’s feet and said, “I understand the social norm. Just bless me. With your blessing, I will learn.” Drona looked at this humility and sincerity, put his hand on his head and said, “I bless you.” Ekalavya went into the forest. With the clay from a river, he started sculpting the form of Drona, as if obsessed. If you want to be a great singer, you not only need a great voice – you need great ears. It is your sense of hearing that makes you a musician. Similarly if you want to be an archer, it is not only about your hands, it is about the keenness of your eyes – how keenly you can observe something, and how keenly you can maintain your attention.

The Eye of the Bird

Arjuna had displayed these qualities. One day, when they were training, Drona wanted to check the Pandavas’ and Kauravas’ archery skills, so he put a small wooden bird on the top of a tree and told them to aim at the eye of the bird. One by one, the Kauravas and then the Pandavas aimed. Drona asked them, “What do you see?” They said different things – “A leaf, the tree, a mango, the bird, the sky.” Drona dismissed them all. Finally, it was Arjuna’s turn. When Drona asked him, “What do you see?” Arjuna replied, “I see a bird’s eye.” Drona said, “You are the only one who is ready for advanced training,” and he taught him the fine art of archery, which included shooting blind, shooting in the darkness – hitting the target without even seeing it. He made Arjuna eat his food in a pitch dark cell every day. He told him, “If you can put food into your mouth without seeing it, why can’t you put the arrow into the heart of your enemy without seeing him?”

Ekalavya’s Unwavering Focus

Arjuna trained in all these advanced techniques and believed he was the best archer in the world. But then Ekalavya came, received Drona’s blessings, and went back into the forest. When Ekalavya came to Drona, he paid attention to even the minutest detail about Drona. This is the quality of an archer – his vision does not miss anything. Someone who misses details when looking at something will definitely miss them when he shoots too. Because he took in Drona’s image, he went and created a clay image of him and bowed down to this image and started practicing with Drona’s blessings.

One day the Pandavas and Kauravas went into the forest hunting. Their hunting dog went ahead of them. At some point, the dog started barking. They thought it had found prey and started pursuing it. Then the dog became silent. They thought a tiger or a bear must have killed it. They went in search of the dog, but then the dog came back to them with six arrows around his mouth, clamping his mouth in such a way that it could not bark.

When they saw this, the first question that Bhima asked was if Drona was somewhere in the forest, because no one else could do this, not even Arjuna. Someone would have needed to shoot six arrows in a split second for them to become a clamp around the dog's mouth. They went in search of him and found a strapping youth who was like a panther – dark-skinned, dread-locked, with his arrow pointed straight at Arjuna's temple because as soon as Ekalavya had seen the five brothers, he realized Arjuna was an archer and that he should be eliminated first. Arjuna saw Ekalavya and gasped because he knew these eyes. He knew someone with such an unwavering focus will not miss. He knew the boy must have been the archer who had silenced the dog with this clamp of arrows. Arjuna was distraught that there was a better archer than he.

Drona Demands Guru Dakshina

Arjuna asked him, "Who are you? Where did you learn this? You are not even a Kshatriya!" The boy said, "I'm Ekalavya. Drona is my teacher." Arjuna ran straight to Drona and cried, "You promised me that I will be the greatest archer, but you have made someone else better than me. This is not fair." Drona asked, "What are you talking about?" He said, "There is this boy in the jungle who is better than me, and he says you are his teacher. He has got your statue and is practicing archery."

Drona being who he is, said, "Yes, I have promised you to make you the best. You are important for this kingdom, and I will not get my fee if you are not the best. Let me fix this for you." He went into the forest and met Ekalavya. Ekalavya saw the one he considered as his guru, though he had not taught him anything, and fell at Drona's feet. In great ecstasy, he welcomed him and brought him flowers and fruits. But Drona had something else on his mind. He said, "It is wonderful that you have become a great archer, but where is my

guru dakshina?" In those days, the custom was that unless the guru gets his donation, he would not let his disciple go and use what he had learnt.

Ekalavya said, "Master, whatever you want is yours." Then Drona said, 'I want your right thumb.' In traditional Indian archery, the bow was drawn with the right thumb. Without the right thumb, you could not be an archer. Archers were valued so highly in those days because they could kill from a distance, unlike swordsmen or lancers. They could kill without risking their own lives to the extent that close combat warriors had to. This made them most valuable and efficient.

When Ekalavya dutifully pulled out his sword to cut off his own right thumb, Drona told him to stop for a moment, and he looked whether Arjuna would relent. But Arjuna looked on coldly, as if it was a ritual that had to be done. Though Arjuna had many wonderful qualities, he was ruled by insecurity. He wanted to be the best archer on the planet, and with Ekalavya's thumb cut, once again, Arjuna was the best.

Mahabharat Episode 19: The Kauravas Find a New Ally

When Karna came and showed his skills, Arjuna immediately interfered and said, "This man is not a kshatriya. Who are you? How dare you walk into this competition?" Bhima stood up and said, "Whose son are you? Reveal this now!" Suddenly, Karna – this confident young man, a great archer who was better than Arjuna – shrank in confidence. When they asked, "Who is your father?" he said, "My father is Adiratha." Then they said, "Oh, you are a charioteer's son! And you have entered this stadium. Just leave! This is for Kshatriyas."

Karna is Crowned

Duryodhana saw the greatest opportunity of his life right in front of him, and he was not going to let it pass. His biggest concern was that there was no archer among his brothers. He was confident he would beat Bhima one day, that some of his brothers would kill Nakula and Sahadeva, and that they could knock down Yudhishtira one day – just by giving a sermon on dharma. But he was worried about Arjuna, because they had no archer to match him. So when he saw Karna and his

competence, he immediately grabbed him. He stood up and pleaded on behalf of Karna to the king. He said, "Oh father, how can this be? The shastras say there are three ways a man can become a king. Someone can become a king because he was born to a king, or because he defeated a king with his skill and valor, or because he created a kingdom by himself.

"Karna is here right now. If Arjuna does not want to compete with him because Karna is not a king, then I will make him a king. There is a small kingdom of ours – faraway lands that are called Anga. The kingdom of Anga is without a king. I will crown Karna as king of Anga." He brought the priest and conducted a coronation on the spot. "He is Anga Raja, the king of Anga. Do not let Arjuna use someone's birth as an excuse. I do not care who his father is. I embrace him as my friend." He hugged Karna and said, "You are my brother, and you are a king."

A Devious Plan

Karna was overwhelmed, because his whole life, he had been discriminated against because of his presumed low birth. And here, a king's son stood up for him, embraced him, and made him a king right there. His loyalty bound him for life. You will see this loyalty without reason sometimes took disastrous turns over a period of time. After this competition, with Karna walking into the palace as a king and Duryodhana's ally, and with Shakuni, the Kauravas became much stronger than they ever were. With Karna's intelligence and skills, they became more competent and focused. Duryodhana thought it was time to put an end to the five Pandavas.

People were associating themselves either with the Pandavas or the Kauravas. Loyalties were being established within the palace and in the city. The city split into two. Dhritarashtra thought if things were allowed to grow further, there would be a civil war. Someone had to go – naturally not his children. He thought the Pandavas should go, but he did not want to say as much. Bhishma watched the whole situation with great concern because his allegiance was only to the country, and he saw a civil war was in the making – not yet on the street, but in everyone's minds and hearts. Dhritarashtra took advice from the most devious of advisors, and all of them advised it was time to put an end to the Pandavas.

Shakuni came up with a plan. He said, "Let us send them to a holy place." You know there are many holy places in the country, but the holiest one of all is always up there. He suggested the king send them on a pilgrimage to Kashi. Dhritarashtra called Yudhishtira and said, "Since you have lost your father and have been through so much difficulty from a young age, I feel it will be good for you to visit a holy place. I want you to go to Kashi and spend a year worshiping Shiva in the form of Pashupati, who is the greatest archer and warrior who has ever existed. Worship him for a year, and then come back. You will be fit to be a king." Already, Yudhishtira had been crowned Yuvaraja; that means he was the prince-in-waiting to become a king.

Yudhishtira went back to Bhishma and said, "Our uncle wants us to go and receive the blessings of Pashupati himself. He wants us to go to Kashi on a pilgrimage, which we would have done in our old age anyway. But because he loves us so much, he does not want us to postpone such an auspicious thing. He wants us to do it right now." Bhishma did not miss the sarcasm but ignored it because his allegiance was to the nation. He knew a civil war was brewing and he had no way to quell the Kauravas or protect the Pandavas. Somewhere, he accepted that the best thing would be for them to move away.

The Palace of Lac

In the meantime, Duryodhana planned elaborately with Shakuni's help. They had a palace built near Kashi. It was plastered with mud and painted beautifully, but inside it was all combustible material, mainly lac, a certain kind of resin. The five brothers were on guard by now. They knew their lives were under threat. Kunti, particularly, was like a fierce tigress looking out for her children all the time. Vidura came to see them off and the Kauravas too, because they want to constantly keep an eye on the Pandavas. The Kauravas had tears in their eyes. By now, they had learnt the art of deception from Shakuni. Shakuni could cry anytime he wanted, without an iota of emotion, because he saw human speech and facial expression as a way of hiding rather than expressing what is within a human being.

Vidura's spies had found out something about the trap set for the Pandavas, but there was no room to pass on any message to warn the Panda-

vas because the Kauravas were always around. So he spoke to Yudhishtira in a language of tribespeople, which the two of them knew. "You must understand fire is a more dangerous weapon than a sword. As a rat protects itself from winter by burrowing, so should you. I am sending this man Kanakan with you." Kanakan was a Tamil miner. Tamil people are among the best in India when it comes to digging wells, because they were among the first people to do it. Even today, where there are no machines, you will find Tamil men working at well-digging.

When the Pandavas reached Kashi, they moved into the palace. It was heavily perfumed to mask the smell of the inflammable material. When Yudhishtira walked into the compound, he noticed there was a moat dug around the palace. But it had stakes not only on the outside but also on the inside. He wondered why anyone would put stakes on the inside, around the palace walls. It looked like they did not want those who were inside the palace to get out! The Pandavas knew something was coming and were wondering what Duryodhana's plan was.

Sahadeva sat in a corner brooding. That little bit of the ant's food that he had eaten worked wonders for him. He saw the place like an ant. An ant knows all the nooks and corners in the house that even the owner does not know. Sahadeva scratched the wall like an ant and told the others, "The palace is made of lac. If it catches fire, it is just a question of a minute or two before all of us are done."

They had to escape, but they could not run away because they would be killed on the streets. So they put Kanakan to work, digging a tunnel in secret. After a month, he had dug all the way to the riverbank. By now, Duryodhana's spy, who was acting as a guard, kind of relaxed because these people were eating well, and laughing and chatting with him. They had also learnt the act and were doing everything normally, and seemed to enjoy the palace so much. Then, they threw a party on a full moon night.

Mahabharat Episode 20: Of Ploy, Humiliation and Revenge

What has happened so far: Shakuni came up with a plan to get rid of the Pandavas. The Kaura-

vas set up a palace in Kashi for the Pandavas, which was made of highly combustible material, and Dhritarashtra suggested that the Pandavas go there for their spiritual pursuit. The five brothers and their mother Kunti went to stay in this palace. Vidura sent them a concealed warning, and someone to dig a tunnel for them to secretly escape from the palace.

Sadhguru: Kunti made friends with a Nishada (a hill tribe) woman who had five sons, invited them often to the palace, fed them well, and took care of them. One fateful night, she spiked the drinks of the guests – the Nishada woman, her five sons, and a spy whom the Kauravas had sent. Once the guests were put to sleep, the Pandavas and their mother escaped through the tunnel and set fire to the palace. The spy, the tribal woman, and her five sons were burnt to death.

Vidura had sent people who helped the Pandavas escape. There is an incredible description in the Mahabharat that says, "They got into a boat where a veiled accomplice was waiting. Bhima was looking for the oars, but there were none. The accomplice handled a few levers, and the boat started humming quietly and moving upstream." They were amazed. They did not know if this was real or if they were already dead.

We do not know if they imagined this, if they really had one, if they imported one from elsewhere, or if someone had such a forward-looking vision that they could see that after five thousand years, someone will build a motor boat. Anyway – they went upstream and then deep into the jungle. When the palace burnt down and they secretly escaped, the whole town came and mourned the presumed death of the Pandavas. In Hastinapur, Dritharashtra acted out grief. Duryodhana pretended not to eat for three days, but he ate in private.

Everyone went into mourning, and big prayer meetings were held. The Pandavas and Kunti had done everything to make it look like an accidental fire. The Kauravas and their allies did not know that their adversaries were still alive. The burnt bodies of the Nishada woman and her sons made it look like the Pandavas and Kunti had died. When Kanakan, the tunnel digger, saw the charred bodies of the Nishada woman and her five sons, he wondered if Kunti and her sons would ever be absolved of this crime. Kunti's cold calculation was that if they did not find dead bod-

ies, the Kauravas would know they escaped and hunt them down. So she had to leave six dead bodies, and she had no qualms about doing that.

Birth of Ghatotkacha

They covered their tracks and retreated into the jungle. Many things happened there. One important event was that one day, a rakshasa, a wild, man-eating beast of a man, saw the five brothers and their mother and wanted to eat them. But instead of that, Bhima killed him in a big fight, and the rakshasa's sister, Hidimbi, fell in love with Bhima. She was a forest creature. Bhima civilized her a little bit, trimmed her hair and made her look attractive, fell in love with her, and wanted to marry her. He lusted after her but felt a little guilty because his elder brother was not yet married.

Yudhishtira absolved him. He said, "Yes, the convention says the elder brother should marry first, but the heart follows no convention, and we bow down to that. You can marry Hidimbi." No one else wanted to have anything to do with her though. Hidimbi stayed with Bhima for a year and bore a child who was completely bald at birth and had a head like a pot or ghatam. They called him Ghatotkacha, which means pot-headed and hairless. He was a huge baby. Later on, he was very useful in battle, because he became a great warrior of enormous strength.

Kunti saw that Bhima was getting too domesticated. She knew if he continued to live with his wife, the brothers would separate at some point. If the brothers separated, they would never get the kingdom. So she came up with a stricture: "You cannot live with this rakshasa woman – she is not an Arya." And she took Bhima and the other brothers from the forest to a small town called Ekachakra.

Rakshasas and Gandharvas

When the Pandavas and Kunti were staying in Ekachakra, a man-eating rakshasa named Bakasura established himself near the town. He started ravaging the city. He picked up people, animals, and whatever came his way, and ate them all up.

Then the town council made a deal with him, that once a week, they will send a cartload of food, and two bullocks and a man along with it. So he had the food and the man as a dessert. It was

agreed upon that in turn, the man-eater would not attack the town anymore and spare the rest of the people. Within the town, they made an arrangement that every week, one family had to cook a cartload of food and had to send two bulls and a man from their family. But Bakasura's appetite was insatiable. Bhima volunteered to go to him. In a fierce fight, he defeated and killed Bakasura.

After almost a year had passed since the palace of resin burnt down, the Pandavas knew that they had to come out from their hiding place. Since they were presumed dead, someone could easily kill them without anyone suspecting anything, so they had to plan their return very cautiously.

Once, they were in the forest and came near a lake. They wanted to drink water from it, but there was the gandharva, Angaraparna, who claimed he owned the lake. Knowing that Arjuna was a great archer, he challenged him to a duel, saying, "You have to duel with me before you drink water from my lake." After a fierce duel, the gandharva was defeated and fell unconscious. Arjuna, according to his dharma as a warrior, had to put him to death, because leaving a man defeated was considered putting him to shame. A Kshatriya usually did not want to live on after being defeated – he would rather die.

Arjuna got ready to behead him. But Angaraparna's wife came and begged Arjuna, "He is not a Kshatriya. He has no problem with continuing to live after being defeated. I am begging you, please spare his life because his dharma is not yours, nor is your dharma his. So he need not be killed." Arjuna spared his life. When the Gandharva returned to consciousness, out of gratitude, he offered many gifts to Arjuna, including one hundred horses and other things that a Kshatriya values, and he told them one hundred stories of wisdom. Out of these stories, we will pick one that is particularly significant for the Pandavas and their future.

Angaraparna's Tale

Angaraparna narrated the story of Shakti, the son of the legendary sage Vashishta, who plays an important role in the Ramayana. Shakti was travelling through the forest and at some point came to a stream with a narrow bridge. When he was just about to get on the bridge, he saw a king named Kalmasapada had already entered it from the other side. One of them had to make way. The

king said to Shakti, "I came here first. Make way for me!" Shakti, who was full of pride about who his father was, said, "You make way! I am a Brahmin – I am higher than you." And he cursed Kalmasapada to become a rakshasa. The king turned into a man-eating rakshasa and devoured Shakti on the spot.

Vashishta was despondent about having lost his son, particularly because it was he, Vashishta, who had empowered him with the ability to give boons and curses. Shakti gave the wrong curse to the wrong man, and as a result, got eaten up himself.

Shakti's son, Parashara, grew up under the tutelage of his grandfather, Vashishta. When he came to know about what had happened to his father, the young boy wanted to take revenge. He planned to perform a yagna that would destroy all the man-eating tribes in the land. Vashishta urged him to drop this idea: "Your father cursed someone, and that curse ate him up. If you try to take revenge now, it will lead to an endless spiral of revenge. Do not pursue the rakshasa – pursue what is valuable to you." Parashara took his advice and became a great sage and the father of Vyasa, who plays an important role in the whole story of Mahabharat. Angaraparna told this story to the Pandavas because he saw the rage and hatred in their hearts.

They were deceived many times, in many different ways. Above all, several attempts were made upon their lives, and this most recent, particularly blatant one was aimed at all five of them, including their mother. They were raging for revenge. After telling them this story, Angaraparna concluded by giving them the following advice: "Don't waste your time and energy on revenge. You can be kings. So first get yourself a priest, then get a wife, then get land, build your own city, and be kings. Don't pursue revenge."

After hearing this story, they became a little more cautious about taking revenge, but it did not leave their hearts. First, they looked for a priest. They went to Dhaumya, Devala Muni's younger brother, who lived in a nearby ashram, and asked him to become their family priest. In Dwapara Yuga, it was very important to have a family priest, because powerful yagnas needed to be performed for every occasion. They found a competent and effective priest in Dhaumya, who was always by their side from that moment onwards.

Drupada and Drona

Then the Pandavas heard that King Drupada of Panchala had called for a swayamvara, which means a princess would choose her husband from an assembly of suitors. As a young boy, Drupada had studied along with Drona under the tutelage of the sage Bharadwaja, Drona's father. Drupada and Drona became close friends. One day, when they were thirteen years of age, Drupada and Drona promised each other, "Whatever wealth we gather, whatever we achieve in our lives – we will share it with each other."

After the years of training were over, Drupada went back to Panchala to become the king. Drona went out to make his own life and got married to Kripi, Kripacharya's sister. They had a son whose name was Ashwatthama. He was called Ashwatthama because when he was born, he laughed like a horse. Ashwa means a horse – so he was the one who laughed or expressed himself like a horse.

In those pastoral societies, milk was almost like the staple food. But Drona's family was so poor, having neither land nor cows, that this young boy had never even seen milk. Once when he went to town, he saw other boys drinking milk and asked them what it was. They realized he had never seen milk before. So they mixed some rice dough in water and gave it to Ashwatthama. He drank it happily, thinking that it was milk.

The other boys made fun of him, because he did not even know what milk was. When Drona came to know about this incident, he became very angry and desperate. Then he remembered that his friend Drupada, who was a great king now, had promised him that he would share everything with him. He went to Drupada's court and said, "You remember the promise we made each other. You must give me one half of your kingdom."

Many years had passed since that promise. Drupada looked at Drona and said, "You are a poor Brahmin. You are incensed because of the insult that happened to your son. I will give you a cow. Take it and go. If you want more, I will give you two. But how can you as a Brahmin come up to me and ask me for half of my kingdom?" Drona said, "I am asking for half of your empire, not for a cow. I do not want your charity. I have come here because we are friends." Then Drupada said, "Friendship happens between equals. An emperor and a beggar cannot be friends. You can only

take charity. If you want, take the cow – otherwise leave.” Burning with rage, Drona left, and swore revenge.

Mahabharat Episode 21: Draupadi – Born for Revenge

Drona swore revenge for the humiliation Drupada had inflicted on him. For this purpose, he acquired the astras from Parashurama, came to Hastinapura, and started training the Kauravas and the Pandavas in various martial arts. When they achieved a certain level of competence and were eager to make some kind of offering to their guru, the first thing Drona asked for was that they capture Drupada and bring him. For no other reason, the Kaurava and the Pandava princes went and attacked Kampilya, the capital of the Panchala kingdom.

The Kaurava brothers went on an attack with great fervor, while the Pandavas stayed back and watched. Drupada’s army was completely unprepared. They did not understand why these guys were suddenly coming and attacking the city for no apparent reason. When they realized they were being attacked, the common citizenry came out of their homes with kitchen knives, ladles, sticks and whatever else they could lay their hands on. They fought the Kauravas and beat them back. Defeated by common people, the Kaurava brothers returned in shame. Then Drona said to Arjuna, “It is you who has to offer the guru dakshina. You must get Drupada.”

Drupada’s Disgrace

Bhima and Arjuna went, quietly slipped into the city, captured Drupada, tied him up, took him with them, and laid him at Drona’s feet. The moment Drupada looked at Drona, he knew Drona was the one who got these young boys to capture him, a great warrior, and throw him at Drona’s feet as a prisoner. Then Drona said, “Now we cannot talk about sharing, because we are not equals. You are lying before me as a slave. I received you as a gift from my boys. I can do whatever I please. But I have been your friend – I will spare your life.”

For a Kshatriya, the worst thing that you can do is defeat him and spare his life. That is what Drona wanted. He knew that telling Drupada that

he would spare his life was the worst thing to happen to him, even more so since it came from a Brahmana. He continued saying, “Half of your kingdom is mine. As a friend, I will give you the other half. Go and rule the other half – one part of the kingdom is mine.” Burning with shame, rage, and hatred, Drupada went back to the other half of his kingdom, unable to face his citizenry after this great humiliation. That was not something that people could accept. He was raging.

He prayed to Shiva and said, “I want a child who will take revenge,” because once he had lost a battle with someone, he had lost the right to call him for a duel. A child was born, but it was a girl. Drupada could not believe it. He asked Shiva, “I wanted a child to take revenge. But now I got a girl. How will this girl take revenge?” From day one, he started dressing her up like a boy. He did not want people to know that she was a girl. He pretended that she was a boy and started training her as if she was a boy. This girl was the reincarnation of Amba, who was now known as Shikhandi.

Drupada not only wanted to take revenge on Drona but on the whole Kuru clan, because these boys were the ones who captured him. He wanted to kill them all, and the pillar of the Kuru clan was Bhishma. He knew that if he knocked Bhishma down, the whole clan would collapse. At the age of fourteen, Shikhandi disappeared. They were distraught and looked for her everywhere, but they could not find her. She went into the forest to train by herself, because she had come of age and wanted to hide it. She did not want anyone to know that she was a girl. Seeing her plight, Stunakarna, a yaksha in the forest, helped her. He said, “I will give you manhood,” and using his magical powers he made her into a man. He said, “This will see you through in social situations. In real terms, you are still a woman.”

Born of Fire

Drupada’s only purpose of life was to somehow bring Drona to shame and the Kuru clan down. He looked for someone who could perform a yagna for him that would give him children who would be capable of defeating Drona and the Kuru clan. He got Yaja and Upayaja, two well-known tantrics of the time, to perform a Putrakarma Yagna for him. Drupada prayed, “I want a son who will kill Drona, and a daughter who will divide the Kuru House.”

After an elaborate yagna, they extracted a young man and a young woman from the fire.

These two, Drishtadhyumna and Draupadi, were not born out of the union of a man and a woman – they were born of fire. They came to life with the single purpose of revenge. From the outset, Drupada kept telling them their only purpose of life was to take revenge on Drona and the Kuru clan. That means while the Kuru clan was struggling among themselves, a formidable enemy was growing in their neighborhood.

Drupada wanted his daughter to get married to the greatest archer and warrior, so that they could take revenge. He looked for a suitable candidate but did not find anyone who could beat Drona. Then he came to hear of all the battles Krishna had fought successfully. Seventeen times, Jarasandha and his army attacked Mathura. Though the Yadava army was only one tenth of Jarasandha's army, Krishna and Balarama beat them back every time with guile and valor.

For the eighteenth attack, Jarasandha gathered a few other kings from the northwest, in the present region of Afghanistan. They came with their armies and surrounded Mathura from all directions. When Krishna saw that an overwhelming military force surrounded Mathura and would annihilate the Yadavas if they stayed and tried to fight them back, he convinced the whole population to leave Mathura and travel thirteen hundred kilometers down to Dwaraka in Gujarat. Hundreds of people died on this exodus through the desert of Rajasthan.

Moving to Dwaraka

Originally, they had planned to build a new city, but when they came to Dwaraka, they found a well-built city on a small island. Krishna felt that this island city was strategically the best location for them. The city was ruled by King Revata. King Revata had a daughter whose name was Revati. In a strategic alliance, Krishna got Balarama married to Revati, and they occupied Dwaraka. The Yadavas moved into Dwaraka, and Krishna effortlessly seized the surrounding small kingdoms. Wherever conquest was needed, he conquered them. Wherever he could include them through a strategic marriage, he married a princess to establish peace.

In those days, family relations were most important, and strategic marriages were sometimes the only way to make peace with an opponent. If you give your daughter in marriage to someone, you cannot wage a war against him anymore. Krishna also abducted Rukmini, and defeated her elder brother Rukmi, who was a great warrior, and Shishupala, who was known as the Bull of Chedi. Krishna had even shamed Jarasandha once in a duel. Because of all these feats, his valor and skill as a warrior became widely recognized.

A Dangerous Beauty

Drupada thought Krishna was the best man for his daughter. He sent word to Krishna, asking him to marry her. Krishna tried to dodge it, but the problem was, had he flatly refused, it would have been an affront, and Drupada would have called for battle. But since he did not want to marry Draupadi, Krishna extricated himself out of the situation in a very artful way, saying, "I am just a cowherd. How can I marry Draupadi? She is a queen."

Krishna married many other queens, but Draupadi stood out. The scripture describes her as the most beautiful woman on the planet. She had a dark, velvety complexion. It also says that when a woman is this beautiful, invariably, she will cause problems. Invariably, people will fight over her. Countries will be divided; brothers will fight; bad things will happen.

Krishna tried to convince Drupada to arrange a swayamvara. At first, Drupada objected, saying that he did not see any warriors who were sufficiently capable. But Krishna said, "A fiery woman like Draupadi should make her own choice. You should not choose for her." He suggested setting up a swayamvara with a contest, and Draupadi could choose whoever won. Krishna's guru, Sandipani himself, devised the competition. They created a matsya yantra, which was a simple machine with a wooden fish on the top that was revolving. There was a pool of oil next to it.

The archer was supposed to hit the eye of the fish, only looking at the reflection of it in the oil. The one who hit the mark would get a chance to marry the princess, if she chose him. After much debate with Krishna, Drupada agreed to this idea and announced the swayamvara.

Mahabharat Episode 22: Draupadi's Predicament

The five Pandava brothers heard of the swayamvara, and so did every other Kshatriya in Bharatvarsh. They invited as many eligible candidates as possible so that the bravest and most skillful warrior would become Drupada's son-in-law. After all, the purpose of this marriage was revenge on Drona and the House of Kuru.

When the time of the swayamvara came, all these warriors gathered, including Duryodhana and the Kauravas, Karna, and the Pandavas, who were still in disguise. No one knew they were still alive – except Krishna, who had sent his spies and found out that it was the Nishada woman and her five children who died in the fire, not Kunti and the Pandava brothers. He did not know where they were, but there was no doubt in his mind that once they got the news, they would not be able to resist – they would definitely participate.

Krishna came with his Yadava warriors to surround the swayamvara, to be able to intervene if trouble broke out. Everyone wanted the hand of Draupadi. One reason was that she was an incredibly beautiful woman; another reason was that Drupada was a very powerful king. His was a huge empire that everyone wanted to forge an alliance with.

On the day of the contest, there was a flurry of events. Every candidate came, one by one, trying his luck. But many of them did not even know how to string this special, occult bow. And the warriors who did manage to string it could not shoot it straight, looking at the reflection of the rotating fish alone.

Duryodhana Bows Out

Duryodhana would have wanted to enter and win the challenge himself, but he did not want to take a chance and lose, so he first sent his brother Dusshasana to try the challenge without winning it. Dusshasana, a proud and brave warrior, went and tried to string the bow, but he failed. Upon seeing that his brother could not do it, Duryodhana left it too, to avoid the shame of failure. Then Karna stepped forward – he was among the last of the warriors who had lined up for the contest.

He walked in with a swagger, effortlessly strung the bow, and got ready to shoot. Looking at him,

Arjuna knew he would hit the fish's eye. But he also knew that even though Duryodhana had made him a king and included him as one of them, he still had the reputation of being a suta putra – a charioteer's son. Likewise, Krishna saw that Karna entering the competition was not part of the plan, and that this formidable warrior had the ability to strike home.

Karna Shamed

Every time a new warrior came, Draupadi glanced at Krishna, waiting for a signal from him if that was the suitor she should choose. So far, every time, Krishna had smiled, enjoying the whole show. Then she knew that this was not the right one. Anyway, a lot of them could not even string the bow, let alone hit the fish's eye. But even if they did not succeed in the contest, she still could have chosen one of them if she wanted.

When Karna came, Krishna closed his eyes and said to Draupadi, "I fear for you because this is not according to the script. This one would be able to do it." Draupadi stood there with the wedding garland in her hands and her brother Drishtadyumna by her side. When Karna came closer, she told her brother, loud enough for Karna to hear it, "I don't want to marry a suta." She did not even say "suta putra."

Drishtadyumna proclaimed, "My sister does not want to marry a suta. So don't take the trouble of even trying." Shamed in front of the whole assembly, Karna put his head down but gave Draupadi a vengeful glance and said, "When my time comes, I will not spare you." He withdrew in great shame.

Then Arjuna, in the guise of a young Brahmana, stood up, came forward, and said, "Now that none of the Kshatriyas have been able to win the contest, can I have a shot?" Drishtadyumna was confused, not knowing if he should allow a Brahmana to compete. He looked at Krishna. Krishna dropped something and bent down to pick it up, which was as good as a nod. Drishtadyumna said, "Yes, if you want to compete, you may. But all the warriors have failed. How will you do it?"

Arjuna's Victory

The Brahmana came, did three pradakshinas for the bow, prostrated before it as if it was the culmination of his destiny, then picked up the bow, effortlessly strung it, looked at the reflection, and

shot. Every warrior had five chances to hit the eye of the fish. He shot five arrows in such quick succession that a line of arrows hit the eye and the fish fell down.

There was a roar of appreciation from the Brahmanas and other non-Kshatriyas who had come to see the contest. The Kshatriyas however, roared in anger, "This is not right! How can a princess get married to a Brahmana? Now a Brahmana has won the contest, and, according to the Arya dharma, we cannot kill a Brahmana. But it is Drishtadhyumna who allowed him to participate. Let us kill him." They all drew their swords.

Immediately, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, and Arjuna stood up, ready to fight. Bhima uprooted a small tree and used it to knock everyone down who went towards Drishtadhyumna. Arjuna picked up the bow and created havoc around him. Then the Yadavas moved in to back them up. Together, they managed to gain control of the situation.

Draupadi garlanded Arjuna. Arjuna and his four brothers took her to their mother's home. Kunti was cooking. Whenever they, in the guise of Brahmanas, went out to beg for food, upon their return, they always placed it at her feet. It was up to her to divide the food, and she always divided it into two halves – one for Bhima, the other for the four brothers.

They walked in and said, "Mother, see what we have brought today." Without looking up, she said, "Whatever it is, share it among yourselves." Aghast, they said, "Mother, it's a woman. We have brought a princess." She turned around, looked at Draupadi, the most stunning woman she had ever seen, and said, "It doesn't matter. I told you to share, and that's it."

They were confused; Draupadi was shocked. She was happy that this brave warrior had won her hand in the contest, but this mother saying they should share her was not going according to plan. The brothers did not know how to go about it. They went back to Drupada's palace. Krishna and Vyasa were also present there.

A debate arose, "How can five men marry one woman?" The Pandava brothers said to Drupada, "Once our mother wills something, whatever it is, we have to do it. Arjuna alone cannot marry her. Either all five of us marry her, or you can take your daughter back."

The Five Husbands

It would have been a complete insult for Drupada if someone returned his daughter after the swayamvara. Still, he did not know what to do. People asked Krishna for his advice, but he deliberately remained silent, looking at the ceiling with a big smile.

Draupadi fell at Vyasa's feet and said, "You are a wise man. Tell me, how can they get me into such a situation that I have to marry five men? This is not dharma, and I will not do it." Vyasa said, "You have three options. You can marry only Arjuna now; he will take you away, he will be in love with you, but after some time, he will resent it because he had to leave his brothers and his mother for you. Resentment will slowly turn into bitterness; bitterness will turn into hatred over a period of time."

He added, "This is how most couples live." Initially, it is a big love affair. But if someone insists you must part with your mother, your brothers, and your clan, this love affair will turn into resentment over a period of time. Especially for Arjuna, this would have held absolutely true.

"So this is your choice – you can enjoy a short, great love affair with your husband, but over time, he will resent the separation from his brothers and mother and hold you responsible for that. Or you can reject the whole marriage and go back to your father. But then, no other great warrior will come forward to marry you, because they will not see you as a prize anymore. You may remain a spinster forever and stay in your father's house, which your brother will resent after some time.

Or you marry these five men. If these five brothers stay together, they will make their own destiny and rule the world. And you, as their common wife, will have the pride of keeping them together. These are the three options you have. Choose whatever you wish."

Overwhelmed by these choices, she fainted. They brought her back to consciousness. Then Vyasa went a step further and made her see that in her previous life, she was the daughter of Nala and Damayanti. Nala was the king of Vidarbha, and, according to the lore, the best cook on the planet. The love between Nala and Damayanti is legendary. In that lifetime, when she was a young woman, she prayed to Shiva.

In response to her penance, Shiva appeared, slightly inebriated, and in a generous mood. She said, "Oh Mahadeva, I want a husband. I want a just husband; I want a strong husband; I want a brave husband; I want a wise husband, and I want a very handsome husband. Shiva said, "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," – five times. When Draupadi had this glimpse into her past life, she realized it was her own doing. Although what she actually wanted was one husband with all these qualities, she inadvertently had asked for five husbands. And Shiva granted that wish. So she married the five men.

Krishna stepped in and suggested a marital arrangement between Draupadi and her five husbands. He said to her, "Be with each brother for one year. If during that one year, another brother even as much as inadvertently steps into your bedroom, he has to go into the jungle for one year."

They were allowed to take other wives outside of this arrangement, but those wives were not supposed to live in the palace. Their common wife Draupadi became the binding force that kept the five Pandava brothers together. This empowered them to work towards the fulfillment of their destiny: ruling the nation. Additionally strengthened through the alliance with Drupada, they went back to Hastinapura.

Mahabharat Episode 23: When an Aghori Almost Killed Bhima

After the Pandavas reemerged from their hideout, Arjuna won the contest at Draupadi's swayamvara, and the five brothers got married to the princess. The Kauravas were humiliated, enraged, and stunned. They could not figure out how the Pandavas, whom they presumed dead, had come alive again after one year. After all, they had found their charred bodies – and suddenly, they were back with a bang!

The alliance with Drupada through their marriage with Draupadi made them stronger than ever. And the greatest humiliation was that Arjuna had won the contest, which none of the Kauravas had been capable of and Karna had been denied participation in because he was deemed ignoble.

Yudhishtira came back to the palace with a wife and a priest, and laid claim to the throne.

Dhritarashtra could not help but nominate him as the Yuvaraj, the future king. From then on, the rivalry between the Kauravas and the Pandavas flared up like never before, now inside the palace. They did not physically assault each other, but both sides worked towards the other one's detriment.

Due to this power struggle, the administration of the kingdom was affected, and the nation suffered. Bhishma realized that he as the regent needed to put an end to this and lay down the law. He said, "Let's crown Yudhishtira king. There is no point keeping him as the Yuvaraj – let's make him the Maharaj. That will settle the matter, one way or the other. And let's give Duryodhana and others important positions."

Duryodhana's Resistance

When this was announced, Duryodhana was outraged. He went to his father and said, "You brought me up as the future king. But now you are asking me to be a slave and take orders from these people who came from the jungle. And worst of all, you want me to take instructions from Bhima. He will taunt and shame me on a daily basis. I will kill myself."

Duryodhana threatened suicide, but Bhishma insisted, "Yudhishtira will be the king. This must be established for the wellbeing of the nation." Though Dhritarashtra did not like this, he had no choice because he was king in name only. Since he was blind, he depended on others to get things done.

Bhishma was the elder, the regent, the wise man, and the warrior whom everyone respected. He was the one who really had the authority and power of decision. And he accepted that Yudhishtira would be the king.

But Duryodhana kept tormenting his father, saying, "No way! I am going to kill myself." His brothers said, "We will go back to Gandhara, into the mountains." That was the place where their mother came from. Dhritarashtra did not know what to do. He wanted his sons to lead the kingdom, but he did not know how to make it happen. Under traditional law, the eldest in this generation, who was Yudhishtira, was to be the king. So Bhishma declared him king.

Yudhishtira's Devotion to Dharma

The day of coronation approached. In the meantime, Yudhishtira had spent so much time with sages and acquired so much knowledge from studying the scriptures that his whole thinking was ruled by concepts of dharma and karma, right and wrong. He wanted to be truthful, straight and just.

When Bhishma proclaimed Yudhishtira king at court and everyone celebrated, Yudhishtira stood up and said, "Yes, I will take the responsibility of doing everything that I need to do. But as long as Dhritarashtra is alive, let him be the king. I will take orders from him and let Duryodhana have equal kingship. After all, he is my brother."

Duryodhana's and his brothers' eyeballs popped out. They said, "What!? Did we hear this right?" They could not believe that they had to go through all this struggle for him to say now that he will share the kingship equally, because he thought that this was dharma and justice.

Bhishma threw up his hands in despair and said, "I have borne this nation for so long." For three generations, he had led the country, without being a king. As a brahmachari, he had all the pains of leading the clan, but not the pleasures of having a family. He sacrificed more than anyone else. And now when he tried to establish the first king of the Kuru Dynasty since Shantanu who was actually able to govern the nation, again the situation got unnecessarily convoluted.

The four brothers were inflamed with rage within themselves, but they had taken a vow at their father's deathbed that, from that moment onwards, whatever Yudhishtira as their eldest brother said would be the law for them.

This used to be the rule in this country, that as long as the father is alive, the sons will follow whatever he says. Generally, the older generation exerts their power over the younger ones, right from Puru and Shantanu, though this power dynamics is somewhat reversed in the case of Duryodhana. The younger four brothers looked at Yudhishtira as a father figure. They always obeyed his word.

But this was too much now for Bhima, that after all this struggle, when his elder brother finally got the chance to be the king and they could have all the power, Yudhishtira voluntarily offered to share it with Dhritarashtra and his clan. But Bhima could not say anything against his brother, nor

could he fight him. Appalled, he walked out of the court.

Bhima's Dangerous Fling

In the meantime, Bhima as usual ate well and picked up a fight with someone or the other. That was what he needed – a lot of food and a lot of fight. He had seemingly unending energy, appetite and everything else. He fell in love with a woman who is known as Jalandhara in Haryana, Valandhara in Uttar Pradesh, and Balandhara in Bengal.

This is the situation in India – there are so many languages and dialects that if you travel from New Delhi to Kolkata and further on to Tamil Nadu, and let us say your name is Vasudev, by the time you reach Kolkata, it will be Basudev. Once you reach Tamil Nadu, it will be Vasudevan. Similarly, her name is Jalandhara, Valandhara, or Balandhara, depending on which part of the country you are in.

Jalandhara was the sister of Bhanumati, Duryodhana's wife. This connection was bound to cause trouble. The story goes into much detail about the love affair between Bhima and Jalandhara. There was one particular incident where he wanted to see her, which was not possible in the palace. So he sent her a note, saying he wanted to meet her in the gymnasium. This was where he used to spend most of his time. Every day, he was working out, building his muscles, and practicing to fight with his mace.

Secretly, in the middle of the night, she came and met him in Bhalia's gymnasium. Bhalia was a great wrestler of over hundred years of age and the father of Someshwar, who was in charge of the training of the whole royal clan.

Bhima later escorted her back. Then he noticed a spy was following him. He caught hold of him and wanted to smash his head. The spy begged him for mercy and said, "Please spare my life. I will tell you something that you will be interested in." Bhima picked up the guy, held him by the neck, and asked him, "What is it that you have to tell me?" The spy said, "Right now, they are doing something so that within a month's time, you will be dead, for sure." Bhima asked, "What are you talking about? Why would I be dead within a month? It is you who is going to be dead within a minute." The spy replied, "Across the river, there is an aghori. Dusshasana and Shakuni are there

with him. They are performing a yagna for you to die. I can take you to this place.”

The Strange Aghori

Bhima and the spy quietly took a boat and crossed the river. There was an aghori's hut. Aghoris are a certain clan of mystics, who still exist in this country – the fiercest and weirdest yogis you can find. Even today, aghoris live odd lives, compared to the rest of society – no one understands who they are and what they do.

This aghori did very strange things. Dusshasana and Shakuni were sitting at the fire; the aghori was chanting wild mantras. Bhima and the spy hid behind the hut and watched. After various incantations, a very fierce form of Devi appeared. The aghori, who was in a trance, asked Dusshasana and Shakuni to tell her what they want.

Dusshasana said, “We want Bhishma dead.” Devi said, “Not possible. He has the boon that he can choose his time of death. Who else?” They said, “Then we want Krishna dead.” Devi said, “Not possible. He is an avatar; he will only die according to his own will.” These two were the key figures – if they died, everything would have fallen into their hands. “Who else,” Devi asked again. They looked at each other. Then they said, “Bhima. We want him dead.”

But before the aghori could do the needed work, Bhima broke the roof of the hut in such a way that it fell into the fire and burst aflame. The whole yagna fell apart, and the aghori himself accidentally got pushed into the fire.

When he caught fire, he sat down in cross-legged posture, eyes open, and without uttering a sound, his body burned into ashes. He was a very strange being – even Bhima was terrified, and so were Dusshasana and Shakuni, who ran away from there.

Back in the boat, Bhima took the spy by the neck and drowned him in the river. He did not want him to go and tell anyone what had happened. After this incident, the situation in Hastinapur got more unstable than ever. Technically, Yudhishtira was the king, but he took instructions from Dhritarashtra, and shared his power with Duryodhana, which created a standoff where nothing could move ahead.

Mahabharat Episode 24: Duryodhana – No Excuses for Him

Veda Vyasa, who in a way composed the verses of Mahabharat, described everyone's past lives, including Arjuna and Krishna, who were Nara-Narayana. Each of the characters in the Mahabharat is depicted as a consequence of who they were in the past, and how they are battling to change the consequence of who they are. Duryodhana was the only one who Veda Vyasa left without a past because he did not want to provide an excuse for him being the way he was, because there is no excuse for that kind of behavior, that kind of emotion, and the kind of life he lived.

Vyasa wanted Duryodhana to be one hundred percent responsible for everything that he was. For everyone else, there is a past from which the good and the bad, the beauty and the ugliness of their character arose. But there are no such excuses for Duryodhana. The message is that for stupidity, for moments of anger and insensitivity, for blindness in emotion, thought, and action, there is a way out. But for the kind of rage and evil intention that Duryodhana constantly displayed, there is no excuse.

Thick as Thieves

This applies regardless of the fact that there were moments where he was a great, generous friend. He sought friendship everywhere and he took good care of whomever was friendly and loyal to him – better than the Pandavas in that respect. People who are leaders in the world, people who are committed to creating wellbeing for all are usually friendless. Great artists, geniuses, and scientists are friendless, but the worst criminals often have the best of friends.

Crime thrives in friendship. You know the expression “Thick as thieves.” To commit a crime, you usually need accomplices. Without the loyalty of give and take, the amount of criminal activities would be much less in the world. There have been such brilliant and notorious partners in crime that their names have been etched in people's memory and in history books. But there is no excuse for Duryodhana being the way he was. I am sorry to say that, Duryodhana fans. There is nothing wrong with loving a beast, as long as you are at a safe distance from him.

A beast is romantic. "Tyger Tyger, burning bright" – what a beautiful poem! You can safely admire it in a cage, in a zoo or from a safari van, but if you encounter a tiger up close, hardly anyone will sing its praises. Similarly, from a distance, Duryodhana has more allure than those who are trying to work with a missionary zeal to create dharma, or anyone else for that matter. But if you ever happened to come in close contact with him without being his loyal friend, you would regret it.

A Princess in Distress

Once, Krishna was a guest in Duryodhana's palace. Bhanumati, Duryodhana's young, beautiful, fragile wife had no clue about what kind of character her husband was. As a princess in those days, she was trained to love her princely husband irrespective of what kind of person he was. She desperately longed for his love and attention. In reality, she was ravished in many ways but not loved. On a certain night, Duryodhana threw a wild party. People were intoxicated and wild orgies were allowed in the palace. Later, when Bhishma came to know, he cried. Never before had such sacrileges and debaucheries happened in the house of Kuru. Everything became animalistic because of this one man.

Distressed by the lack of attention from her husband, Bhanumati got drunk and deranged. When Krishna saw from across the room that she was about to stumble into a disastrous situation, he made his way through the crowd and took the risk to pick her up half-naked and carry her in his arms to her chambers, in order to save her. When he laid her down and looked at her, he teared up at the thought that such a fragile, wonderful creature was in the hands of Duryodhana.

Mahabharat Episode 25: Duryodhana – On the Road to Ruin

Yudhishtira was crowned as king, but out of his urge to be good, he surrendered his power and once again created a situation that would lead to confusion and conflict. In Tamil, there is a saying, "Nallavan venuma, vallavan venuma?" That means, "Do you want a good man or a capable man as your king?" Maybe you want a good man as your neighbor, but you want a capable, competent man to run the nation.

It is not that Yudhishtira was incompetent or lacked the necessary intelligence to rule the nation, but he read too many scriptures and acquired too much bookish goodness in him, which did not allow his intelligence to function. Instead of doing what was good for the people, he did what was good for his conscience. That is why he attracted disaster continuously.

No matter how much people around him worked to bring him into a good position, he turned it into a disaster again – not with any evil intention, but out of his urge to be good. By trying to be good, Yudhishtira created a situation where many people had to risk their lives, and some lost their lives.

Duryodhana's Poisonous Plots

Duryodhana used this opportunity to plot ways to get rid of the Pandavas. Since he came to know that the Pandavas, who he had presumed dead, had reemerged, there had been only one thing on his mind – finding a way to destroy the five brothers.

He insisted on having a meeting with Dhritarashtra in the presence of Karna. Inflamed with rage, he said, "I was born to be a king. I am not going to take instructions from anyone. If you don't let me do away with the Pandavas somehow, I will commit suicide."

He continued by saying, "Only because they have the friendship of Drupada, they think they are strong. Let us invest in buying over Drupada, no matter what the cost. Once Drupada is on our side, there will be no one to defend them, and we can openly kill these five guys."

Karna pointed out that Krishna was on the side of the Pandavas. And the Yadavas, who were Krishna's men, were almost invincible in the battlefield. Karna reminded Duryodhana that at the Swayamwara, Krishna himself, Satyaki, Uddhava, and even ordinary warriors of the Yadava clan could have hit the mark. It was just that Krishna forbade them to enter the competition. Apart from that, the fact that Drupada's daughter was married to the Pandava brothers made it even less likely that Drupada would accept a bribe from their enemies.

Duryodhana dropped this plan, but he had many others in store. He said, "They are living here in the palace – we can easily poison their food."

Dhritarashtra and Karna did not respond. Duryodhana saw that they did not appreciate this plan and moved on to the next one.

"We can hire the most beautiful women in the country, seduce all the five Pandavas, and turn Draupadi against them. There is nothing like breaking a home. If we ruin the marriage, that's the end of them." They did not buy into this plan either.

Then he said, "If we approach the sons of Madri, Nakula and Sahadeva, alone, I'm sure we can somehow corrupt them. If we manage to turn these two against the other three brothers, we can do them in." The elders did not agree.

Then he said, "Krishna has a weakness for women – we can corrupt him that way. And I know that before I married Bhanumati, he had a soft spot for her. We could try something." He went as far as planning to use his own wife as bait.

Then Dhritarashtra said, "My son, your heart is poisoned. This is not going to work. Let us think of another solution. If we kill them, people may start a revolt in Hastinapur. That will not be good for us." He was not against killing them – he was only concerned about the feasibility. He added, "And remember, Drupada and the Panchalis have defeated the Kuru army before. If they and the Yadavas fight together against us, we stand no chance. This is not the way to go." But Duryodhana did not give up easily. He was determined to find a way to dispose of the Pandavas.

Kuru Court Reasons with Duryodhana

Then he met with the doyens of the Kuru court – Bhishma, Drona, Kripacharya, and Vidura. Bhishma told him, "Killing your cousins is the last thing that should be on your mind. With the attempt to burn the Pandavas alive in the wax palace, you have already brought so much disrepute not only to yourself but also to your father, the king, and the whole Kuru dynasty. A man does not die when his spirit leaves the body. A man dies when his reputation is lost.

But there is still a chance for you to repair your reputation. Just allow Yudhishtira to be the king. He is a fair man; he will not rub it into you in any way. You see what he did just now – I crowned him and he gave you equal status. He will treat you as a brother. Learn to live as a brother. This

can be a turning point in your life. You have to make the right decision now."

But not only at this point, whenever there was an important decision to make, Duryodhana compulsively took the wrong turn. No matter how many of his advisors, friends, and elders suggested otherwise, he was hell-bent on taking the wrong turn anyway.

After Bhishma had given his advice, Dronacharya added, "The Pandavas are not easy to defeat, even if you use foul play. I know Arjuna – I have trained him. He is as good as I. Even blindfolded, he will be able to shoot you dead. He has that kind of capability and power within himself. Such attempts will invite death for you, for your brothers, and probably for all of us."

Kripacharya voiced similar concerns. Vidura saw there was no point trying to convince Duryodhana. Instead, he tried to stir Dhritarashtra's emotions. Dhritarashtra, Vidura, and Pandu grew up together. Vidura tried to evoke this connection and said, "Remember what a wonderful childhood we had! How joyful we were. And how you loved Pandu. So how can you do something to Pandu's children? Pandu will look down on you from heaven and curse you and your children forever."

Dhritarashtra was visibly shaken. Vidura tried to further rake up Dhritarashtra's emotions for Pandu, but he underestimated Dhritarashtra's ability to put on an act to conceal his deep attachment to his son. Dhritarashtra said, "Bhishma, Drona, Kripacharya, Vidura – we have the best counselors that a king can ever have. What they suggest is for the wellbeing of the Kuru dynasty. My son, you must do the right thing."

Duryodhana Walks Out, Krishna Steps In

As the king, he could have just told him what to do, but he did not do that. He left it open. Duryodhana got up and walked out of the meeting. To simply leave while the king and the elders of the Kuru court were sitting there was an unthinkable thing, but that was what Duryodhana did. No matter what, he wanted the Pandavas to die or leave for good.

But then Krishna stepped in. From then on, Krishna assumed an active role in everything that happened. He counselled them, saying, "If they cannot all live together here, it is only fair to give

the Pandavas half the kingdom. Let Duryodhana and his brothers rule in Hastinapur, and let Yudhishtira and his brothers take the other half of the kingdom and make it their own.”

Mahabharat Episode 26: A New Beginning for the Pandavas

In this episode of our Mahabharat series, the division of the kingdom becomes unavoidable. However, Dhritarashtra’s “gift” to the Pandavas of a cursed, barren desert is transformed overnight by the magic of Indra into the beautiful city of Indraprastha.

What has happened so far: After a prolonged power struggle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, with Duryodhana repeatedly crafting plans to murder his five cousins, Krishna finally advised to split the kingdom into two parts in order to finally establish peace between the two parties.

Out of his deep allegiance to the nation, Bhishma wanted to avoid at any cost that the territory would be broken up. He went to the elders of Hastinapur and said, “All of you must intervene, otherwise the nation is going to be split into two.” The elders replied, “When you took that vow of lifelong brahmacharya, you did not consult us. Now you are turning to us?” They all knew things were anyway headed for partition and wanted him to bear the pain of executing it.

A Kingdom Divided

The onus was on Bhishma to initiate the breakup of the land that he loved. He finally told Dhritarashtra, “All right, split the country. Let the Pandavas have one part and let the Kauravas rule in Hastinapur.” Dhritarashtra called the five Pandava brothers and in the full assembly of the court, he declared he will give them Kandavaprastha, which included the ancient capital of the Kurus. Generations before, Pururava, the son of Budha and the first of the Chandravamsha dynasty, was cursed by the rishis, following which the Kandavaprastha fell into ruin, turned into a desert, and was abandoned. That was the kind of gift Dhritarashtra bestowed upon the Pandavas.

Many believed that the Pandavas would anyway die in this cursed place. But Duryodhana did not

want to leave it to chance – he had plans to do them in.

Yudhishtira, being who he was, dutifully accepted it and was getting ready to leave with his brothers and his wife. Krishna intervened and said, “Now to make it fair, half the gold, cattle, horses, and chariots should be given to the Pandavas. And the mallas, the blacksmiths, the goldsmiths, and whoever else wants to go with them, let them go. No compulsion to stay, no compulsion to go.”

Malla means wrestler. The wrestlers were very important in those days. If you wanted to train an army, you needed people who work with them in the gymnasium. This was an unexpected turn of events for the Kauravas, that Krishna said all these people were free to go with the Pandavas. Dhritarashtra and the Kauravas were trying to make it look like a fair share. But in reality, they kept the best part of the kingdom for themselves and gave an abandoned, barren part to the Pandavas.

Kandavaprastha

Many believed that the Pandavas would anyway die in this cursed place. But Duryodhana did not want to leave it to chance – he had plans to do them in. But first, the Kauravas had to part with half of their gold, horses, and cattle. And a lot of people decided to go with the Pandavas. The convoy departed. After many days of walking and a lot of people dying on the way, they eventually reached Kandavaprastha. Until then, the five brothers had been enthusiastic. But when they saw how desolate the place was, their heart sank, and Bhima flew into a rage. He said, “I want to kill Duryodhana and his brothers! How can they give us such a place?”

Bhima

Bhima was the son of the wind – he just flew off. Realizing they had landed up in the middle of nowhere, in the ruins of a cursed city, the other brothers fell silent. In a tone that was unusual for him, Krishna said, “How could Bhishma sanction this, and your Gurus Drona and Kripacharya allow this to happen! The people who have brought this upon you are inviting death with their open arms. It’s not far away.” For the first time, it was no more

just Duryodhana – he included Bhishma, Drona, Kripacharya, Dhritarashtra, everyone in the curse.

Indraprastha, the Magical City

Exhausted from the journey, the Pandavas and their entourage lay down in the open desert to sleep. Krishna waited for everyone to settle down, then he walked around to feel the place. He raised his head to the sky, and in a tongue that was older than the sun, he called on Indra. With thunder and lightning, Indra arrived. Krishna said, “You have to raise this city with your magic. Then we will re-name it as Indraprastha. This will be your city. It should be the most beautiful city the world has ever seen.” And the magic began.

Vishwakarma, the architect of Indra, was called and ordered to raise the city. When everyone slept, he spread his ethereal body like a blanket across the city, and its walls, its towers, its palaces, its courts, and its homes – everything rose. The magic of it was witnessed only by Indra and Krishna. When everyone woke up in the morning, they found themselves in a beautiful city. The news spread like wildfire, that overnight, “the Pandavas have raised a city.”

From that moment onwards, the Pandavas were seen as godlike by the population. Already, there were stories about them coming back from the dead. People said, “The Pandavas died, went to devaloka, and transformed themselves into gods. Then they came back to the Earth, and now they raised the city overnight.” Indraprastha became the most beautiful city. Even today, Indraprastha is the capital of India – it is a part of New Delhi. Indraprastha continued to be the capital city of various dynasties. Even the invaders who came from outside chose to rule from Indraprastha. Until today, the corridors of power are there, and Indraprastha lives on. Whether it is still magical or not is a different question.

Mahabharat Episode 27: Rajasuya Yagna – Paving the Path to Power

Many lifetimes, Krishna and Arjuna had been together as Nara–Narayana. In this life, after moving to Indraprastha, they started spending a lot of time together – going riding, sitting on riverbanks, and discussing various things that

Arjuna needed to understand. This was when Arjuna once again consciously bonded with Krishna.

One day, they were sitting under a beautiful tree on the banks of Yamuna, in the Khandavaprastha, a thick jungle, and Krishna said, “It is time we extend the city and build many other structures. We will have to burn this forest down.” Arjuna said, “This is such a beautiful forest, and it is full of life. How can we burn it down?” Krishna said, “Now that you have chosen to be kings, you must civilize the place. There will be no glory for you as kings without this responsibility and burden.”

As he and Arjuna set out to burn the forest down, Krishna added, “You must kill every creature that tries to escape the fire.” Arjuna asked, “Why kill them?” Krishna replied, “If you want to live and rule the nation in peace, do not let your enemies go. If you let them go today, they will come back tomorrow.”

The ruthlessness with which Krishna acted needs to be understood in its historical context. This was five thousand years ago, when the whole land, from the Himalayan foothills to Kanyakumari, was covered with thick jungle, and densely populated by wild animals. Burning forest and killing animals was necessary to make the land habitable for human beings. The idea of saving the environment did not exist at that time, since the situation was completely different.

A Hall Like No Other

In the process of creating human habitat, Krishna and Arjuna killed almost all other creatures in the area. Only one particular snake, who later came back to cause trouble, and his friend Mayasura, an asura king, escaped. Mayasura surrendered to Krishna and Arjuna and pleaded with them, “I am a great architect and builder. I can build a great assembly hall for you, the kind of hall that humans have not seen in this part of the world. Please do not take my life.” Questioningly, Arjuna looked at Krishna, and the latter said, “Let him be. He will be useful for you.”

Mayasura built the Maya Sabha, an assembly hall unlike any other, exquisite in every aspect. He even made panes of thinly cut crystal sheets that people could look through without even knowing these sheets are there. In those days, no one had seen glass. When guests came, they walked into

the crystal sheets, thinking they were open doorways. And of all the people, later on one day, Duryodhana would walk into one of them. He was a very proud man, which means if he accidentally banged his head against something that you built, you were in for trouble.

Narada Arrives in Indraprastha

Indraprastha was such a beautiful and prosperous city that many people started moving there. Half the population of Hastinapur relocated to Indraprastha, including the best and most talented townspeople. As he saw so many of their residents leave for Indraprastha, anger and resentment against the Pandavas welled up again in Duryodhana's heart. Even his brothers wanted to go and see Indraprastha, which made him furious.

Then the inevitable thing happened – Narada came to the Pandavas. When Narada appeared, trouble always came in the form of goodness. The five brothers prostrated in front of him. Narada said, "Now you have become prosperous." And he told them a story about two rakshasa brothers – Shunda and Ashunda.

The two brothers built a huge kingdom for themselves and ruled it together. They loved each other very much, and their influence and power kept growing. Certain people, who envied their success, sent a gandharvi to them. Her name was Tilottama. She was a ravishingly beautiful woman, and she made sure both the brothers were substantially drawn to her. When things came to a crux, she said, "I will marry whoever is the strongest between you." Immediately, the two brothers started to fight. Both were equally strong, and they ended up killing each other.

After telling this story, Narada cautioned the Pandavas, "Tilottama was also a dark beauty, like Panchali. You are not just two – you are five. When you were facing hardship together, you did not fight. But as your wellbeing grows, you will fight over this woman. The only way you can avoid that is to absolutely follow the rule that Krishna has established for your marriage." The rule was that Draupadi should live with one brother for one year, and that none of the other four should go near her at that time. Otherwise, they would be banished.

While they lived in Hastinapur and all these intrigues and politics were going on, they did not

really stick to this rule. Now that they had built their own kingdom and the situation was stable, Narada, in the presence of Krishna, admonished them to stick to this rule.

Everyone was happy. The city of Indraprastha was beautiful and getting bigger by the day, brimming with activity and talent. They had a fabulous palace, and the assembly hall that Mayasura had built was sensational. People were traveling long distances just to see this hall. At this point, Narada gave them the following advice: "Now that you have created your own kingdom and Krishna is here, wanting to establish dharma, it is time for you to perform a Rajasuya Yagna."

Preparing for the Rajasuya Yagna

A Rajasuya Yagna was a ritual to transform a king into an emperor. It was about sending out the message that this king has become fit and powerful enough to be the king of kings. Either others accept that, or if they do not, you fight with them. Yudhishtira said, "Where is the need? We are happy in Indraprastha. Why should we go and invade other places? Why should we force or coerce other people to take us as their sovereigns? I have no such ambition."

Narada said, "It is not about you. Your father has still not made it to heaven. He is still in the land of Yama. You are his children. Unless you do the Rajasuya Yagna, he cannot rise to Devaloka, the land of gods." This argument convinced Yudhishtira to agree.

Only once in many centuries did a king acquire enough power and prominence to claim that he could perform a Rajasuya Yagna. This was the biggest event that could happen to a Kshatriya. They sent out invitations. To those who refused, they sent their armies. The four other brothers – Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva – went in different directions and conquered land after land, kingdom after kingdom, and brought back immense wealth. They brought back elephant-loads of gold, jewelry, and diamonds as gifts and signs of surrender from other kings. The only kingdom they spared was that of the Kauravas, because they were cousins. The Kauravas were invited to the Rajasuya Yagna as family members, so they could not refuse.

Duryodhana's heart burnt with rage. He could not bear it anymore. He had sent them to a wax palace and burnt it down – they did not die. He had sent them into a desert – they turned it into a

paradise and built a glorious city. And now they were going to perform a Rajasuya Yagna. In one generation, only one king could perform a Rajasuya Yagna. That meant Duryodhana would not get such a chance in his life – unless Yudhishtira died. Immediately, this became Duryodhana's only ambition.

Mahabharat Episode 28: Jarasandha – Born Divided

Jarasandha, the king of Magadha – who was Krishna's constant enemy and had burnt down Mathura, because of which Krishna had moved to Dwaraka – planned to do another kind of yagna, where he would sacrifice one hundred Kshatriya kings, which would elevate him to be emperor and sabotage the Rajasuya Yagna of the Pandavas. He had already captured ninety-nine kings and needed to get one more to be able to perform the yagna.

Krishna said to Yudhishtira, "If he performs this yagna, hundred kings will die at a time, and your Rajasuya Yagna will not succeed. And anyway, Jarasandha is not going to accept you as emperor. You cannot defeat him in battle, because your army is not yet strong enough to fight Jarasandha's. We must kill him, one way or the other. One thing is I owe it to him that he must be dead. And if you want your Rajasuya to be successful, you have to eliminate him."

Jarasandha's Split Birth

Now the question was, how to kill Jarasandha? He was a mighty king and quite an indomitable human being. Disguised as Brahmanas, Bhima, Arjuna, and Krishna travelled to Magadha. As was the custom in those days, they, as Brahmanas, were welcomed in the city. They said they wanted to meet the king. The king gave them an audience.

Then they told Jarasandha that Bhima wanted to wrestle with him. Jarasandha was known to be a great wrestler, and his birth had been quite unusual. Jarasandha's father, when he did not have offspring, went to a sage and asked for a blessing. The sage gave him a mango and said, "Give this fruit to your wife. She will bear you a son." He had two wives and loved both of them.

And when he came back with the fruit, he met both of them together. He did not want to decide to which one to give the mango, so he cut the fruit in two and gave one half each to his wives.

When the due date arrived, both wives delivered half a baby. When they saw this, they were terrified. They wanted to immediately do away with this. They did not want the people to know that such a monstrosity has happened in the palace. So they gave the two halves of the infant to a maid to secretly go and bury them in the forest. The maid went to the forest, but instead of burying the two pieces, she just threw them there, too lazy to dig a hole, and assuming that wild animals would eat them anyway.

Jara, who was from a cannibalistic tribe, passed by. She saw these two pieces of flesh, picked them up, wrapped them into her clothing, and went deeper into the forest to eat. But after wrapping the two halves of the infant together, they got joined, and suddenly, the child started to cry. Never before had she seen such a tender piece of life. Looking at this helpless little baby, her maternal instincts did not allow her to eat it. She held the child, and when she realized he had come from the palace, she found someone to take him back to the king.

When a wonderful baby boy came home from two pieces of flesh, the king was so happy that he named his son after Jara who found him. He called his son Jarasandha – one who was put together by Jara. Jarasandha became a great king. He was just, capable, and strong in every sense. But he hated Krishna, so he was on the wrong side of the story.

Mahabharat Episode 29: When Bhima Wrestled Jarasandha

When Bhima, Arjuna, and Krishna, disguised as Brahmins, arrived at Rajagriha, the capital of Magadha, Jarasandha welcomed them, as was the custom of the time. They told him that Bhima wanted to wrestle with him, without revealing their true identity.

Jarasandha looked at them and sized them up. When he saw Arjuna's hands, which were calloused in a way that is characteristic for an archer, he said, "Well, looks like you are an archer. You

are not a Brahmin, are you?" He also noticed that Arjuna bore these calluses on both hands.

Arjuna could fight or shoot an arrow with either hand with the same accuracy. He was ambidextrous – that is why one of his names is Savyasachi. Being able to use the left and right hand with the same dexterity is a huge advantage in battle. Jarasandha said, "You are ambidextrous. Who are you? The only other archer I have heard of who is ambidextrous is Arjuna. I have not met him, but for sure he would not come dressed as a Brahmin. Anyway, you have come as guests." And he offered them the customary welcome and a place in the palace. He asked them, "Are you sure you can wrestle with me," because as a wrestler, he was considered matchless.

A Match to the Finish

There were two kinds of wrestling matches in those days. One was as a sport where, once you floor the opponent, the match is over. Another was a life and death match where you had to kill the opponent in the ring. It would be the worst disgrace for the opponent to leave him injured and not kill him. You had to kill him. They asked for the second kind of wrestling – Bhima wanted to wrestle with Jarasandha in a life and death match. Still, Jarasandha treated them as his guests, with great honor and fabulous hospitality. The wrestling match started after a few days.

Every day, in the late afternoon, they wrestled for two and a half to three hours, till both of them were exhausted. Then they returned to the palace, dined, drank, and partied together, and the next afternoon, they entered the ring again. Krishna told Bhima, "The hospitality is so good here. Why don't you stretch it out a little longer. We are really enjoying this place." The wrestling went on for many, many days. Then at some point, Krishna said, "It's time to go back," and he told Bhima to go all the way. But going all the way with Jarasandha was not easy, because he was going all the way too. They fought bitterly. Whatever Bhima did, he was not able to kill Jarasandha.

Bhima was much younger and stronger, but he was not able to take Jarasandha's life. For twenty-six days, they fought for three hours daily. Then Krishna said, "It is enough. We must end it." They realized that in wrestling, they could not kill Jarasandha. So they suggested fighting with maces. But however Bhima hit him, Jarasandha did not

die. He just sat up again and again. Because he was older, he was a little more exhausted than Bhima, but he was able to take any kind of blow.

Then Krishna told Bhima, "Tomorrow is Amavasya. On Amavasya night, Jarasandha is going to acquire superhuman powers. He will kill you. Do not think he is treating us so well for nothing. He wants us to enjoy the hospitality so that we stay until Amavasya. When Amavasya comes, he is unbeatable. And on that day, which is tomorrow, he will kill you. Unless you kill him today, tomorrow, you will be dead."

Torn in Two

Bhima went all out. But whatever he did, he could not kill Jarasandha. Then he looked at Krishna and asked, "What to do?" Time was running out. Krishna took a leaf and tore it into two. Bhima knew of Jarasandha's birth, how the two pieces of an infant were joined together. He immediately understood what he had to do.

He put one leg on Jarasandha's left leg, tore him into two pieces and threw the halves down. But to his and everyone else's amazement, the two pieces rolled together, joined, and Jarasandha sat up again. That was when Bhima felt his death was imminent. With fearful eyes, he looked at Krishna again. Krishna took another leaf, tore it, and threw the two pieces into opposite directions.

The next fight began. Again, no matter what Bhima did, Jarasandha did not die. Jarasandha was just waiting for tomorrow. Then Bhima again tore him apart, and this time, he threw the two halves in opposite directions. People anxiously waited to see if the two parts of the body would again come together and sit up. Nothing happened. Jarasandha was finally dead.

Krishna crowned Jarasandha's son as king and invited him to join the Rajasuya Yagna. They released the ninety-nine kings who had been imprisoned in Jarasandha's dungeons. Then they all traveled back to Indraprastha. They took half of Jarasandha's huge elephant army and loaded up half of the gold and wealth that he had.

With these ninety-nine kings and these immense riches, they came back to Indraprastha. There was not enough space in the treasury of Indraprastha to store all this wealth – they heaped it up everywhere.

Now the Rajasuya Yagna could begin.

Mahabharat Episode 30: Duryodhana Humiliated to the Core

Everyone assembled in Indraprastha for the Rajasuya Yagna, including Duryodhana and his clan. One person was supposed to be the guest of honor at the yagna. Yudhishtira prostrated in front of Bhishma, who was the most senior one there, and said, "Pitama, you must tell me who should be the guest of honor. To my mind, it is you, but I leave it to you to decide who should be the guest of honor."

Bhishma said, "Of all the men who are here, I may be the eldest, but the greatest is definitely Krishna, because he is more than a man. So, naturally he must be the guest of honor." The moment he said this, Shishupala, Krishna's cousin, stood up in a rage. Shishupala was the king of Chedi. He was known as the "Bull of Chedi," because he was an extraordinarily large man.

Shishupala's Anger Boils Over

There had been a string of problems with Shishupala in the past. One important incident occurred when Shishupala was set to marry Rukmini. Rukmini's brother Rukmi promised Shishupala, who was his friend, that he would give his sister in marriage to Shishupala.

Instead of simply conducting a marriage, they called for a swayamvara. In a swayamvara, the girl is supposed to choose her groom. But they set up a fake swayamvara, in which Rukmini's brother had already made the choice. They chose to do a swayamvara to satisfy everyone and use it to forge a strategic alliance.

But Rukmini was in love with Krishna, whom she had not even seen. Just hearing about Krishna, she fell in love with him. Krishna knew that she loved him, and he did not want Rukmi and Shishupala to set a precedent of conducting fake swayamvaras.

Krishna went to the swayamvara and abducted the princess. When Rukmi and Shishupala gave him chase, he trounced both of them. Krishna did not want to kill Rukmi because he was Rukmini's brother. He disarmed Rukmi and shaved his head, his eyebrows, and his moustache, and sent him

back. This was the greatest shame you could inflict on a Kshatriya.

And he did not kill Shishupala either, because he had made a promise to Shishupala's mother, many years before. When Shishupala was young, out of pure arrogance, he abused Krishna. At some point, Krishna got a little irritated and said, "This is uncalled-for." Knowing who Krishna was, Shishupala's mother begged him, "Promise me that you will never kill Shishupala," to which he replied, "Even if he abuses me a hundred times, I will not kill him."

Many years later, when Bhishma said Krishna should be the guest of honor at the Rajasuya Yagna, Shishupala was incensed. All the old anger and shame he held inside burst out, and he stood up and started abusing Krishna. Bhishma intervened and said, "There is no need to abuse the guest of honor at an event like this. It is I who chose him."

Then Shishupala started verbally abusing Bhishma too, while continuing to hurl abuses at Krishna as well. Krishna just sat there smiling and counting the number of abuses. When it came to ninety-nine, Krishna said, "I promised your mother that even if you abuse me a hundred times, I will not kill you. There is just one more left for you. If you go beyond that, you will be dead."

The Yagna Turns Ugly

But Shishupala was not in the mood or state to listen. He was foaming and throwing abuses. So Krishna took up his famous weapon, the deadly Sudarshan Chakra. It says in the Mahabharat that when Jarasandha attacked Krishna and he had to leave Mathura, Krishna went up a mountain and met a sage who was working with metallurgy who taught him how to extract the hardest kind of metal, which was otherwise unknown at that time, from a reddish-brown rock. Until then, all the arms were made of brass. Now, for the first time, Krishna forged a disc from iron. He learnt to use the disc in such a way that people ascribed all kinds of magical powers to it. Krishna threw the disc, and it severed Shishupala's head and those of many of Shishupala's friends.

People who had resented the killing of Jarasandha all drew their swords. The Pandavas were unarmed. But the people who were on the Pandavas' side outnumbered those who had

drawn their swords, and they prevented a larger outbreak of violence. But the Rajasuya Yagna, which should have been the greatest event in a king's life and happen beautifully, turned ugly. One thing was Krishna had to kill his own cousin. Another thing was that the situation was on the verge of turning into a battle. It was mainly Krishna's Yadava soldiers who prevented a mass carnage.

A Treasured Task

During the Rajasuya Yagna, everyone in the family was given some responsibility, so that the uncles, aunts, and cousins felt at home. Even today, this is common practice at Indian weddings. Some family members take up genuine responsibilities, others just nominal ones.

When Yudhishtira asked Krishna, "What responsibility should I give Duryodhana?" Krishna smiled and said, "Make him the keeper of your treasury." Yudhishtira innocently gave Duryodhana the responsibility of managing the treasury for those few days. Duryodhana walked into the treasury. There were heaps of treasures – a kind of wealth that he could not even dream of. When he saw all this, his envy knew no bounds.

After the Rajasuya Yagna was over and all the other guests left, Yudhishtira, as was his nature, particularly requested Duryodhana and his brothers to stay back for a few more days. "Be our guests. It has been such a long time – we have been missing all the bad blood." Such a good man he was.

Now that the function was over, there was finally time to show them the whole palace, and they were taking them on a tour of the Maya Sabha, a magical hall like no one had ever seen before, because the architect came from elsewhere. It was designed to create maya, an illusion.

Duryodhana's Misstep

The architect created crystal screens that were completely transparent and water pools whose surface looked like flooring. One had to really watch out as to not be deceived. Duryodhana was not someone you could take on a tour. You can see this sometimes – when you take a group of people on a tour, usually, women, children, and a few men walk with the guide, but there are some, mostly men, who just cannot.

Likewise, it was impossible for Duryodhana to join a guided tour, and to follow and listen to someone. After all, he was a king. But he did not see the crystal screen and walked into it. As if that was not embarrassment enough, he fell into a pool, thinking it was a solid floor.

Draupadi, who was passing by, and Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna, and Bhima, who were sitting there, burst into peals of laughter. When Yudhishtira sternly looked at them, the four brothers stopped laughing. But Draupadi could not contain herself. She laughed out louder and louder. And to top it all, she said, "What can you expect of a blind man's son?" Fueled by the humiliation, Duryodhana's jealousy, envy, fear, and anger, grew beyond measure. Had her husbands not been there, he would have ripped Draupadi apart.

Duryodhana went away, consumed by shame. On the way back to Hastinapur, he did not eat for many days. He wanted to die. He said, "I cannot bear this shame that their city has grown to such an extent that they have become so wealthy, and now they have done a Rajasuya Yagna, which I will not be able to do in my whole life. And on top of everything, this woman laughed at me! I want to die." When he reached the Hastinapur palace, he sat down. For many weeks, he did not eat. He did not wash his body. He did not change his clothes. He just sat there like a mad man.

Dhritarashtra got worried that his son was going insane. Whatever anyone said, he was in no mood to listen. He just wanted to die. He did not know how else to fix the situation. Then Shakuni stepped in.

Mahabharat Episode 31: The Game of Dice

Shakuni said, "What you cannot do with the sword, you could do with guile. You are a foolish Kshatriya, always thinking about the sword, always thinking about poison, always thinking about killing. There are other ways to do things." And he pulled out his dice, saying, "These are my father's bones. They will roll as I want. Ask me for any number – I will get it for you."

The dharma of those days was if you invited a Kshatriya for a duel or a game of dice, he could not say, "No." He had to come. Shakuni said, "Yudhishtira has a weakness for playing dice,

and he has absolutely no clue how to play. Let us invite him for a game of dice. I will play for you. With this game of dice, we will get their wealth, their kingdom, everything out of them. Just bring them here. I will take care of the rest.”

Duryodhana suddenly livened up – he showered, changed his clothes, ate, and full of vigor, went to his father and said, “Father, we must invite the Pandavas for a game of dice.” The moment Bhishma heard this, he stepped in and said, “No way.” For the first time, Duryodhana revolted openly against Bhishma and said, “You are an old man. You do not understand the politics of the day. Leave it to me.” Until then, no one had ever spoken deprecatingly to Bhishma. But now he got pushed aside by this young man. Everyone present was aghast, but no one had the courage to say anything.

Dhritarashtra said he did not like the idea, but he actually liked it. They sent the invitation to the Pandavas. Yudhishtira was such a good man that he said, “Our cousins have invited us. They just came to us as our guests. Now it is our dharma to go to them and be their guests.” Bhima said, “We would be utterly stupid to go back to that place and play a game of dice with them. They got something up their sleeves. They will once again try to eliminate us in some way.” Yudhishtira said, “No, it is our dharma. When they call me for a game of dice, as a king, I cannot say ‘No.’” And he liked to play, even though he did not know how to play.

The Game Begins

In full regal glory, the five brothers, their queen, and their whole entourage were set to journey back to Hastinapur. Duryodhana wanted to build an assembly hall for the game of dice that was equally good as the one the Pandavas had. He hired a local architect, and, in an effort to impress, made the hall horribly garish. Even his own brothers, who otherwise had no taste either, did not like the hall. And the Pandavas made the mistake of not informing Krishna, who had gone back to Dwaraka. They went there by themselves, thinking that, after all, they were just visiting their cousins.

The Pandavas arrived at the hall. The full assembly of the court was present to watch the game of dice. Yudhishtira sat down, ready to play. Then Duryodhana came, but he sat down

away from the dice board. People looked a little surprised, and Duryodhana announced, “Shakuni, my uncle, will play for me.” A murmur went through the assembly. Everyone knew Shakuni was an uncanny dicer. Playing dice was all he was doing, all the time. And everyone knew these dice he had were occult-charged. People whispered, “This is not fair. Yudhishtira will lose.”

Yudhishtira said to Duryodhana, “I thought I was playing with you.” Duryodhana replied, “Brother, why are you afraid? My uncle is playing for me. What is the problem? We are of the same blood. Have you lost your courage?” Yudhishtira said, “No, it is okay. We will play.” They asked him, “What is your wager?” Yudhishtira bet his elephants, his horses – all kinds of things. Every time Shakuni rolled the dice, he got what he wanted and Yudhishtira lost.

From Kings to Slaves

Dhritarashtra, the blind king, had his assistant Sanjaya by his side to provide him commentary of the game. Every time Dhritarashtra heard the dice roll, he eagerly asked, “Who won? Who won?” Every time, Shakuni won. Yudhishtira lost the whole treasury. He lost his army. He lost his personal jewels. Then his brothers had to give the ornaments they were wearing, and he lost them. These ornaments had not only monetary value, but were objects of prestige. Losing them was almost like losing their status.

Then Yudhishtira put the kingdom at stake and lost it. People were looking on in dismay. Bhishma stood up and said, “Stop the game.” Duryodhana shouted him down, “It is not for you to stop the game. We are playing this game as per the dharma of the Kshatriyas. If Yudhishtira is afraid of playing the game, he may leave. No one else can stop the game.” Yudhishtira was not afraid of anything. He knew how to walk into any trap in the world. He lost the kingdom. Then Shakuni taunted, “I will give you one more chance. If you wager your brother Bhima, you can win back your kingdom and everything else.”

First he put Nakula at stake, and lost him. Then he lost Sahadeva. Then he lost Arjuna. Finally, he lost Bhima too. Then Shakuni said, “This is your chance now, Yudhishtira. Put yourself at stake, and you can win back everything.” Yudhishtira rolled the dice and lost himself. The Kauravas roared with joy. “The Pandavas are our slaves

now! They have to take instructions from us. Take off your upper garments!" This was a symbolism of slavery – a slave was not allowed to wear an upper garment. The Pandava brothers took off their upper garments and stood in shame. Just fifteen minutes ago, they had been kings. Now they stood there partially disrobed, as slaves, not knowing what to do next.

The Humiliation of Draupadi

Then Karna suggested, "You can wager your wife, your queen." Draupadi was not present in the court. It was her time of the month, so she was in the private quarters. They tempted Yudhishtira. "This is your chance. You can win back your brothers, your kingdom, and everything. Your queen versus all that – if you win, you take everything. You will win, of course. This is your lucky time." Yudhishtira wagered his wife, and lost her. Immediately, Duryodhana roared in delight. He said, "Draupadi is our slave. Bring her here." They sent a messenger. A male messenger was generally not allowed into the queen's chambers, particularly at this time of the month. When the messenger was turned back, Duryodhana told his brother Dushasana, "Who is she to say whether she can come or not? Go get her."

Dushasana went, broke open the doors, entered the chambers, and said, "Come!" When Draupadi replied, "How dare you walk into my chambers!" he took her by the hair and dragged her away. Her clothes were stained with blood. She said, "I am in a single garment and I am in this condition. How can you touch me and drag me like this?" He said, "It does not matter. You are our slave," and he just pulled her by the hair through the corridors of the palace and brought her into the court. A few people stood up and said, "This is not dharma. Never before in the court of a king has a woman been treated like this." But Duryodhana said, "This is the law. She is a slave. I can treat her whichever way I want."

Enraged, Draupadi sat up and pleaded with Bhishma to interfere, but he put his head down. Then she asked, "Did Yudhishtira wager me first or himself first?" They said, "Yudhishtira wagered himself first." Then she said, "If he had already lost himself and he was already a slave, he had no right to put me at stake." People asked Bhishma, the ultimate judge about questions of dharma, "Since Yudhishtira had already lost himself,

could he jeopardize his wife?" The expert in law that he was, Bhishma gravely said, "According to the dharma, even a slave has the right over his wife. So even as a slave, he had the right to wager her."

The law that was meant to be for the wellbeing of human beings became technical to a point where in establishing legality, humanity was lost. What happened there was the cruelest scene. And as if that was not enough, they started taunting Draupadi. According to ancient law, if a king or a Kshatriya had no children, with his permission, his wife could bear children from up to three other men. But if she went to a fifth man, she was considered a whore. Karna tried to shame Draupadi by saying, "She is living with five men. She is not a wife – she is a whore. We can do whatever we want with her." And he told Draupadi, "Why only five – now you have a hundred!"

Krishna's Protection

Then Duryodhana said, "Come, Panchali, sit on my lap." Enraged, Bhima said, "Today, you pointed at your thigh and asked Panchali to sit there. One day, I will smash your thigh and kill you!" Their opponents said, "We will talk about killing later. Right now, disrobe the woman." Dushasana went to pull her single garment. The situation turned from civilized to brutal. Those present turned into beasts.

Draupadi was helpless and enraged. But as Krishna had promised Draupadi, he protected her and ensured in his own way that she did not get disrobed. When they saw the miracle happen - that even though their intentions were to go all the way, they could not - fear seized Dhritarashtra's heart.

For the first time during this whole event, Dhritarashtra rose to speak, and he said, "The game is over. Everyone gets back what they had before the game. Yudhishtira is still the king of Indraprastha. Let them go back in honor." Duryodhana, Karna, Dushasana, and their whole clan got very angry. Duryodhana left the sabha. The Pandavas got back their kingdom, their freedom, their wealth, and everything else, but the burden of shame remained. With hanging heads, they started to walk towards Indraprastha.

Shakuni, Karna, and Duryodhana quickly took Dhritarashtra aside and said, "This is not right.

Because of your intervention, what was a fair game resulted in an unfair outcome. We have to invite them for just one more game. The conditions will be these: If they win, we will go to the forest. They can have the whole empire. If they lose, they must go to the forest for twelve years and live incognito for one more year. After thirteen years, anyway, they can have their kingdom back. But there must be some kind of price for the game we played.”

Once again, Dhritarashtra got swayed by his son, and he sent out messengers to call the Pandavas back. The other four brothers initially refused to go back, but Yudhishtira said, “This is the dharma. They are calling us back. We have to go,” and he went back. Obviously, he lost the game, and they gave up their royal clothes, wore simple garments, and left for the forest.

Mahabharat Episode 32: Krishna’s Vow to Draupadi

After the First Dice Game

This dastardly event that was perpetrated in the court of the Kuru turned gentle beings into beasts. The joyful, playful, ever mischievous Bhima transformed into a beastly Bhima. He took a vow to shatter Duryodhana’s thigh and to drink Dushasana’s blood. Draupadi took a vow to leave her hair loose until she got to wash it in Dushasana’s blood. And four of the five Pandava brothers, except Yudhishtira, took a vow to kill every Kaurava. But Bhima said, “No, leave it to me. I am going to kill all one hundred of them.”

When this horrific incident occurred, Draupadi, a young married woman and a queen who enjoyed her life, flew into a rage and displayed her strength. Alarmed by the way the situation unfolded, Dhritarashtra intervened and said that whatever Yudhishtira had staked and lost in the dice game should be returned. He offered that Draupadi ask for whatever she wanted. She said, “I want freedom for my husbands.” Dhritarashtra said, “Granted, they are free men. What else?” She said, “They must have their kingdom back.” He said, “Granted, yes. Ask for one more thing.” She said, “It is not wise for a human being to be greedy. This is all I want.”

Dhritarashtra said, “Don’t you want anything for yourself? Ask for something for yourself.” She was

still not free. She said, “I don’t want anything; I am willing to be a slave. Let these men who staked me in the game be free. Let them be kings. I have loved them. But it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to ask for a third boon.” At that point, Dhritarashtra returned everything the Pandavas had lost to them and granted them and Draupadi their freedom. The Kauravas, Karna, and Shakuni were totally disappointed. Karna said, “Such great Kshatriyas, and they were saved by a woman! Brave men are these. They got away cheaply.” That was the taunt that brought them back again to the second dice game, and they lost everything once again. The Pandavas and Draupadi had to go to the forest for twelve years, and remain incognito for another year. In case they were found out, they would have to extend their exile for twelve more years.

Krishna’s Vow

When Draupadi related to Krishna what had happened to her, he vowed to avenge this infamous act. Draupadi cried bitter tears and said to Krishna, “Though you saved me at the last moment, you were not there, and this is what they did to me. Until I see Dushasana’s blood, I cannot forget this.” So Krishna took a vow, saying, “The heavens may fall. The Himalaya may be leveled. The seas may run dry as a dead man’s bones. The earth herself may burst asunder, but I will keep my oath to you. To avenge the crime against you, there will be a war to end all wars. Your eyes, which shed drops of fire today, will see all one hundred Kauravas dead upon the battlefield. Wipe your tears because the tears are the prerogative of the one hundred widows in Hastinapur.”

Good and Bad in the Story and in Life

When we look at the whole story of Mahabharat, some characters seem good or great, others seem bad or evil. How does this happen? As such, there is no goodness and badness. It is just the choices we make in crucial moments that make us seem good or bad. Some people repeatedly make choices that are harmful to themselves and everyone around them. Some people make choices with the constant concern of what will happen because of their choices. This is all the difference between Duryodhana and Yudhishtira, or just about anyone.

What kind of choices do you make in different situations that you face in your life? Are the choices arising from exclusiveness or inclusiveness? Are the choices arising from the needs of the body or the nature of the being? Are the choices arising from your individuality or the universal nature of life? You have the choice to function as a smaller or larger being. One who functions as a larger being gets judged as a great being. One who functions in between becomes a good being. One who functions from the smallness of who he is becomes a bad being.

Mahabharat Episode 33: The Forest Exile

What has happened so far: After the infamous game of loaded dice, the Pandavas and Draupadi are forced into exile for thirteen years. An enraged Draupadi vows to keep her hair unkempt until it is washed with the blood of Dushasana. Bhima, in solidarity, swears in time to drink Dushasana's blood and shatter Duroyodhana's thigh. And, Krishna to Draupadi says, "The heavens may fall. The Himalaya may be leveled. The seas may run dry as a dead man's bones. The earth herself may burst asunder, but I will keep my oath to you. To avenge the crime against you, there will be a war to end all wars."

Sadhguru: After the game of dice, the Pandavas had to leave their kingdom. They lost not only their inheritance but also what they had earned and built – all in a matter of an hour or two – with a roll of dice, not in battle or otherwise, as it should have been. Now, they prepared to leave for the forest. In a sense the whole situation moved from civilized ways of handling life to the ways of the wild, where might is right. It was a transition from properly laid out rules and everyone talking about rules, to turning into the wild.

When they set out to go into the forest, instead of wearing royal robes, they appropriately dressed in simple hermit's clothes. As they walked out of Hastinapur, people gathered and wailed. A large number of people loved the Pandava brothers, particularly Yudhishtira, because he had earned the reputation of being the most evenhanded ruler that they had ever seen. So when the Pandavas and Draupadi left, a lot of people wanted to go with them to the forest. If you are going into the

forest and a lot of people come with you, it is not of help, it is a lot of trouble. It took a lot of convincing to make people understand and get them to stay away. People walked behind them for miles. But they were turned away except for Dhaumya, their family priest and a little over a dozen other brahmins, to take care of the ritual part of their lives.

They went into the Kamakhya Vana, a forest that was about a day's travel away. By evening, they reached the forest and camped near a river. Now, these brahmins who had come with them set up their rituals and things to support the family. No one spoke to anyone. Everyone was distraught except Yudhishtira – he looked around the forest and started enjoying it. While the others were grief-stricken because they had lost everything, Yudhishtira looked at the green forest, the chirping birds – everything was so beautiful, far more beautiful than the palace. He started going around with a smile on his face. Looking at the smile upon his face, Bhima and particularly Draupadi got incensed. She was angry because of what had happened to her, because of losing the comfort, clothes, and conveniences they had in the palace. A woman is generally more dependent on those things than a man, because of the very way she is made. A house is a lot more important for the feminine than the masculine. Men would rather sleep under a tree.

Draupadi was grief-stricken, enraged, and thirsting for revenge. Bhima always resonated with her. Whatever she wanted was his mission. The others were quiet. Sahadeva did not say a word for weeks on end. But Yudhishtira could not help enjoying the forest. The next day, they moved a little deeper into the forest and tried to set up a camp for themselves. But within a few days, the grains and other provisions ran out. As kshatriyas, they could go out hunting a deer or a boar and eat. But it became a big challenge to feed the over a dozen brahmins. They even begged them to go back because they could not feed them. Particularly Draupadi was pained by that. When they lived in Indraprastha, she always enjoyed giving and feeding people so much. Whenever possible, she fed whoever came to town.

In this culture, in ancient times, anywhere you went, someone would serve you food. You did not have to go to a restaurant. Even today, in many temples, particularly in southern India and in some places in northern India as well, they serve simple

but good meals every day to anyone who comes. Food is seen as something so fundamental that you should not deprive anyone of it. They can eat whatever they want. So, Draupadi used to uphold this tradition in Indraprastha. Now, when she could not feed these brahmins who accompanied them, she was deeply pained. Then, sage Vyasa came by and he advised her to pray to the sun god, because there was a possibility to organize food through him.

With the appropriate rituals and prayers, the sun god appeared and Draupadi said, "I'm not asking for my kingdom back. I'm a queen, but I'm not asking for jewels, clothes, or any other things. All I want is to see that whoever comes as guest to us should not go hungry. When people come, I must be able to feed them." And because the Pandavas were who they were, people kept coming to see them. The sun god gave her a bowl and said, "With this bowl, you can serve whatever food you wish to whoever comes. The food will keep coming out of this bowl, endlessly. The only thing is you must be the last one to eat. The moment you eat, food will stop for that day. The next day, it will come again."

Blessed with this bowl, feeding the brahmins and other guests was not a problem anymore. Slowly, everyone began to enjoy being in the forest and became a part of it. Different people take different amounts of time to see its beauty and experience what a comfort and joy it is to be with nature. Slowly, everyone fell into place and all of them started enjoying the process of living in the forest, going out to gather food, arranging things, and all that. No burdens of running a nation, no intrigues of Hastinapur palace, no constant fights with your cousins – life was good. It became a fantastic vacation in the wild for them.

As they were relaxing into the forest life, many sages and saints started visiting them. Now that they had an inexhaustible amount of food, they could welcome and feed them all, and Yudhishtira loved to listen and converse with the sages. He never had an opportunity like this before. From the time he came to Hastinapur at the age of fifteen or sixteen, it was all about the training in arms and administration. After that, it was a continuous cold war with the Kauravas. And then they built a city afresh. Now, he really started enjoying being in the forest. No one had ever seen him so happy. He spent days and nights sitting, speaking, and listening to the guests and sages. He almost

completely forgot why he was in the forest, and what he was supposed to do after that. Of course, their return was still thirteen years away, but others began to fear that Yudhishtira was relaxing too much. When someone begins to enjoy the space so much, he may renounce his original purpose altogether.

Duryodhana was very satisfied with the result he and his accomplices had achieved, but still worried that the Pandavas may rethink, "What the hell – it's our kingdom. Just because we lost a game of dice, we are supposed to stay in the forest!?" Spies were sent to travel with the Pandavas or be around in the forest, to keep Duryodhana informed. "What is their condition? How are they doing? Are they suffering enough?" The latter was a very important issue for him. When the spies reported that these guys, particularly Yudhishtira, were really enjoying their forest life, Duryodhana continued worrying, "If they're so happy, what are they up to? They could gather the Panchala and Yadava armies and come back to fight for their kingdom," so additional spies were sent to Panchala and Dwaraka to find out if any alignment was happening. "Are they going to launch a surprise attack?" because now all the rules were broken, no one talked dharma anymore. When his spies came back and said there was no sign of any alignment or the like, and that the Pandavas had resigned to being in exile for thirteen years, Duryodhana relaxed a bit. But he still felt that if they are so happy in the forest, it would be better their lives end in the forest. And of course he wanted to give a helping hand.

Duryodhana and Karna sat down and came up with a plan. They wanted to go for a hunt in the same forest where the Pandavas were unarmed and hunt them down like wild animals. But they could not leave without Dhritarashtra's permission for the mission, which also meant getting Bhishma's okay. Bhishma and Vidura got wind of it, and both of them tried to dissuade Dhritarashtra. They said, "You cannot allow that. We have taken away everything that was theirs, stripped them down to nothing and sent them to the forest. At least let them live there. There is no need to go after them." But Duryodhana and Karna still wanted to go for the hunt.

Mahabharat Episode 34: Vidura Puts His Foot Down

Right from Dhritarashtra's childhood, Vidura had been an able support for him. So, being his brother and having been his wisdom all his life, Vidura could talk to him in a way that no one else could. Vidura told him, "This is unbecoming of us. Already the house is so full of sin that I cannot even eat in this place. But now going after them in the forest and trying to hunt them down, as these boys intend to do, is simply out of question. This cannot be allowed. I am telling you, your boys will not keep quiet. They will go on doing something."

"Do one thing: call the Pandavas back and give them their half of the kingdom. Ask them to forget everything and go. Because the five Pandavas are sons of devas. They are hugely equipped and a majority of the kings sympathize with them. Above all, Krishna is with them. If we fight a battle, it is sure death for all of us. Don't have illusions about this. Believe me, whatever it may look like right now, when it really comes to battle, Arjuna will stand up like a god and defeat everyone. It is best you call them tomorrow and give them back the kingdom."

Dhritarashtra listened to all this and said, "Are you never tired of praising the Pandavas? I can clearly see you are prejudiced in favor of Pandu's sons against mine. How can I ask my son to give back what he has won? He has won it according to the Dharma, he has won it in the dice game."

Vidura replied, "You know very well that the dice are loaded. You know very well Shakuni is a cheat, and you know very well Yudhishtira does not have a clue how to play a dice game. Knowing all this, you allowed the game to happen, and now you are talking about Dharma. Don't utter that word."

"The day you sanctioned the wax palace and its burning, you lost all your credibility. If you want to revive anything for yourself, your children and for the Kuru lineage, just call them back. Give them their portion, let your boys have your portion, let them live in peace. And we can somehow take some kind of commitment from the Pandavas that they will never wage a war against us. That will leave us in safety – your boys will live their full term of life. Otherwise, your sons will be dead the moment the Pandavas come back."

Dhritarashtra got sick of this – not that he had to get sick of anything; he had always been sick one way or the other. He said, "I have had enough of you. If Pandu's sons mean so much more to you than my own, go! I have no use for you."

Vidura said, "That is the best thing you could have done for me." He bowed down and he left. He made arrangements for his wife and Kunti who were living in the house and left joyfully for the forest, where he met the Pandavas. Vidura hugged all of them and they all wept. After all the emotion was done, they asked him why he was here. Vidura said, "I have come to stay with you. It is over for me in Hastinapur. I could not leave my brother myself, but now my brother asked me to go so I am now free. At last I am happy that I am free from the sinful alignment of things that were happening there." The Pandavas were very happy. They had always respected Vidura. He was the only one who stood up and said something right in the court that day when things were going utterly wrong.

But Dhritarashtra could not exist without Vidura because right from his childhood, every day, day in and day out, Vidura had been his companion, wisdom, eyes, ears – everything. Suddenly Dhritarashtra felt so lost. So just after two days, he sent messengers to Vidura and said, "Please, if you are gone I will die. I will stop eating and I will kill myself." After much pleading, Vidura went back to the palace again.

When he went back, he insisted that they must call off the hunt. Dhritarashtra called Duryodhana and said "There is not going to be a hunt." Duryodhana and Karna pleaded heavily that they are just going for fun and not for anything else, but he said, "You cannot go for a hunt. And if you go for a hunt, you will have to go in the opposite direction." But they were not interested in hunting there – they wanted to hunt here.

Mahabharat Episode 35: Durvasa's Visit – Averting Fury and Curse

Sage Durvasa came to Hastinapur. He was known to be a very angry man. For the smallest things, he would flare up and curse people. The Mahabharat and even the Ramayan are full of his curses. Wherever he went, if he was pleased, he would bless them. He was the one who blessed

Kunti with the mantra [that enabled her to receive a son from anyone she wished]. He was the one who cursed Shakuntala (an earlier queen of Hastinapur). Wherever sage Durvasa went, everyone was on their toes to make sure that he did not get angry.

When Duryodhana came to know that Durvasa was on his way to Hastinapur, he went outside the gates of the city to receive him, which was a very unusual thing to do for Duryodhana. When he saw Durvasa, Duryodhana prostrated, welcomed him, brought him to the palace and offered him the best possible hospitality to keep him happy. By then, Duryodhana had come to know about the Akshaya Patra, the bowl that Draupadi had received from the sun god. People kept coming to visit the Pandavas in the forest, and because of this bowl, Draupadi was able to feed them well. The fact that the Pandavas were eating well and that they were even entertaining guests made Duryodhana furious. According to him, such things were not supposed to happen in the forest exile. Things were going well for the Pandavas in the forest. Duryodhana wanted to change that.

A few days into Durvasa's stay with him, Duryodhana suggested, "My brothers, Pandu's sons, are in the forest because of some unfortunate circumstances. As you have blessed me, they must also receive your blessings. Please go and bless my brothers." Duryodhana told Durvasa that arrangements will be made at the camp for him and his people, and he sent his men to guide them to the Pandavas' camp in the forest. But actually, the Pandavas and Draupadi were not informed about the impending visit of Durvasa and his few hundred disciples. Duryodhana wanted to make sure Durvasa and his entourage reached only after Draupadi had already eaten, so that she would have nothing to serve them. Then Durvasa would get angry, which for sure would be a disaster for her and her five husbands.

When they arrived, late in the afternoon, Durvasa and his disciples were very hungry from walking all the way from Hastinapur. Naturally, being a well-known sage, he expected a certain level of hospitality. The Pandavas welcomed him and said, "Please have your ritual bath in the river and then please come for food." They did not know Draupadi had already eaten, which meant food would not come again before the next day. Durvasa and his disciples went to the river to have their ritual bath. Then, Draupadi came to know about

their arrival, and she was in great distress. There was no point asking anyone around, because there was no one there who could provide food. And there was no point bothering her husbands either. At the most, they could have gone hunting, but Durvasa did not eat meat.

She knew a curse from Durvasa would be disastrous for them. Twelve years plus one year in exile was already a big enough disaster. Durvasa may curse you for a hundred years. She called out to Krishna, "Oh Krishna, only you can save me! Do something. I don't want this sage to curse us now, when we are already down." Krishna had promised her earlier, "Whenever you call, I will be there." He appeared and Draupadi told him her plight, "Durvasa is here with his disciples. He is hungry. He will be back from his bath any minute. I have nothing to offer." Krishna said, "Why only Durvasa? I'm also hungry. Is there nothing at all?" She said, "Nothing." Then he said, "Show me the bowl."

At the time when the news of Durvasa's arrival reached her, Draupadi had just finished eating and was yet to go and wash the bowl. There was one tiny piece of a vegetable stuck to the bowl. Krishna took it and put it in his mouth. Draupadi said, "What are you doing, eating a leftover from me!" He closed his eyes and said, "Oh, I'm so full." She thought he was mocking her – eating a small, leftover piece of vegetable and saying he was full. She said, "Don't be so cruel. I'm already in great distress because these people are waiting and I have nothing to offer. And now you are doing this to me!" He said, "No, Panchali – I'm really very full," and he burped.

Down at the river, Durvasa and the people who accompanied him had finished their bath. They were supposed to come for lunch now, but they all suddenly felt overfull. They said, "We can't eat. We don't need food." "You cannot refuse our hospitality – please come." The Pandava brothers insisted, not knowing about the whole situation. Now, this was a problem – when someone is asking you to come for a meal, you cannot say "no." So they said, "We will come. You go – we will follow you." When the Pandavas went to the camp to make some arrangements, they saw Krishna. They said, "Krishna, when did you arrive?" He said, "Draupadi invited me for lunch, so I came." They said, "Durvasa and his disciples have come. They are also going to have lunch." Krishna said, "Please bring them." Nakula went to

look for them, but no one was there. They had all run away, because their stomachs were so full, and they could not come and say they will not eat.

In many situations, when things were about to really go off course, the Pandavas always got help in some form, which was nothing short of miraculous. When Krishna seemed to let everything happen, and things were going to spill out of control, course corrections were always done. People made judgments, "Why all this? Could you not have done something earlier? You could have avoided the whole situation. You could have made sure Durvasa lost his way, or something like that." But that is not how it works. You do not interfere with anything and everything. You let it run its course. Only when it is going beyond a certain point, you pitch in. Repeatedly, therefore, Krishna said, "I'm not here to continuously play the game for everyone. Everyone should play their own game. The only thing is that it should go where it needs to go. If it doesn't, some corrections will be made here and there. But I cannot interfere with your life at every point."

Grace does not mean you do not have a life to live. It does not mean you do not have to use your brains or your body. In fact, it means you have to use them much more than ever before, because you are working with a partner who is of a different nature. When you have a partner like that, you better work to the limit. Do not think that because you have a good partner, you can sit around – then he will not be your partner. It is so even if your partner is a human being. If you have a great partner, you will have to strive to do great things – otherwise you won't have a great partner.

This is the message that Krishna is constantly giving to them: "Yes, I'm there, but you have to do what you have to do." In the name of devotion, in the name of the Divine, people tend to become lazy, lethargic, and do not explore the full potential of who they are. So Krishna is constantly telling them, "It is your complete involvement in every aspect of life which is most important. I'm there, but you have to do what you have to do." The very Gita is just this. Arjuna is trying to throw up his hands and say to Krishna, "Why should I do it? Anyway you're there – just fix it." But Krishna said, "You have to do what you have to do. Especially because I'm there, you have to do more than you would normally do."

Mahabharat Episode 36: Pandavas Rescue Duryodhana

Life went on in the forest for the Pandavas. Duryodhana was very frustrated that his father had cancelled the hunt. Then Karna told him, "See, they are already vanquished – we don't have to go and kill them. If you kill them, you will spare them suffering. When a man is defeated, the worst thing that can happen to him is that the victor gets to strut around him. So let's go and strut around. Let's enjoy our victory; let them suffer their defeat. Let's just go visit them, express our sympathies and enjoy it. Why go and kill them?" So they came up with another plan.

Duryodhana went to his father and said, "Father, I think it's time we count our cows– this is part of pastoral societies – We have millions of heads of cattle, so they obviously cannot be kept in one place. So once in a way, we have to go out and count our cattle to see how much wealth we have." No one had any objection against cow counting. So Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and Dusshasana, along with their wives and a whole retinue, prepared to camp somewhere and count the cows. It was an outing for the whole family – work and pleasure. But of course, they wanted to count cows close to the forest.

They camped not far from where the Pandavas were. They had everything with them – cooks were cooking, women and children were there, they had music; all kinds of things were going on. Nakula, who was out in the forest, heard noises, came to the edge of the forest and looked at the Kaurava camp. He went back and reported what he had seen. Immediately, Bhima and Arjuna picked up their arms. They said, "They have not come just for fun. They have come to harm us. We have to be alert. Or the best thing is we take the offensive – we go finish them first." Yudhishtira said, "That is not our dharma. We have accepted to stay in the forest for twelve years – we will just do that. Our brothers might not have come to attack us. They have not done anything. Why should we assume that they will do this?"

In the evening, a Gandharva whose name was Chitrasena came with his retinue to the camp of the Kauravas, and a kind of altercation happened between them. The Gandharvas disarmed the Kauravas in no time. They killed a few soldiers and roped up everyone else except the women.

The news about this event went to the Pandavas. Immediately, four of the brothers burst into celebration. "I'm sure they came with evil intent." "They had something on their minds." "They got it – that's good." But Yudhishtira said, "We cannot allow this. They are our brothers. We must go and fight these Gandharvas because they have shamed our brothers."

Bhima was furious. "You're talking about shame? Do you know what shame is? Do you have anything like that in you?" Big arguments, but as the elder brother, Yudhishtira said, "No, go and release the Kauravas. Whoever the Gandharva may be – fight him." Bhima resisted vehemently; Arjuna also was not willing to go. Then Yudhishtira said, "What greater pleasure is there for a man than being magnanimous to his enemy? Go enjoy yourself! Why are you guys resisting what I am telling you?" Then they suddenly realized, "Yes, this is a great chance. We going and liberating them is going to be good!"

They went to save the Kauravas. As they got there, they found Duryodhana, Dusshasana, Karna, Shakuni, and many others, lying on the ground with their hands and legs bound. The Gandharvas were having fun, eating their food, and kicking them around. They had no respect for Kshatriyas (those who belong to the warrior class), because they did not belong to this land. Arjuna set out to fight with the Gandharvas and got into action in such a way that Chitrasena was defeated. Since Chitrasena lost the fight, before he went away, he gave Arjuna gifts. Later on, Chitrasena would become Arjuna's music and dance teacher at Indra's palace.

The Pandavas freed the Kauravas, cutting the binds from their hands and feet, looking at them with magnanimity. This was the most horrible moment for Duryodhana. After the Pandavas left, he cried bitterly. He said to Karna, "I don't want to live anymore! I want to die." Then he called Dusshasana and begged and urged him, "My brother, go back to Hastinapur. Become king in my place. Rule wisely, with Karna and Shakuni beside you. Always provide a sanctuary to your friends and be generous to your brahmins. Mix justice with mercy when you judge a crime. There is no one better to teach you discernment than our uncle Vidura. You go. I'm not coming. I'm done with this. I cannot live with this shame that my hands and legs were bound, and the Pandavas had to come and release me." Whatever they

said, he refused to go back to Hastinapur. He asked all of them to leave, and he stayed back alone on the bank of a lake.

Duryodhana acted like a madman. For more than a month, he raged around in the forest, screaming, yelling, wanting to die, not knowing how. Then he decided he wanted to leave his body. With whatever little sadhana he had learned, he crossed his legs and sat down praying. After a few days, his body started to deteriorate. Then a demon appeared. She was taller than the palm trees, and she said in a booming voice, "Narakasura's spirit has entered Karna, so don't bother. Whichever way, one day, Karna will kill Arjuna." Once Duryodhana heard this, suddenly, enthusiasm to live entered him again. He went back to Hastinapur.

In the fight with the Gandharvas, as always, Arjuna had been pure action. The way the Mahabharat described him is when Arjuna went into action, when he took the bow and arrow into his hands, he became like a blur. You could not see what his hands were doing – his action was so fast and so perfect. That was the only fulfillment he knew in life, when he was using his arms. Otherwise, Arjuna was a quiet man.

Mahabharat Episode 37: Arjuna's Astras

Draupadi Tries to Incite Yudhishtira

The Pandavas saw that they were having too many guests in their forest dwelling. Once people came to know that there was food and that the Pandavas were there, they started to visit them in big numbers. The place did not even feel like a jungle anymore – rather like an ill-equipped palace. So they decided to move further into the jungle. They moved to another forest called Dvaita Vana, which was between the rivers of Yamuna and Saraswati; an extraordinarily beautiful place, totally free from civilization. Once they moved into this much thicker forest range, and the little comfort and support of people coming every day, bringing gifts, was gone, Draupadi went into depression. And when she went into depression, it was better you not be around, because she would make sure everyone was in a deeper pit than herself.

Draupadi gave hell to Yudhishtira. She taunted him; she abused him; she harassed him in every

possible way. Whatever she did, Bhima would resonate the same and add to it. In many ways, Draupadi had Bhima wrapped around her little finger. Bhima was different compared to Arjuna. Bhima was a huge man, also very masculine, but not the hero kind. He was the hero's assistant kind. Whenever Draupadi wanted something done, she knew Yudhishtira would not do it, and the other brothers would also not do it without his permission. Unless Yudhishtira said so, they would not take a single step – that was their vow. But Bhima was so fond of Draupadi that he ignored the instructions and always did something for her. Many times, this put all the five or six at great risk. But whenever it was needed, she acted, and it worked out in the end.

So Draupadi and Bhima started working on Yudhishtira. They were trying to somehow make him so angry that he would gather an army and ride towards Hastinapur. Then Yudhishtira said, "No matter what, even if you leave me, I will not break my word – I said I will go into exile for twelve years, and that is what I will do." That kind of settled it, and Draupadi worked herself out of depression.

Arjuna Acquires Astras

After about six years of living in the forest exile with his brothers and Draupadi, Arjuna decided to go and equip himself for the coming war. Except for Yudhishtira, who still had trust in the Kauravas, the Pandavas had no illusions – they knew there would be war anyway. They knew that when their exile gets over, Duryodhana would not keep his word to give back what was rightfully theirs. So Arjuna said, "I want to go and do sadhana, to acquire astras." Astras are weapons that are empowered with occult powers. Arjuna went off and worshipped Varuna and got the Varunastra. Likewise, he went to various gods and sages, gathering blessings and astras. But his aim was to get the Pashupatastra from Shiva himself.

Arjuna went into the Himalayas and sat in meditation, trying to please Shiva. One day, after many days of sitting, he was very hungry, and he heard the grunt of a wild boar. He opened his eyes and saw the boar, picked up his bow and arrow, and effortlessly shot it. He got up and went close to the boar, and to his amazement, there were two arrows. Who shot the other arrow? A tribal man came with his wife and said, "Who are you, sitting

here like a sage but carrying a bow and arrow? This doesn't make sense. Anyway, I shot this boar first. Look, it is my arrow which has gone into the heart of the boar. The boar is mine." Arjuna said, "How dare you!" He had these big vanity issues – he was highborn, a Kshatriya, and believed he was the greatest archer.

Arjuna always thought he was a better archer than everyone else. He was competitive. No one should be better than him. And in case he saw someone better, he somehow tried to make sure that eventually he himself was better, even if that meant the removal of that person's thumb, as in the case of Ekalavya. This was his worst streak – everything else was absolutely noble in this man. Now he got into a kind of altercation with this tribal man, and they decided to duel. The duel of arrows ended in a tie. Then they decided to wrestle. They wrestled and the tribal man was more than a match for Arjuna and got him down. Then, not knowing what to do, Arjuna started to throw whatever he got a hold of at the man. In this effort, he pulled out a flowering plant and threw it. It hit the man, and he receded a little.

Arjuna knew that if this man came back again, he had nothing to defend himself with. Arjuna turned to the linga that he had been worshipping and doing his sadhana at. He bowed down to the linga and said, "Give me strength, Mahadeva. After all, I have been sitting here in anticipation of you. And who is this wild man from the forest, coming and putting me to shame?" Arjuna put a flower on the linga. As he turned back, he saw this same flower on top of the tribal man's head. Then Arjuna knew who he was, fell at his feet, and Shiva returned to his original form. Pleased with Arjuna, Shiva gave him the Pashupatastra. The Pashupatastra was the most powerful weapon in those days. Arjuna knew that armed with this astra, he could win the war.

Arjuna Stays With His Father Indra

Then Indra, Arjuna's father, came in a spacecraft and took Arjuna with him to his abode Amravati. Arjuna was very happy to be with his father for the first time. And his father was very proud of who his son was. They spent time together; they fought battles together, and Indra asked him to learn dance and music. Initially, Arjuna thought, "I am a warrior – why should I learn dance and music?" Indra told him, "Someday, it will be useful

for you. There is nothing wrong in learning dance and music and you will be a better warrior with a song in your heart and a little dance in your feet.” The Gandharvas who were with Indra were the best dancers and musicians. Arjuna got Chitrashana as his teacher and became an accomplished dancer and singer.

There was an apsara, a celestial being, in Indra’s kingdom whose name was Urvashi. She was described as the most beautiful feminine being anywhere in creation. Urvashi was the wife of King Pururava who, in the lineage, was a forefather of Arjuna. She saw Arjuna, desired him, and came to him as a woman. Arjuna bowed down to her and said, “As beautiful as you are, I see you as my mother because you are Pururava’s wife. I cannot see you as a woman.” Urvashi said, “These morals that you are talking about are for the humans. I am not a human being, so it doesn’t matter.” But Arjuna said, “I am human, so it matters to me, and I bow down to you as a mother.”

Urvashi felt insulted and cursed Arjuna, “May you become a eunuch! I’ve come to you as a woman. As a man, you have refused me, so you shall become a eunuch.” The macho man got cursed to be a eunuch. Completely distressed, Arjuna went to Indra. Indra pleaded with Urvashi, and she reduced the duration of the curse to one year.

Mahabharat Episode 38: Hanuman Teaches Bhima Some Humility

The twelve-year period was coming to a close and Arjuna is yet to come back. The four brothers were a little distressed. They had heard no news of him for over five years now. The whole family went up to the Himalayas, in search of him. There, they stayed in a hermitage in Badrinath, waiting for Arjuna or at least to hear some news about him. Then, sage Lomasa came and said, “Arjuna will be coming back shortly. His purpose of going there has been fulfilled.” They waited in anticipation. One day, Draupadi and Bhima took a walk in this beautiful forest. There, Draupadi saw a Sougandhika flower, which is also known as Brahma Kamal. If you have gone on the Himalayan trek, you might have seen this. This flower can be dried and preserved for a long time. Draupadi had never seen a flower like this before. Excited about

finding these flowers, she plucked a few. She saw there were more of them further away, but it was getting late and they had to go back. On the next day, Bhima went to get more of these flowers for her. In his enthusiasm, he went deep into the forest. There, an important incident happened.

In the Indian lore, “going to the forest” is a metaphor for going to a place of learning. What you cannot learn in a city or a university, you learn in a forest. Whether it is the Ramayan, the Mahabharat, or elsewhere, “going to the forest” is an enduring theme – to learn the ways of life. As Bhima was walking in the forest, he saw an old monkey sitting there, who had an extremely long tail, and it was in Bhima’s way. Now Bhima was a proud man. He expected everyone to make way for him. And in these twelve years of exile, after this shame that they went through, he also became an angry man. Earlier, he had been very bubbly and happy, but now he was angry. Being proud and angry makes you stupid – dangerous for others and dangerous for oneself.

When Bhima came and saw this monkey’s tail, he felt kind of insulted. Why was this monkey putting its tail in his way? He said, “Hey, monkey! Move your tail away.” In India, traditionally, people never cross somebody else’s limbs. It is not only considered inauspicious, there are actual reasons not to do that. So Bhima said, “Pull away your tail I want to go.” The monkey said, “I’m so old I don’t have the strength to lift my tail. Why don’t you do it for me?” Bhima said, “Okay.” He tried to lift it but was unable to do so. He could not believe it. This man was proud of his strength. He was always building his muscle. He thought he was the strongest man on the planet, empowered with the Naga elixir and everything. Now when he could not lift the tail of an old monkey, it was an insult he could not bear. He tried very hard with both hands but did not succeed. Then, he went down on his knees and asked, “If I can’t lift this tail, you’re not just a monkey. Who are you?” Then the monkey revealed that he was Hanuman.

Hanuman told him, “No matter how much strength you have, if you don’t have humility and devotion, you will fall.” This is what both Arjuna and Bhima lacked – everything else about them was good, but they were a little proud of who they were. They thought no one could beat them. Krishna was constantly reminding them that when it comes to the battlefield, it does not matter who you are – people who are standing on the other

side are not idiots. They are also capable. He repeatedly told Arjuna, "It is not the enemy's arrows which will kill you. If you don't shed your pride, it will kill you one day – you will die an unfortunate death." These two lessons – Arjuna's humiliation by Shiva and Bhima's humiliation by Hanuman were set up in such a way that the two got rid of this one flaw in them, so that they became perfect for the action that was being planned for them.

Mahabharat Episode 39: Yudhishtira Answers the Yaksha's Questions

On a certain day, when the Pandavas were out hunting in the forest, they got a little thirsty and tired. At that time, a Brahmana came running to them and said that for his worship, he had hung out some sacred grass to dry. A male deer passed by, the grass got caught in its antlers, and the buck ran away into the forest with the grass. He pleads with the Pandavas, "Please, somehow get this sacred grass for me, because it's time for my worship. I don't want to miss this worship. You're supposed to be brave Kshatriyas; you must help me."

Yudhishtira asks his brothers to go in different directions to search for the deer. They don't see the deer anywhere. At some point, they are exhausted and thirsty. Yudhishtira asks Nakula to go and look for water. At some point, Nakula comes to a pond. As he is about to drink from the water, a voice says, "Don't drink from this water before you answer my questions." Nakula ignores it, drinks the water, and falls dead.

When Nakula doesn't return, Yudhishtira sends Sahadeva to look for him. As Sahadeva comes near the pond, a voice says, "Wait! Do not drink from this water before answering my questions." Sahadeva says, "Let me quench my thirst first. Then I shall answer your questions." He drinks the water and falls dead. Now Yudhishtira senses that the two brothers are in danger, and he asks Bhima and Arjuna to look for them. They come to the pond. As they are about to drink from it, a voice says, "Wait! Do not drink from this water before answering my questions." Arjuna says, "Who are you? Show yourself." Bhima says, "Leave it, Arjuna. Let's drink the water." They both drink the water and fall dead.

When even Bhima and Arjuna don't return, Yudhishtira goes in search of them. Eventually, he comes to the pond and sees his brothers lying there, dead. He asks the pond, "Water! Are you the culprit? Are you the one who took my brothers' lives? Take mine too!" A voice says, "Stop! Do not drink the water before answering my questions." Yudhishtira asks, "Who are you? Where are you? Show yourself."

A Yaksha appears and says, "This pond belongs to me. Your brothers died because they drank from its waters before answering my questions. Do you wish to suffer the same fate?" Yudhishtira said, "I do not wish to take what does not belong to me. Ask me your questions, and I'll answer them as best as I can."

Question: What is more important than the earth itself? – Yudhishtira: One's mother.

Question: What is higher than heaven?
Yudhishtira: One's father.

Question: What is swifter than the wind?
Yudhishtira: The mind.

Question: More numerous than the blades of grass?
Yudhishtira: The thoughts in the mind.

Question: What is the highest sanctuary of dharma? – Yudhishtira: Liberality.

Question: What is the highest sanctuary of fame?
Yudhishtira: A gift.

Question: Of heaven?
Yudhishtira: The truth.

Question: What is the most praiseworthy thing of all? – Yudhishtira: Skill.

Question: The most valuable possession?
Yudhishtira: Knowledge.

Question: The greatest treasure?
Yudhishtira: Health.

Question: The greatest happiness?
Yudhishtira: Contentment.

Question: What is the highest dharma?

Yudhishtira: To injure none of the living.

Question: What must be controlled?

Yudhishtira: The mind.

Question: What must be renounced to make a man agreeable?

Yudhishtira: Pride.

Question: What must be renounced to make a man wealthy?

Yudhishtira: Desire.

Question: And what can be renounced without regret?

Yudhishtira: Anger.

Question: And what will be relinquished to gain happiness?

Yudhishtira: Greed.

Question: What makes the way?

Yudhishtira: The good make the way, indeed they are the way.

Question: Who is the ascetic?

Yudhishtira: He who remains faithful.

Question: What is true restraint?

Yudhishtira: That of the mind.

Question: And what is true forgiveness?

Yudhishtira: He who endures enmity truly forgives.

Question: What is real knowledge?

Yudhishtira: The knowledge of god.

Question: What is tranquility?

Yudhishtira: When the heart is still.

Question: What is mercy?

Yudhishtira: When one desires the happiness of all creatures.

Question: What is simplicity?

Yudhishtira: When the heart is tranquil.

Question: What is the invincible enemy?

Yudhishtira: Anger.

Question: What disease has no cure?

Yudhishtira: Covetousness.

Question: What is the honest man?

Yudhishtira: He who desires the happiness of all the living.

Question: And the dishonest one?

Yudhishtira: The one who has no mercy.

Question: What is ignorance?

Yudhishtira: Not knowing one's Dharma.

Question: What is pride?

Yudhishtira: When a man thinks that he's the one who is the doer of life.

Question: What is grief?

Yudhishtira: Only ignorance.

Question: How does a man become patient?

Yudhishtira: By subduing his senses.

Question: Which is the true ablution?

Yudhishtira: When the heart is washed clean.

Question: What is charity?

Yudhishtira: Protecting all creatures.

Question: What is wickedness?

Yudhishtira: Speaking ill of others.

Question: How is a man agreeable?

Yudhishtira: When he speaks agreeably.

Question: How does he get what he wants?

Yudhishtira: When he acts with discernment.

Question: And how do you find bliss in the next world?

Yudhishtira: By being virtuous in this one.

Question: What is truly amazing in this world?

Yudhishtira: The most amazing thing is, though humans are mortal, everybody goes about their life as if they are going to be here forever.

Question: What is the news? Who is the real man?

Yudhishtira: The word of one's good deeds reach heaven and is spread from there across the earth. As long as that word lasts, one is called a man.

Question: Who is he, Yudhishtira, who has every kind of wealth?

Yudhishtira: Only he to whom joy and sorrow, fortune and misfortune, past and future are all the same.

Yaksha: Yudhishtira, you are the wisest man in the world and the most righteous one too. I grant you a boon. Ask me for the life of any one of your brothers.

Yudhishtira (after pondering for a while): Give me Nakula.

Yaksha: I am surprised. I know Bhima is dearest to you among all your brothers. You depend on Arjuna to win the war that's coming. Yet, you choose Nakula's life over others. Why?

Yudhishtira: I have two mothers – Kunti and Madri. I, the son of Kunti, am alive. Surely, a son of Madri should also live.

Yaksha: Ah! You are a great soul indeed. Yudhishtira! I will never look upon another like you in all time. I grant you not just Nakula's life, but the life of all your brothers.

The Yaksha revived all the brothers.

The Yaksha was Dharma, Yudhishtira's father.

The significant aspect of this encounter with Yaksha is this: When Yudhishtira fell into the temptation of putting his brothers at stake during the game of dice, he put Nakula and Sahadeva at stake first. They were his stepbrothers – somewhere, he was ready to lose them. Now, after living in the forest, that wisdom blossomed in him that when it came to saving one of his brothers' life, he chose Nakula. "One of Kunti's sons – that's me; I'm here. One of Madri's sons should also live." What this incident is trying to convey is how the Pandavas went through a transformation by living in the forest. These twelve years of forest were not a curse. They made them into much better human beings, to later on become much better kings. This was all Krishna's game plan.

Mahabharat Episode 40: The Pandavas Go Incognito

The Significance of Twelve Years

Questioner: Sadhguru, both the Pandavas and Rama were exiled for twelve years. Is there any significance to the duration of twelve years?

Sadhguru: Twelve years is because that is the solar cycle. It takes twelve years for anything significant to happen in a man. It is true for women too, but a little less noticeable. Every twelve to twelve and a half years, everyone's life goes through a certain cycle. This is because of the solar cycles, which have a lot of influence on your physiology, your mind, your emotion, your energy, and your life situation. People are not aware enough to notice what is happening, because it is twelve years. In my life, I clearly know when the next twelve-year cycle is coming up. For anything significant to happen, you have to ride one cycle. That is why all sadhana was structured around twelve years. Whether you went to a Guru or you went to the forest, it was always for twelve years.

Today, people understand going to the forest as a punishment. It is not a punishment but a learning process. For the Pandavas and Draupadi, it was twelve years plus one more year, just to make sure they got the point. After the twelve years were over, they were supposed to spend one more year incognito. That meant they had to live somewhere in a civilized place, but they should not be discovered. It was very easy for them to be caught. Five regal looking men and a phenomenally beautiful woman – how can you hide such people? Wherever they were, they would stick out. This was the most challenging part. If they were discovered in this one year, they would have had to go into exile for another twelve years.

Crafting New Identities

The priest Dhaumya and the sage Lomasa, who were with them, planned out a strategy for the Pandavas and Draupadi on how to spend this last year without being discovered. As the thirteenth year was coming up, Duryodhana sent his spies to every country, to make sure that the moment they arrive, they would be discovered. He was quite confident that in one year's time, his spies would find them. The Pandavas and Draupadi could not remain in the forest – they had to be in a town. There were only two dozen cities, with populations of a few thousand people. Duryodhana's spies spread out everywhere, into every kingdom, waiting for the Pandavas to show up.

On the advice of the sages, the five brothers decided to go to Matsya, King Virata's kingdom.

When they came near the city, they disguised themselves in different ways. Yudhishtira disguised himself as a Brahmana. Bhima disguised himself as a cook. Arjuna disguised himself as a eunuch. He did not have to do much, because he had become one. Urvashi's curse came in handy at this point – Arjuna's masculine body had transformed, and it was easy for him to dress up like a woman. Nakula disguised himself as a horse caretaker, and Sahadeva as a cowherd. But it was difficult to disguise Draupadi. How to deglamorize her and take her into the town in such a way that she remains undiscovered? She dressed herself like a maid, but still, her royal bearing and her beauty could not be hidden. Everyone feared that she would be discovered. Moreover, she had a quick temper. If she got angry, people would immediately know it was Draupadi, because there was a certain flavor to her that was not common.

Outside the town, they sat down and discussed the plan, how they would go separately, one after another, with a few days' break in between. They decided to take different names. Yudhishtira called himself Kanka; Bhima called himself Bhalava; Arjuna became Brihanala; Nakula became Dhamagranthi; Sahadeva became Tantripala, and Draupadi became Sairandhri. In this disguise, they all moved into the court, one after the other. First Yudhishtira approached King Virata and offered his services to him. Yudhishtira's biggest dream was to play dice well one day. When he was in the forest, one day, he met a sage by the name Brihadashva, who gave him a secret mantra with which he could get whatever number he wanted on the dice. Now, armed with this mantra, he could win against anyone. Probably, he had a dream of winning against Shakuni someday. But now he went to Virata's kingdom. The dice game was such a passion in those days. There was not much other entertainment, except fighting.

King Virata saw the skill with which Yudhishtira could play dice. This was the best disguise for Yudhishtira, because the word had spread everywhere, what a horrible dice player he was. Now, no one would believe that he could do magic with dice. Had he been capable of that before, he would not have lost his kingdom. Yudhishtira settled into the royal court. Virata appreciated his intelligence and wisdom so much that he became an advisor to the king. Bhima also found his way into the king's kitchen. He was a great cook and became popular with the foodies in the palace.

Arjuna came and showed his skill as a dancer and a singer, which he had picked up in Amaravati, Indra's abode. With the gandharva Chitrasena as his teacher, he was a magical dancer and an exquisite singer. Because of that, he found his way into the harem, where Virata's daughter Uttaraa took him as her dance teacher. After the usual checkup, they found that he was really a eunuch, so they had no problem housing him in the harem. He had the body of a eunuch but the mind of a man. It took some time for him to settle down in the women's quarter, among hundreds of women. Nakula found his way into the king's stables.

It is said that Nakula was magical with horses. They had such a rapport that, suddenly, the king's stables rose to a different level altogether. The king immediately noticed that the way the horses were bred, the way they were taken care of, and the way they performed, and everything changed because of Nakula's relationship with the horses, because he was the son of an ashvin[Divine horseman, demi-god]. Sahadeva found his way to where the king's cattle herds were managed. He did miraculous things with the cows, and the herds grew. He caught thousands of wild cows and bulls and domesticated them. Virata's wealth grew in the form of cattle. And so, all the five found their places at the king's palace, but it was an explicit rule that they never contact each other.

Before they came into the city, they took their famed weapons with them, including Arjuna's Gandiva, bundled them up with a rotting dead body from the cremation grounds, tied it all up in an old carpet, and hung the bundle in a tree. Certain tribes had this practice that they did not bury or cremate their dead but hung them in trees for the birds to eat. People would see that it is a dead body, and no one would go near it. That was a kind of safety, so that their weapons would not get lost. Draupadi was the last one to enter the city. People saw this stunningly beautiful woman, dressed in tatters, walking on the street towards the palace. Men gathered around her and stared at her. A woman of this kind of beauty walking alone without a man seemed suspicious. They asked, "Who are you?" Draupadi did not speak. Then they started poking and pinching her. She was in trouble.

The queen, who was travelling towards the palace in a palanquin, saw Draupadi in distress and took her to the palace. The queen was amazed

that when she took Draupadi to the palace and looked at her, Draupadi looked like the queen, not her. The queen asked, "Who are you?" Draupadi said, "I'm a flower girl. I was doing hair and flowers for Draupadi. But since the Pandavas lost their kingdom, I have been unemployed. I am just wandering around. I have five Gandharvas as my husbands. They are gone to another land right now. And till they come back, I need some refuge. They will be back in a year's time." The queen saw the skill with which she could do the flowers and she let her do her hair, and she did wonders with it. She thought this was a great gift for her and kept Draupadi with her.

Mahabharat Episode 41: When Arjuna Single-Handedly Defeated the Kauravas

Life continued for the Pandavas and Draupadi during their time living undercover in King Virata's kingdom. Yudhishtira became very popular with the king. They were waiting for these twelve months to get over. By the eleventh month, Duryodhana was desperately trying to find the Pandavas and Draupadi. His spies could not produce any results, so he sent out his brothers to search for them everywhere. They tried to find out their whereabouts in all kinds of ways, asking astrologers, aghoris, and mystics to find out where they are. But it was upon Krishna's advice that the Pandavas and Draupadi had gone to Matsya, under the guidance of the sages Dhaumya and Lomasa. So they were under Krishna's protection. He assured them, "No matter what happens, you will not be discovered in that one year. Do not fear, just go and settle there."

Kichaka's Desire

In the eleventh month, a certain incident happened. One day, the queen's brother Kichaka set his eyes on Draupadi, the flower girl. He went mad with desire. When warriors came back from campaigns, they were in a certain mode, thinking they could grab anything they wanted. They were used to that. Wherever they went, in every kingdom they conquered, they grabbed the women they wanted. So when he came to see his sister, and he saw Draupadi, he instantly went crazy. He told his sister, "I want this girl." She tried to tell him, "It seems she has five Gandharva hus-

bands." He said, "Rubbish. If they come, I will make sure that she has no husbands – it is as simple as that." He was a battle-hardened man and he wanted her.

Initially, when the queen asked her to go to him, Draupadi said, "No." But later on, the queen insisted, "Take wine and go to Kichaka's quarters in the evening." Then Draupadi activated Bhima, though she was not supposed to contact anyone. She knew if she went to Yudhishtira, he would talk dharma. And, above all, if you do anything to Kichaka, the chances of being discovered were too high. Virata was the king of the Matsya kingdom only in name, because he had become old – almost seventy years of age. Kichaka was the real power. He was the one who controlled the army. If something happened to Kichaka, it would be serious trouble. So she went and instigated Bhima. She said, "I am not going to that man. Either you do something about it, or I am going to kill myself today."

Bhima Leaves His Mark

A secret rendezvous was arranged between Draupadi and Kichaka. But instead of Draupadi, Bhima came and killed him. It had been a long time – eleven months since he had killed anybody. He had done nothing but cooking, and now he was itching for action. So after Bhima killed Kichaka, he did not leave it at that but pushed Kichaka's arms and legs into his body with sheer brute force. At first, when the news spread, no one knew who killed Kichaka. When the queen said, "It must have been Draupadi's Gandharva husbands," everyone got scared of Draupadi, that she has some magical husbands who mysteriously came and killed someone like Kichaka. Since Kichaka was a strong man, people could not believe he could be killed like this, with bare hands.

When the news went to Duryodhana, he was alarmed. He asked, "How was he killed?" They said that each limb was pushed into the body. Then he said, "Only Bhima does that. It is his modus operandi." After killing somebody, he pushed the limbs into the body, because he is not satisfied killing – he has to do something more. So he said, "It is Bhima – let's go there."

The Kauravas Attack

Duryodhana, Dushasana, Karna, Bhishma, Drona, Kripacharya, all the stalwarts decided to ride there, along with a small battalion of the Kaurava army. They asked an allied king to steal Virata's cows, so that Virata would go chasing the cow thieves. They took away the cow herds in one direction. Virata and the whole army went there, chasing the thieves. None of them were in the city when the Kuru army came there. Just Virata's only son Uttara, who was about seventeen years of age, was at home with his sister, his friends, and all the women. When he realized the Kuru army was approaching, he said, "I will go and take them on single-handedly."

Only among the harem women was Uttara brave. He knew nothing about fighting. He had never been in a battlefield. Still, he thought he could beat the Kuru army and boast about it. But he needed a charioteer, and there was no one around. Then Arjuna came forth to volunteer, in the guise of Brihanala, a eunuch. Uttara said, "It would be a shame for me to be charioted by a eunuch. No, find a man as a charioteer." But there was no one else. Then Yudhishtira, who was Kanka now, came and said, "Take Brihanala – you'll have no problems. I know he is a great charioteer." So, Arjuna went as a charioteer, Uttara as the warrior, to face the Kuru army. When Uttara saw all these battle-hardened warriors standing there, he shook in his pants, and his heart sank into his footwear.

Arjuna Drops His Disguise

Uttara told Arjuna, "Let us turn back."

Arjuna replied, "Why turn back? We wanted to fight them. Let us fight!"

"No way! Turn back, immediately! I order you! Let us go back."

Arjuna said, "No." Uttara got off the chariot and started running. Arjuna chased him, caught hold of him, put him in the chariot, and said, "Wait." Arjuna took down his Gandiva (bow) and told Uttara, "I am Arjuna." Just then, the thirteenth year was over, according to the solar calendar. According to Duryodhana's calculations, there were still a few days left. At first, people could not recognize Arjuna. But then he came out as a warrior. When he strummed the Gandiva, it always made a particular sound that struck terror in people's

hearts. So when Arjuna strummed the Gandiva, people realized it was him.

Duryodhana was happy, thinking that now Arjuna was caught, and the Pandavas would have to go back into exile for twelve more years. Bhishma frowned and said, "You are ignorant of these things. The solar calendar gives them their freedom – the thirteenth year is over. That is the reason why Arjuna has appeared in front of us." Duryodhana said, "Nothing doing. We are Chandravamshis – we must follow the lunar calendar." Bhishma said, "We may be Chandravamshis by lineage, but on the battlefield, we belong to Surya, and that is the cycle we go by. That is the dharma in this land. You cannot change that now, simply because it does not work to your advantage."

Arjuna and the Kauravas Face Off

Then they went into battle. Arjuna told Uttara that his sister, a young girl of fifteen or sixteen years of age, had told him to convey the following message: "Brother, when you win the war, get the upper clothes of all the Kauravas for me. I want to use them to dress up my dolls." That was dangerous. When they went to battle, Uttara saw the magic of Arjuna's archery. Karna said, "Wait, I will finish him today. Whether it is twelve years, thirteen years, fourteen years – what does it matter." Arjuna gave him battle in such a way that he broke Karna's bow. Karna had to turn back and escape from the fight.

Arjuna used a weapon that made them all faint. After everyone fainted, Uttara went there, took the upper clothes of Duryodhana, Karna, Dushasana, and Ashwatthama – leaving out the elders – and went away. When they came to their consciousness, they discovered their upper clothes were gone. It was a matter of shame that someone came in the battlefield, took off your clothes and went away, and you could not do anything about it.

Completely shamed, they left. But Duryodhana was still arguing, according to which calendar or astrologer the years should be calculated. Bhishma said, "They went by the law. You have to keep your word." Duryodhana had always been determined, but now he expressed it: "It does not matter if it is thirteen years or fourteen years – I am not going to give back anything to them."

Mahabharat Episode 42: The Strongest Warrior in Mahabharat

A Last Push for Peace

The war was inevitable. A few last-ditch efforts were being made, though there was really no hope of peace. What individual human beings say or do at a time like this is the truest of them in their whole lives. In comfortable situations, people could make you believe all kinds of things. In an emergency situation or a moment of crisis, you will know who is who – who can take how much and to what extent they will go. Whether they like it or not, the situation will suck them in. That will produce a different kind of people. A crisis manufactures people. Those you thought are no good may stand up like giants; those you thought are great may whimper at the first moment – all kinds of things can happen. But it is in the pre-crisis situation, when crisis is inevitable, where you will actually see what someone is made of.

In the last peace negotiations, Yudhishtira said, “I have no wish to be the reason for this war. If everything else fails, I will accept just five towns to make peace. Let Duryodhana give me Indraprastha, Vrikaprastha, Jayanta, Varanavatha – these hold memories for us. The fifth one, let it even be a village of his choice.” Duryodhana said to his father Dhritarashtra, “Hear me clearly, my lord, and all of you: I will never return the kingdom to the Pandavas – not all of it, not five towns, not five villages. I will not even give them a needle-point of land.”

Draupadi said, “I want war! Krishna, I want war, and nothing else but war. A bloody war to avenge what I suffered on that terrible day, and for the thirteen years after. I want every Kaurava killed. The elders who sat by, not lifting a finger to help me when I begged them to – I want to see them dead. I know Yudhishtira has always been for peace, at any cost to himself and his family. But when I hear Bhima, Arjuna, and Nakula talking of peace today, I can hardly stand it. I want neither peace nor friendship with the Kauravas. If you love me at all, Krishna, if you ever felt sorry for what happened to me, make sure there is war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. I must see my enemies lying dead on the field as carrion for jackals and vultures.” That’s her.

Dhritarashtra sent Sanjaya to convey a message of peace to Yudhishtira: “My lord, you have

not heard the whole message I bring to you from the king: ‘Man’s life is brief, Yudhishtira. Why let it end in shame? Why allow yourself to be remembered as the Kuru who spilled the blood of his own kinsmen? Don’t lead your life into this war. That will be the end of you, regardless of whether you win or lose. What does an earthly kingdom count for anyway, Yudhishtira? For a man of dharma like you, it would be better to live on the kindness of Vrishnis and Andhakas or Yadavas than fight this war against your own blood.

“The desire for material possessions is what steals a man’s judgment from him. A man like you, a seeker of truth, should burn every vestige of desire in his heart. The longing for wealth and power is a shackle on the spirit, an obstacle on the path to salvation. Few men can renounce it – you are one of the few, Yudhishtira, prince of dharma. My last word to you is, give up your anger. Forget everything that happened and return to the forest. Spend the rest of your life in quest of nirvana, and win undying fame and joy for yourself. Or else, live with Krishna in Dwaraka; live off the alms of the Yadavas. They will see to your every need and comfort. You have walked the high road of dharma for so long – why leave it now for the alleyways of sin? I beg you, forget the bloodshed you are planning. Live in peace.”

Obviously, this effort towards peace was bound to fail. Inevitably, they hurled themselves towards war. It was decided they will fight the war on the field of Kurukshetra, where Parashurama, in the earlier generation, had slaughtered hundreds of Kshatriyas, creating pools of blood. The armies assembled. The Kauravas had eleven akshauhinis, or we could say battalions, in modern terminology. The Pandavas had seven. So the ratio was 7:11. In this war, two key people did not take sides: one was Rukmi, Rukmini’s brother; the other one was Balarama, Krishna’s brother. Because of their relationship with Krishna, they kept out of it.

Barbarik Loses His Head

A warrior from the south arrived on the battlefield. His name was Barbarik. No one had seen him before. With only three arrows in his quill, he came to battle. Krishna and others were there, and pre-battle preparations were underway. People asked him, “How come you have only three

arrows?" The warrior from the south said, "With one arrow, I can kill all the Kauravas. With one arrow, I can kill all the Pandavas. So, three is more than enough for me." When Krishna heard this boast, he said, "Why don't you show your skills?" He pointed to a banyan tree with thousands and thousands of leaves, and he said, "Let me see how many leaves you can pierce with a single arrow." With a single arrow that had the necessary occult empowerment, Barbarik pierced every leaf on the tree. And eventually, the arrow went down and hovered around Krishna's feet, under which was a fallen leaf – it was waiting to pierce that.

Krishna said, "That's very impressive. On whose side will you fight?" Barbarik said, "I will always fight on the losing side. From day to day, I will see – if the Kauravas are losing, I will fight for them. If the Pandavas are losing, I will fight for them. Anytime I see a particular army is losing, I will fight for them." Krishna saw that if this guy is on the other side, you should not win – that would be the formula for success. Because if this guy is on your side and you start winning, he will go and join the other side. So, Krishna said, "If I ask you for something, will you give it to me? I want you to remove the head of one warrior." Barbarik said, "For you, I will do it. Tell me who it is." Krishna went into his camp, brought a mirror, and held it in front of Barbarik.

Barbarik knew he was done in, but he had given his word. He made one request: "Yes, but I came all the way from the south to see this great war. The warrior that I am, I don't want to miss this spectacle." So Krishna said, "That's okay. You remove your head – I will see to it that your head can see and speak." Then Barbarik took his sword, removed his own head, held it by the hair, and gave it to Krishna before his body fell down. They placed the head on the battlefield, at a vantage point where he could see everything. And it so happened that when the war began, anytime he saw something cowardly, something funny, Barbarik would laugh so uproariously he would unnerve a lot of soldiers. Just his laughter would create such a disharmony.

Mahabharat Episode 43: The Worst Crime

Arjuna's Attempt to Bail Out

Just before the war, Arjuna suddenly has an urge for peace. Standing between the two armies, he says, "I don't want this. I cannot kill my grandfather, my Guru, my brothers, and my friends, just to have a kingdom. I will go back to the forest." That is when the eighteen chapters of the Gita are rendered, and Krishna gives the Vishwarupa Darshana. So Krishna is saying, "If you wanted to become a hermit, you should have become one before. Why did you get all these people to the battlefield? They came to fight for you. And now you want to go to the forest, while they will all die in the battle? You entered the battle. You cannot become a hermit now. Go! Either you kill or you die – you have to do one of these things." Krishna goes to the extent of saying, "This is my will; you have to do it."

The war begins. The Mahabharat describes the whole event arrow by arrow. We will not go into every detail. Bhishma is the commander or senapati of the Kauravas. Dhrishtadyumna, Drupada's son and Draupadi's brother is the commander of the Pandava forces. Krishna's Yadava army is on the side of the Kauravas, as promised, led by Kritavarma. Notice that in spite of all the bitterness, they still keep their word. When you promised to send the army, you send the army. You do not say, "You deceived me, so I will not send the army." That is the day and age in which they lived. I will not go into all the gory details of things that happened. Uttara, who, inspired by Arjuna, has become a great warrior, goes down on day one.

Enraged, his father Virata goes berserk, killing anybody who comes his way. The Kauravas suffer a phenomenal loss of men and material. Bhima is at his destructive best, and the Pandava army has a slight upper hand on the second day. This seesaw continues day by day, hour by hour. Sometimes one side is dominating, sometimes the other. But on certain days, when certain people went at it full force, a very large number of soldiers got decimated on the battlefield.

A Seesaw Battle Ensues

On day three, things happened in such a way that the Kauravas started gaining dramatically. Yudhishtira began to freak out a bit. There are

two aspects why you do not want a war: one thing is you do not want the violence; another thing is the fear of loss. When there is hope for victory, you do not mind a war. But when this hope dwindles, you do not want a war. When you know that you are going to be the victor, you say, "Let's finish the war." When you know you are going to lose, you want to withdraw.

The war goes on, and the Kauravas gain ground in a big way between the fifth and ninth day. Still, Bhima continues to kill Duryodhana's brothers, and every day, he tells Duryodhana how many of them he killed. Duryodhana's anguish and anger keeps building up with each day he counts how many brothers have died. And Dhritarashtra and Gandhari camp close by. Dhritarashtra wants to have a ringside view – like he had a ringside view of the dice game – hoping that his sons will win the war. Every time the dice were rolled, all he asked was, "Who won?" Though people were being led into total disaster, which would invariably lead to bloodshed after some time, the only thing Dhritarashtra was concerned about was, "Who won?".

Even now, at the battlefield, Dhritarashtra sits there with the same concern. Sanjaya describes every event to him. When the Kauravas face losses and the news reaches him, he suffers immensely. When they are doing a little better, Dhritarashtra becomes hopeful, but Sanjaya keeps reminding him, "Krishna is on the other side. Whatever games happen, in the end, they will win, they will win, they will win." Vidura and Sanjaya kept chanting this.

Hesitation, the Worst Crime

Along the way, many times, whenever he faces certain people from the other side – particularly Bhishma – Arjuna avoids going for the kill. How to fight a battle that way? You may not have seen a battle, but you have seen a cricket match at least. Let us say if you like the batsman, you bowl a slow ball – you cannot play a game like this. If you are at war and you are willing to kill one person from the other side but not the other – you cannot fight a battle like this. You cannot do anything like this. Krishna's fundamental teaching is not war. What he is saying is that without involvement, you cannot do anything. This is the beautiful thing about the Gita: Krishna is not saying compassion

or whatever else is the greatest thing – he is saying hesitation is the worst of all crimes.

Look back at your own life: if you decided to do something but then hesitate, in this hesitation you are avoiding life. This is the context in which Krishna spoke: when you hesitate, you miss life. Hesitation means you are neither here nor there. Krishna is saying, "Before you start such a huge situation, a major war, you hesitate. But once you start something, there is no looking back. Either you sail through or you die – that is all there is." This is not just with war but with lots of situations in life. You start something; halfway down, just because it is uncomfortable or unpleasant for you, you think you can drop it and go.

What Krishna is saying in this context does not look like any spiritual teaching, but it is the greatest teaching. He says, "Hesitation is the worst of all crimes, because when you hesitate, you are missing life." You are losing touch with life, because you are lost in your mind. Your opinions, your ideas, your emotions have taken over, and that does not allow you to function.

Krishna, the Strategic "Deserter"

On the spiritual path, it is a daily affair: "I will give my life to you, Sadhguru." Then I say, "Don't give your life; keep it, and keep it well. I will tell you how to put it to truly wonderful use, how to make it worthwhile for the life that you are." One day, they say, "I will give you my life," and the next day, they say, "Sadhguru, I don't like the food in the ashram. I can't." Or "No, Sadhguru. I was really committed, but you know what this person said?" I say, "Oh, they said something about you too? Is there anything that they have not said about me?" Anything that a man can do and cannot do has been said.

Kshatriyas called Krishna "Ranchor," which means "one who stole away from a battlefield," a coward, a deserter. Because when Jarasandha attacked Mathura from one side and another king from Afghanistan attacked from the west, Krishna saw there was no way to fight these two armies at the same time. So he took his people and went to Dwaraka to save them, because he thought there is no point in everyone getting killed. Let the city burn; let the people live somewhere else. So they went and created a great city somewhere else. Dwaraka became one of the richest and most prosperous cities of the day. For this move, Krish-

na got this title of a Ranchor, a deserter, which stuck to him all his life.

He did not withdraw out of hesitation; he withdrew because he knew that if he stayed there, all his people would die for nothing. Making a strategic decision in a war to do something is one thing. But if you are willing to kill one man, but you hesitate to kill the other, when both are wearing the same uniform – that is a different thing. In a way, it is the uniform that you kill, not the men. If you look into the life of the man who is in front of you, maybe there are so many wonderful things about him that you do not want to kill. If you look at the man – suppose you know his family, his wife and children – you cannot kill him. You are looking at the uniform, and you want less and less of that uniform standing – that is all a war is about.

Mahabharat Episode 44: Arjuna vs Karna – A Battle between Archrivals

Krishna Issues an Ultimatum

On the ninth day, Krishna says to Arjuna, “This is it – if you are not going to fight, I am going to fight.” Earlier, he gave the Kauravas his word that he will not fight. If he fights now, forever he will be seen as a man who did not keep his word. Still, Krishna says, “It does not matter what people think of me. Anyway, they already think I am a Ranchor, a coward, a thief, all kinds of things. Let them think one more thing.” He takes his Sudarshana Chakra and says, “I will finish the war today.” Then Arjuna says, “Don’t do this. Your name will be tainted forever. I will fight.”

As days passed, towards the eleventh or twelfth day, the armies became almost equal in number, because on the Kaurava side, the losses were much bigger. By the sixteenth day, the Pandava army seemed to be larger than the Kaurava army. But then, certain people went berserk, and they decimated both the armies quite drastically. Duryodhana became desperate. Karna took charge of the Kaurava army. Karna knows they are going to lose the overall battle. But for him, the only thing that really matters is to have the glory of ending a man’s life who is believed to be the greatest kshatriya ever – Arjuna.

Karna – All for Glory

Karna lives for glory, and he is willing to die for it. He only wants to kill Arjuna. He does not mind if he loses the battle; he knows Krishna will not let the Kauravas win. He knows that if the worst comes to the worst, Krishna will enter the battle himself and see that it is won by the Pandavas. By now, Karna knows that the Pandavas are his own brothers. Still, he wants glory. So one by one, he attacks the Pandava brothers. He defeats Yudhishtira, disarms him, and comes close to him.

When Yudhishtira stands in front of Karna unarmed, terrified, and ready to die, Karna pokes him on the chest with the tip of his bow and says, “I don’t think men like you should be fighting on a battlefield when I am here. It is best you go back to your wife. But maybe you can’t go back to your wife; maybe it is another brother’s time,” he taunts Yudhishtira. Then Karna defeats Bhima and taunts him, too. He says, “With all this muscle, what are you going to do? Like a bull, you have grown. If I want, I will take off your head. But what is the use of taking off the head of a child? Go.” To Nakula and Sahadeva, he does the same thing, because he promised that he will not kill them. He keeps his promise, but he wants to have the glory of defeating them.

Karna’s and Indra’s Barter

When Indra came and asked him for his kavacha or armor, Karna gave it to him – in spite of the sun-god’s warning not to do that. At that time, Indra was pleased with Karna’s sense of sacrifice. Because he promised it, even though he knew that it would be sure death if he removed his kavacha, Karna gave it away. At that time, Karna asked, “Give me your Shakti astra for the kavacha and kundala, so men will say, “Indra gave Karna his own ayudha in return for what he took from him. The Shakti will not save my life – that is doomed anyway. But I feel strange love for you, and I want to protect your reputation.

“Knowing fully well I am going into the battle; you are asking for my armor. This is the most dastardly thing. As the king of gods, you will lose your reputation. At least give me your Shakti astra so that people in the future will feel that Indra did some exchange. It will save your reputation.” The

man is always strutting with a certain glory about himself. Then Indra says to Karna, "Win or lose the war – it's a small matter. Today you have won immortal fame with the arms you gave me. I name you Vaikarhana for cutting your kavacha from your flesh. And men will say ever after that the greatest of all givers of arms was not Indra but Karna. As long as the world lives, Karna, your fame shall live in it," and that is all Karna wanted. Both of them got what they wanted.

Ghatotkacha's Occult Powers

Now the battle is on. Karna is without the kavacha, but he got the Shakti astra. With this one astra, he can kill Arjuna; he is saving it for Arjuna. He will end Arjuna, and then he will be quite powerless without the astra, and he will be killed by someone. Ghatotkacha, Bhima's son, is let loose. The nighttime rule was broken and fighting started at night. When they were fighting in the day, Ghatotkacha was just one more warrior. But in the night, his occult powers come to full flowering, and he is creating havoc. Ghatotkacha's occult powers are such that the Kaurava army does not even know which way to turn and fight, which direction to face, because illusory armies are all over the place, even in the sky.

It is a free run for the Pandavas; the situation turns into indiscriminate slaughter. Duryodhana looks at this and says, "This night, the Kaurava army will end." He tells Karna, "Use the Shakti; kill this giant." Karna hesitates because he is saving the Shakti astra for Arjuna. If he uses it up, his dream of killing Arjuna will be over. He hesitates. Suddenly, Duryodhana looks at him suspiciously and says, "What is the matter?" He always lives in this fear that maybe someone's loyalty has shifted.

Karna Kills Ghatotkacha

He questions Karna's loyalty. Karna says, "I have not come here to win the war; I have not come here to rule; I have not come here to get a kingdom. I have come here to die for you. I am not doing anything less than what I should do. If you insist, I will use the Shakti," and he uses the Shakti to bring down Ghatotkacha. Suddenly, all the occult powers are gone, and it is a normal battle once again.

Once Krishna comes to know Karna used up the Shakti, he tells Arjuna, "Tomorrow morning, you must get Karna. That's it. He is finished." So next day morning, they get Karna in a way that is not usually approved. But by then, nothing is approved or disapproved. Everyone is doing whatever they want. Karna is carrying the bondage of curses in his life. Parashurama had cursed him, "When you really need it, you will forget the mantras." And the brahmin whose cow was killed had cursed him, "When you are fighting a battle, in a moment of life or death, your chariot wheels will sink. And when you are helpless and unprotected as my cow was when you killed it, just like that, you will die."

Arjuna Defeats Karna

So Karna is fighting Arjuna; a lot of drama happens. Then Karna's wheel goes down. He comes down from the chariot and tries to get the wheel out. According to normal battle rules, in a situation like that, the opponents do not shoot at him; they wait for him to get back on the chariot. Karna says, "I am sure you are kshatriya enough not to shoot at me when I am down." Of course, Arjuna also thinks he is warrior enough to not shoot, and he waits. Krishna asks, "What are you waiting for?" "No, let him release his chariot wheel." Krishna's patience is running out. He says, "Kill him." Arjuna protests, "But he is unarmed." "It does not matter – kill him." Karna is trying to get his chariot wheel out. Krishna says, "Break the chariot." So Arjuna breaks the chariot.

Then Karna knows that they are going to fight even when he is down. So he picks up his bow. Krishna says, "Break his bow." Arjuna breaks it. Krishna says, "When he is standing totally unarmed, just take off his head." Arjuna takes off his head. So Karna goes down. A great man and a great tragedy and a great mistake, all his life. Not evil, just a big mistake he is. With him gone, Duryodhana loses heart. Karna was always his assurance.

The Last Battle

Duryodhana makes Shalya the commander. Shalya fights bravely, but Yudhishtira kills him on that day. Once that is done, the Pandava army is on a rampage, and the Kauravas are completely decimated. In the process, Pandava soldiers also

die in big numbers. Ashwatthama eliminates a large part of the Pandava army. Eighteen days of war are over. The five Pandavas are alive, Drishtadyumna is alive, the Pandava children are alive. Otherwise, everyone who is significant is dead.

All the Kauravas are dead except Duryodhana. Ashwatthama and Kripacharya are alive; most of the foot soldiers are either dead, or they left the battlefield. Seeing this indiscriminate, non-stop killing, seeing themselves killing indiscriminately, many of them lost heart or lost their mind – whichever way, they ran away.

Mahabharat Episode 45: Duryodhana vs. Bhima – The Final Fight Begins

After the War, Still Hostility

The war has ended. The Pandavas have won; Duryodhana leaves the camp. He is burning with the shame of being defeated. Vyasa described it as being like hot oil poured over Duryodhana's skin. Duryodhana goes to a place where there is a small pond, and he uses a certain capability he has to sit inside the cool water. He wants to quell the suffering he is going through; his body is burning like he is in hot oil, so he goes and sits underwater. Krishna says, "Duryodhana is still not dead, so the war is not over. Look for him." They go looking here, there – he is nowhere to be found. They sent spies all over the place, to nearby forests, caves, searching everywhere.

Then they find footsteps going into this pond and not coming out. The Pandavas arrive, and Bhima loudly shouts at Duryodhana, "Hey coward, what are you doing there underwater? Come." Duryodhana hears it, but he restrains himself; he knows this is not the time to burst out. Then they are all looking at what to do, because they cannot go underwater like him and do what he is doing. Krishna indicates to Bhima, "Just taunt him. You are the best person. Use whatever vulgarities you have in your vocabulary." So Bhima lets loose all the vulgar vocabulary that he has, insulting Duryodhana in many ways.

Duryodhana Burns Underwater

There is a beautiful piece of literature in Kannada, a poem that somehow stuck in my head. The

poet is saying Bhima's insults were such that Duryodhana started sweating inside the cold water. Unable to bear it, he comes out. Yudhishtira, being the king who won the war, steps up and says, "Duryodhana, you brought this war upon us. We did not want to fight, but unfortunately, you did not want to give what belongs to us. I even told you I just want five villages, but you said you will not even give me a needlepoint of land. We had to kill your brothers. We had to lose many people who are dear to us. Some of our children died; so many dear friends died. Now if I let you off, it will be a disgrace for you; you cannot bear it. So, you can duel any one of us with any weapon you choose. If you win, you can take back your kingdom."

Krishna looks heavenward. What to do with this man! Yudhishtira is such a good man. After having hundreds and thousands of people dead, he wants to hand over the fruit of the war. When Yudhishtira gave him the choice of weapon, Duryodhana immediately saw his chance. If he picks the mace, there is nobody who can fight him. Bhima believes he can beat him, but the truth is that he cannot. Bhima is stronger than Duryodhana, but he is a little bit of a lump. Duryodhana has been training in mace fighting every day, for years; when the Pandavas were walking the jungles, he was training. He is a very skillful mace fighter.

The Last Duel

Yudhishtira says, "The choice of weapon is yours." In this kind of extreme situation, he employs standard language, and he knows. He even says, "You can pick any one of us." If Duryodhana picks Nakula or Sahadeva, he will swat them like flies. But his pride will not allow him to pick Nakula or Sahadeva. He says, "The choice of weapon is mace, and of course I will choose Bhima, because it has always been my wish to kill this lump of a man that you call a brother."

Krishna rolls his eyeballs. The duel starts. Right from the first moment, Duryodhana has the upper hand, because during the war, a certain incident happened. Since Gandhari kept her eyes consciously closed for so long, she had acquired a certain amount of power within herself. When Gandhari saw, through Sanjaya's eyes, that this war could go any which way, she decided to use her power. She told Duryodhana, "Tonight you

come into my tent completely naked. I will look at you just once, and you will become indomitable; no one will be able to kill you. But you must come totally naked.”

Duryodhana, Tricked Again

Duryodhana had a dip in the river and was walking naked towards his mother’s tent. Krishna accosted him and said, “Oh Duryodhana, what is this? Like a child you are walking, but you are no child. I can see you are a grown up man.” Duryodhana covered himself. Krishna said, “Where are you heading? It looks like you are going towards your mother’s tent. Have you fallen this far that you’re going to your mother’s tent naked like this, a grown man,” he said mockingly. “No, my mother asked me to come like this; that’s why I am going.” “It doesn’t matter what she asked. She had her eyes covered all the time. She has not seen you. She thinks you are a baby. But you are a grown man, a king, a warrior. Don’t you have this much sense that in Arya dharma, we don’t stand naked in front of our mothers? At least cover yourself to the necessary extent.”

So Duryodhana cut a banana leaf, covered himself with it, and went to his mother. “Mother, I have come.” Gandhari untied her blindfold, opened her eyes and looked at him, and her heart sank. She let her power out, and then she asked, “Why did you cover yourself?” He said, “Mother, I thought it would be inappropriate to stand in front of you naked, so I covered myself with a leaf.” She shook her head, closed her eyes, tied the blindfold once again, and asked, “Who told you to cover yourself?” “Krishna.” Gandhari’s heart turned cold for Krishna. She waited for her opportunity to come.

The Skill to Kill

On the day of the duel, no matter what kind of blows Bhima strikes, Duryodhana again comes back. Duryodhana is not only protected, he is also more skillful than Bhima. Bhima is more powerful but Duryodhana is more skillful. Then, when it looks like for sure Bhima is going to die today, Duryodhana starts laughing. He is not only going to have the joy of killing Bhima, he is going to get back his kingdom. He is laughing, taunting Bhima. Duryodhana knows he can kill Bhima any mo-

ment. It is no more a fight – he is playing with Bhima.

Mahabharat Episode 46: The Feud’s Bloody Climax

The Blow Below the Belt

The other four brothers stood there, distraught. They realized what they thought to be victory was again defeat. Bhima looked at Krishna, and Krishna reminded him, “You have taken a vow to break Duryodhana’s thigh. Do it now!” But in a mace fight, hitting below the belt is not allowed. Below the belt is considered treachery. Bhima looked hesitant. Krishna just said, “Come on!” Duryodhana was now playing with Bhima, showing off his skills. He leapt up in the air to come down with a deathblow. Bhima took his mace and went down between Duryodhana’s legs. Shattered, Duryodhana fell, mortally wounded, and he said, “I did not think the Pandavas will sink so low that they will hit me below the belt in a duel.” Krishna said, “Don’t talk about dharma, not you. With you, there is no dharma.” But then Balarama came back.

Rukmi and Balarama did not participate in the war. Balarama went on a pilgrimage at the time of war. Now he picked up his mace to kill Bhima, because Bhima had broken the laws of mace fighting - and Balarama was a teacher of mace fighting for both of them.

Krishna stepped in and said, “Oh, now you are here to establish dharma? When you were needed, you went on a pilgrimage. Why did you come back now? When Panchali was pulled into the court by her hair, you did not get angry. When they tried to disrobe her, you did not get angry. When the Pandavas were sent to the forest after being cheated in the game, you did not get angry. And when they completed their full term of exile like fools – anyone else would have come back and attacked – after thirteen years, they were not given what was due to them, but you did not get angry. Now your favorite disciple is lying here with his manhood shattered, you are angry and you want to protect the dharma. Leave this place! Protecting the dharma is not your business, because you have never participated in that.”

Once Krishna took a stand like this, Balarama had no answer. Very angry, he promised

Duryodhana, “You will attain to heaven – this much I promise you,” and he left.

Bhima Thirsts for Blood

Then Bhima put his foot on Duryodhana’s head. This is the worst thing you can do. When your enemy is defeated, you treat him with respect. But now Bhima put his foot on Duryodhana’s head and wanted to drink his blood and eat his heart like he had done to Dushasana. He had killed Dushasana in the battle, opened his chest, taken his heart out, and eaten it. And he had taken Dushasana’s blood and had gone and smeared it on Draupadi’s hair. Only then had she started combing and tying her hair again. For thirteen long years, she had not tied her hair, because she had taken a vow. [After the infamous game of dice when Dushasana dragged Draupadi into the court assembly by her hair and attempted to disrobe her, Draupadi vowed to leave her hair loose until it was washed in his blood]

So when Bhima had a desire to do something like what he had done to Dushasana to Duryodhana as well, Yudhishtira interfered, “Don’t do this – this is not dharma. You can’t put your foot on a defeated enemy’s head. Stop it.” Krishna looked at him and said, “Yes, you cannot put your foot on his head, nor do you have to do anything else. Let us leave Duryodhana to his own ways. Let us not interfere.” That means they wanted him to die slowly. Actually, by law, they should have killed him. But Krishna said, “You don’t want Bhima to put his foot on his head. You are so concerned about dharma. So let us not interfere with Duryodhana’s life anymore,” and he took the Pandavas and went away.

The Kaurava Allies’ Last Attempt

Ashwatthama, Kritavarma, and Kripacharya, who survived the war, had escaped to the forest. They came down to the battlefield, found Duryodhana, and saw what happened. Ashwatthama was raging because the Pandavas had lied to his father about his death, and they had killed Dronacharya. He said, “We must do something.” While others fell asleep out of exhaustion, Ashwatthama sat there, thinking about what to do. When a man is filled with hatred, he has tremendous energy; he cannot sleep.

Ashwatthama wanted to somehow avenge his father’s death. Then he saw a night owl quietly flying in and attacking a crow’s nest. The little crow babies were trying to pop out of the nest, but the hunting owl ruthlessly killed all of them. In a few moments, the job was done. The whole family of crows was killed by the owl, without a sound. Have you seen an owl fly in the night? If it flies past you, except the wind, you will not hear a bit of sound – that silent it is. Ashwatthama watched this, and he thought this is the thing to do.

The Pandava Children’s Slaughter

It is a tradition that when someone wins the war, the victors will go and sleep in the camps of the losers. This is a way of establishing that they have won the war. Krishna told the Pandavas, “As per the dharma, we must sleep in the Kaurava camp. Come, let’s go and enjoy Duryodhana’s bedroom.” All the five Pandavas went there. The women and children were sleeping in the Pandava camp. Ashwatthama, Kritavarma, and Kripacharya sneaked into the Pandava camp. First thing is they stabbed Dhrishtadyumna, Drupada’s son who killed Dronacharya.

They thought the Pandavas were lying there, sleeping. Ashwatthama went and slit their throats and cut their heads off. The five heads in his hand, he came running to Duryodhana. Duryodhana was lying there in excruciating pain. But in the moonlight, he saw Ashwatthama coming with five heads in his hand, and joy spread through him. He thought Ashwatthama had killed the five Pandavas and brought their heads as an offering to him. Even Ashwatthama believed that he had killed the Pandavas, but then they saw it was the five children of the Pandavas and Draupadi. He had slit their throats, cut their heads off, and put them at Duryodhana’s feet.

Mahabharat Episode 47: The Ugly Aftermath of War

No End to Revenge

When they realized that they had killed the children, Duryodhana died, and Ashwatthama kind of loses his mind and goes and stays in some ashram.

Mahabharat Episode 48: The Truth About Krishna and Arjuna's Relationship

Kripacharya had said to Ashwatthama, "A warrior must be brave, but he must also be virtuous. You must remember that Duryodhana was no king of dharma himself. He was greedy and ruthless. He humiliated the Pandavas; he cheated them out of everything they owned and banished them for thirteen years. Still they sued for peace until the last moment, but Duryodhana was unrelenting. We must not take his death out of its context or forget everything he did to the sons of Pandu. As for the manner in which Bhima struck him down, it was only as he swore he would. Perhaps you are right that the mace fight was not the occasion to do it. But that is not cause enough for us to commit the crime you want to." Kripacharya tried to stop Ashwatthama but eventually still participated in it.

The Pandavas hear the wailing of the women in the early morning. Not knowing what happened, they come running to their camp to discover that all the five children had been killed in their sleep. No one had gone this far before. You do not kill a sleeping man, let alone children. For Draupadi, having won the war, having all her enemies killed, all she wanted has happened. But now her own five sons were dead. She screamed in rage once again, "I want Ashwatthama's head." Arjuna vowed to take his head, and they went for him.

Cutting off Ashwatthama's Gem

Arjuna went looking for Ashwatthama and found him. Ashwatthama always wore a magic jewel on his forehead. That was his power. When Arjuna and the other Pandavas went there to kill Ashwatthama, a rishi stepped in and said, "There is no need to kill a brahmana. This is not a battlefield. Killing a brahmana here will not be good for you." Arjuna decided it was better to cut the jewel off Ashwatthama's forehead, because without the jewel, Ashwatthama would be powerless, and he would lose his mind completely. They forcefully plucked the jewel off his forehead, brought it as an offering to Draupadi, and went back to Hastinapur.

What happens after the war, usually, in most places, is worse than the war itself. And that is what started unfolding.

Questioner: Sadhguru, you have likened Arjuna and Krishna's relationship to that of Nara/Narayana. Can you tell us more about that?

Sadhguru: This theme of Nara/Narayana manifests in many different ways. The significance of this is, even if God comes down to man's world, he needs man's assistance. Even if God lives in your home, he needs your assistance – otherwise it does not work. You may have Divine presence with you, but without your assistance, still it will not be fruitful. That is the message.

Different Names, One Concept

Nara/Narayana, in this combination, acted many times. Are Arjuna/Krishna the same people? Arjuna, we can say, is the same being. To some extent, the memory carries him and gives him a certain bone density which we call destiny. We will look at Krishna later because there is no such thing as Krishna. Krishna is like a wisp. That which is the basis of everything is manifesting itself in a certain way; it could dismantle itself anytime. In other words, Nara means the same source manifested in a more compulsive manner – Narayana means the same source manifested in a more conscious manner.

Because of the burden of consciousness, Narayana's own action gets limited. He chooses Nara who is a little more compulsive for action. The same theme reflects in other cultures – God and his Son acting in tandem. Nara/Narayana means just this – the same source manifesting on one level much more or absolutely consciously, on another level more compulsively. A compulsive life is capable of more action; a conscious life should not be very active. That is the symbolism.

Krishna comes as a charioteer; he does not fight; he is not in the action. When you commit the "crime" of being both conscious and action-bound, in many ways, you cripple yourself and limit the duration and scope of your life. So they acted in tandem. If Krishna himself chose to be action, then the scope and duration of who he is would come down. But in this life, the duration does not matter for him; he is only looking at the scope.

Action – Yes, Fruit – No

Only the human mind and the human body are individual. So here, the “something more” which is beyond body and mind, is universal and comes in the form of Krishna/Narayana. That “something more” always travels with Arjuna/Nara. Krishna says, “O Arjuna, I am bound to you. I will be with you every moment of your life, in everything you do. Leave it to me. Don’t hesitate, just act.” You need to understand the intelligence behind such words. The normal understanding would be, “Oh, Krishna said, ‘Leave it to me,’ so I will leave it and sleep.” If I tell someone, “Don’t worry, I’ll take care,” the idiots won’t do anything.

When Krishna says, “Leave it to me and act,” he is only saying, “Leave the results to me. Don’t leave the action to me. The action is still yours. If you were to leave the action to me, you wouldn’t exist. I would act myself – why would I need you? Leave the fruit of action to me – you keep the action.” It is very important that you understand this and are conscious of it every moment of your life – that the action is yours, but the fruit of action is not yours. There are many forces beyond your understanding, perception, and imagination. In this galaxy, the solar system, and the Earth as a planet are just specks.

Pure Action versus Consciousness

The forces that are acting upon this planet right now are not in your perception. Some force in this galaxy may do something – you may disappear, the planet may disappear, the solar system may disappear, the very galaxy may disappear. Even the galaxy is a small happening in the cosmos. That is why when the yaksha asked, “What is the most amazing thing?” Yudhishtira said, “The most amazing thing is, though humans are mortal, they think they are forever and they are everything.” Ignorance is the most amazing thing. People manage to remain ignorant, no matter how many times you remind them.

So Arjuna is pure action. Krishna is consciousness. Krishna goes on reminding his “action tool” Arjuna that this is the way, but the action tool begins to think it is by itself. You popped out of this planet from nowhere, and you will go back one day, but you think you are a complete world by yourself. In your perception, the cosmos cannot exist without you. When you sleep, hasn’t the cosmos evaporated?

The Only Way Out

Right now, you exist, and you are in this chakra-vyuha, a wheel trap. You don’t know how you got into it; for sure you don’t know how to get out of it. But if you cease to exist, you are out. Suppose you are sitting in a hall; all doors are locked; you do not know how to get out. But if you just evaporated, you are out. You are neither inside nor outside, but you are out. So we divined how to cease to exist. That is why whatever action is fine, but when they want to go beyond that, everyone looks at Shiva.

Krishna did not start a single day of his life without worshiping his personal linga that he carried with him always. No matter what, no matter where he was, even in the eighteen days of the battle, though everyone sees him as God, Krishna always worshipped the linga before he started his day. Because the only way out is to cease to exist. Shiva means that which is not. That which is not is the only thing that can be free from everything. That which is, is bound to be in some kind of a trap.

That which is, is bound to be in some kind of a wheel, some chakkar, some kind of spin is going on all the time. No matter what you do, you spin out of one chakkar and spin into another chakkar, endlessly. Whether you like it or not, you are a part of it. For example, if dirty politics are going on in the country, whether you like it or not, you are a part of it. If it spins out of control, it will suck you in. “We are sitting at the Velliangiri Hills; we are not concerned about all the nonsense that happens outside” – that is not true. If it spins out of control, it will suck you in. Anyway you are part of some chakkar, consciously or unconsciously. Better to be there consciously. The only way to come out of all chakkars is to cease to exist.

A Living Formula

Every day, even Krishna reminds himself that Shiva is the way. To cease to exist is the way. The kaya (body) will anyway die; it will anyway cease to exist; the earth will absorb it. Whether you are a Yudhishtira, a Duryodhana, or a Krishna – the earth will absorb you. The kaya is not the problem; the other aspect of who you are is the problem. To make that cease to exist is the whole game. That is the fundamental formula that Krishna is trying to give out. It is not like a teaching. He is making his life into a formula, to make that

which is beyond the body cease to exist, because that is the only way you can be free.

Mahabharat Episode 49: The Real Reason Gandhari Chose To Be Blindfolded

Questioner: Pranam, Sadhguru. My question has to do with that aspect of dharma which a person decides for his ultimate liberation – when Bhishma decides Brahmacharya, or Karna decides friendship, and Gandhari decides being an ardhangani as a method to reach one's ultimate nature. On what basis does one decide this?

Sadhguru: When Bhishma takes the vow, he does so out of attachment and awe for his father. But once he has taken the vow, he uses that as his ultimate goal, because as a Kshatriya, he cannot go back on his word. Taking a vow like that is not the best way to seek your ultimate wellbeing. But now that he is committed to it, he is using it towards his ultimate wellbeing. Gandhari did not choose to marry Dhritarashtra. Only after she came to Hastinapur, did she realize that her husband was blind. When she realized that, she chose to close her eyes for many things.

Suppose, as a young woman, your marriage is fixed, and you go there and realize your husband is blind. It was a big shock. Above all, if you go a little further back, her horoscope says, "Whoever marries her will die in three months' time." She would have gone through many things when her parents and brothers knew they could not get her married. Especially in a family like that, when you have brothers like Shakuni, many unpleasant things would have happened.

Then the humiliation of marrying a goat, then killing your "husband," then deceiving the next husband by not telling him that you were married earlier, and then going there and realizing he is actually blind. If you look at it, what all this does to your mind is not a small thing. In today's society, you are educated. You can say, "To hell with this marriage – I'll go and work somewhere." This was not the situation back then. Five thousand years ago, either you got married and made your life, or you had no life.

Above all, living with a blind man means you will have to do everything for him. But if you are blind, everyone will do everything for you. Mark Twain

said this: "Never learn to do anything: If you don't learn, you'll always find someone else to do it for you." Being a queen, everything gets taken care of for Gandhari. I am not trying to ridicule the whole thing. These are the many things she thought of. Human mind considers everything. No one is innocent of that.

Another aspect is when you have consciously chosen to be blind, the greatness that comes with it is unbelievable. Such a tremendous sacrifice! Every moment of your life, people will say, "Wow! What a woman! She lives blind for her husband." If you are a sensible woman and you love the man, if you have sense in your head and love in your heart, you should be his eyes. But she took the other route, because there is personal glory in sacrifice. There is no personal glory in getting up every day in the morning and doing what is needed. But there is personal glory in tying a strip around your eyes. Now both of them have to be helped.

And once you take a public vow, you cannot go back on it. As a queen, even in your bathroom, you cannot take off the blindfold, because helpers are waiting everywhere for you. If you were a private person, at least in the bathroom, you could have taken it off and danced. Considering all this, she took that step. Once you have taken such a step, however bad it may be, initially, you will crib; you will struggle; you will be depressed; you will fight. But once you realize there is no way out of it, you will see how to make the best out of it. Because the intelligence always kicks in to somehow make the best out of it.

She thought, "Anyway I have chosen to be blind – let me use my blindness for my wellbeing." That is not even a thought – life naturally moves in that direction. If that level of intelligence to reconcile with life was not there in a human being, every human being would have a broken mind by now.

Mahabharat Episode 50: Who Decided The Course Of The Kurukshetra War?

Questioner: Sadhguru, how could Duryodhana tell Bhishma, "Krishna is only a cowherd. What can he do?" Especially after both he and Karna were single-handedly defeated by Krishna when they tried to capture him, and Krishna demonstrated that he is much greater than they thought?

Sadhguru: It is like after participating in a Bhava Spandana or a Samyama program, people say things like, “Sadhguruuu!!! You are everything. You are bigger than Shiva!” But after fifteen days, one month, six months, or a year, some of them will say that I am the most horrible creature on the planet. I am not shocked, because I have seen too much of it. It is only when people whom you took into an inner circle do it, it hurts a bit.

Had Arjuna said this, probably Krishna would have retired. When Duryodhana says it, it is okay with Krishna. He does not expect anything else from Duryodhana. People say all kinds of things. Sometimes, the same people who crawled at your feet and said you are God, turn negative at some point, or even become deadly enemies. But when Duryodhana, Dushasana, and Karna say that, Krishna is not bothered – he continues to go about his life and action. But in case Arjuna had said it, then he would have left. He would not have furthered action.

That is the nature of existence: It is always moving you. You just have to position yourself right so that you will move in the right direction. The worst curse would be if it left you stagnant. If it was a stagnant pool of water and you had to keep swimming all the time, it would be too strenuous. But it is moving you; you just have to position yourself right. That is all the Pandavas did. They positioned themselves right, so their lives moved in one direction. The Kauravas positioned themselves in a different way – their lives moved in a different direction. What you are aligned with determines everything.

After Dronacharya was killed, Arjuna was raging, because now Karna was going to be the commander, and Arjuna wants to kill him. All these days, Krishna was in a way pampering and baby-sitting Arjuna, but now Krishna said, “Arjuna, you know you are not the greatest archer. Any day, with eyes closed, Karna will be better than you.” Arjuna was shocked, “Krishna, you are saying this to me!” Krishna said, “I am telling you the truth. Tomorrow, you are going to battle with that man, so you better know the truth.”

“I want you to know he is a better archer than you any day. He has Indra’s Shakti and a few other astras with him. If Indra had not taken Karna’s kavacham (armor) and his kundalas (earrings), he could have defeated and killed you. Karna could defeat Indra himself and kill him. Not just Indra, he could also defeat and kill me if he

had his kavacha and kundalas. These two things were taken from him for your sake. But still, do not believe you are superior to him – you are not. As long as the Shakti is in his hands, he will kill you effortlessly.”

Arjuna was completely disillusioned. He had always been walking around with this aura of being the greatest warrior on the planet. Krishna said, “You are absolutely not the greatest archer.” And after the war was over, the few Pandava soldiers who were left wanted to know who had been the greatest warrior in this war. They asked Krishna, “Who was the best warrior in this battle, these eighteen days of absolute brutality and slaughter?” Krishna laughed and he said, “Why don’t you ask Barbarik? He had a gallery view. I have been into so many situations; I would have definitely missed something. Ask Barbarik; he will know.”

As you probably know, Barbarik’s head sat on top of the hill and watched the whole battle. They went to him and asked, “Who was the greatest warrior? Who was the determining factor?” Barbarik said, “It was neither Arjuna, Karna, Bhishma, Drona, Ashwatthama, Dhrishtadyumna, the Pandavas nor the Kauravas who decided the course of this war. It was Vishnu in a deceptive form. It is the Sudarshana Chakra which caused the slaughter and which won the war. From this vantage point, I could not see anyone kill anyone. I only saw the Sudarshana Chakra going around and doing all the killing.” That was the gallery view.

The symbolism is that if you are a little above the situation, you will see it clearly. One who is above the situation always notices things better than people who are in the thick of life. That is why they say, “Be a witness to your own life.” If you are above, you would see it clearly. If you are in it, you could easily get lost in the turmoil of the situation.

Mahabharat Episode 51: Krishna – Avatar or Bhagavan?

Questioner: What is the distinction between an avatar and a bhagavan? What is Krishna, really?

Sadhguru: In the traditions of this culture, whatever they do, whether they are fighting a battle, killing for food, cooking or living in a family – they repeatedly talk about dharma and karma.

In this culture, mukti is the only goal. That is the reason why they are continuously debating about what the right or wrong action is. If you simply look at the physical situation, any street-smart kid will know what the right thing to do is in a given situation. The debate about dharma is just this: to see if the situation on the street and your journey towards the ultimate match.

Whenever someone figures out how to perform or initiate action in such a way that it will naturally lead to that goal, that being is referred to as avatar. Avatar literally means manifestation. A manifestation of what? Every creature is a manifestation of the Creator. You, a tree, and an ant are all manifestations of the Creator. In order to act like one, you need to be conscious to a point where you have access to the possibilities of being a Creator. Once people recognize that a being has this access, they call him bhagavan.

Common people may refer to someone as bhagavan out of emotion. If a qualified person, a rishi or a sage, someone who is in a certain state of knowing, refers to someone as "bhagavan," it means this being found access to the possibilities and the ways of the Creator. A bhagavan will simply sit and bless; he will not teach. If that same person moves into a semi-active state where sometimes he is like the Creator, sometimes he is a very ordinary down-to-earth man, then they refer to him as avatar.

Avatar means he is a manifestation of the Creator, but he is not living like that every moment. He has come down by choice to make the process a little more accessible to people around. An avatar will come down and teach, eat, and do things – he is a manifestation who is consciously coming down and going up as is required. So technically, the word "avatar" is a correct description of Krishna, when he comes down. But the moment people see him as Vishwaroopa, they will say Bhagavan Krishna.

Mahabharat Episode 52: How Do Souls Multiply?

Questioner: During the time of Mahabharat, there were thousands of people in the armies. Today, human population has multiplied and there are seven billion people on the planet. Could you

explore the phenomenon of old and new souls, and where these new beings are coming from?

Sadhguru: Where do all the new souls come from? You need to understand, as your body is a physical thing, your mind is also a physical thing. Because your body and mind are physical things and your experience is limited to physical things, you always think in terms of when it began and when it will end. All physical things inevitably have a beginning and an end. But when you say the word "soul," which is so loosely used today, we are not talking about a physical thing. I never use this word, but let us say we use the word "soul" to describe the non-physical dimension of who you are. That which is non-physical does not have a beginning and an end. That which is non-physical means that which does not exist, because your idea of existence is purely physical. That which is not physical, you call it empty space.

That which does not exist or that which is not cannot have a beginning. If it does not have a beginning, it cannot be old or new. Such things do not apply. It is like, let's say you have a weighing machine. You stood on it and you saw your perfect weight, as prescribed in the fitness books. Then you wanted to check how Mother Earth is doing, so you turned the weighing scale upside down. Technically, the planet was sitting on the weighing scale. You know why they do shirshasana (headstand) – because they want to feel like they are carrying the planet on their head. If you take a picture of someone in shirshasana from a certain distance and turn it around, you will have a man carrying a planet on his head. So, if you turn the weighing scale around and look at the weight, you will get the weight of the weighing scale, but you will not get the weight of the planet.

Right now, it is like that: through your mind, you are trying to understand that which is not physical. It is like trying to measure the weight of the planet with your weighing scale. If you stand on it, it shows you perfect weight, but if you make Mother Earth sit on it, it does not work, because that is not how it works. So, once you utter the word "soul," do not talk about quantity. Quantity and non-physical nature cannot go together. Quantities are about the physical. How old, how many, how big, how small – all these things are concerned with the physicality of existence, not with the non-physical. So anyway, if someone asks you such a question, do not be bowled over. Just

ask them, “Do you know the insect population has gone down?” That is Sahadeva’s wisdom.

Mahabharat Episode 53: Little-Known Southern Influences

Questioner: Sadhguru, you said Barbarik came from the South, and that the southern mysticism had a big influence in the war. Could you elaborate on that?

Sadhguru: Barbarik showed his skill. But fortunately for the Pandavas, he could not use his skill in the war. Krishna immediately recognized that this guy can destroy. He came with such confidence, only carrying three arrows, because he was dead sure these three could handle the whole world. And he was not willing to fight for just anyone – he would fight for the losing side. He liked the game of war, because he was sure he would win.

Southern mysticism played out big time. Because of Ghatotkacha’s occult power, Karna lost the Shakti [the powerful weapon that Karna could only use once]. Had Karna still had the Shakti, for sure Arjuna would have died. Krishna actually said Karna could even kill him. So southern mysticism was the deciding factor in the war. There are stories about how Ghatotkacha’s mother Hidimbi was worshipping a goddess and even doing human sacrifice to acquire powers, which is part of her culture. She was from the South.

And the food was supplied by the Udupi king. There was a lot of support from the South, but the battle was essentially about the northern kings. It was they who were fighting. But the southern warriors did not want to miss the action. They went to see it; if not fight at least see how it happens. Even after Barbarik took off his own head, with Krishna’s blessing, he still saw the whole war, had a perfect understanding of what happened there, and spoke about it.

Southern influences quietly played a role.

Mahabharat Episode 54: Dharma – An Absolute or Relative Truth?

Yudhishtira: Righteousness above All Else

Questioner: Sadhguru, you said that people followed Yudhishtira because he is the king and seen as the manifestation of godliness. But why are people still following him after he made some crazy decisions? And how come Krishna does not intervene, or how come he does not ask Krishna for advice?

Sadhguru: You think they are crazy decisions? That is a very bad judgment on Yudhishtira. Yudhishtira is going by the law. He does not want to tell a lie; he does not want to break the law. And he says, “I don’t even want to be a king.” There is nothing wrong with that. Had he always been aspiring to be a king at any cost, and then he did not want to do it, you could say he is crazy or stupid. But if he says, “I don’t even want to be the king. I just want to be truthful,” is he not a great guy?

There is nothing wrong with the man. But because he is trapped in the compulsions of a certain action, he is made to look stupid, because the situations are propelled by a predetermined force, and he does not understand where it is going. He is just trying to be a righteous man, and he does not fit in properly. That is all his problem is. He did not make crazy decisions; he made decisions that were honored in those days. Even today, if someone gives you something that is valuable to them, you will look at them with a certain regard, respect, and reverence. Everyone looked at him with that same reverence, respect, and regard. Because they had their own compulsions, they raged against him, but they knew he was right in many ways. He was trying to follow what is written in the scriptures to whatever extent was possible for him.

Krishna’s Take on Dharma

Questioner: Sadhguru, when Duryodhana and Arjuna went to Krishna to request his alliance, Krishna sent his army, the group of people who relied on him completely, to fight alongside Duryodhana, the side which he knew for sure was going to be defeated. What is his dharma as a king?

Sadhguru: His dharma is the dharma of being practical. Dharma can be seen as an ancient law, or it can be viewed according to the current situation. You need to understand this before you make judgments. Each of these characters exists within you and depending on the situation it can be decided which one should be enhanced in you. The Duryodhana in you, the Arjuna in you, the Yudhishtira in you, the Karna in you, or the Krishna in you – which one should be brought forth. Do not go about making judgments. Someone who looks like a fool may come out as the winner in the end. Someone who looks evil comes out as divine in the end. Someone who seems to be righteous, comes out all wrong. It happens every day with our lives.

You must see what Krishna's stake is in the whole thing – he has nothing to lose, nothing to gain. He has a prosperous kingdom of his own; he could happily live there. When the Pandavas talk as if Krishna is their property, Krishna reminds them, "I love Duryodhana and his brothers as much as I love you, but I am standing with you because you are truthful, and only as long as you are truthful. I am not standing with you because I hate them and love you."

Now your question is, "He is the one who is telling them not to be truthful." Truth is not a verbal thing; truth is an existential thing. For example, in the last few days, there was a series of bombings across the world, but there were no fatalities. Ideally, they want to bomb a place where there is maximum human concentration, so they can cause maximum damage. This Mahabharat program would be a great target in that sense, because there is a high concentration of human beings here. When such an opportunity is there, if they ask, "Is the Adiyogi Alayam [hall in the Isha Yoga Center] full of people," what should I tell them? The truth? The ultimate truth is to act out of your inclusiveness.

The question is, are you acting out of your inclusiveness or are you acting out of your exclusiveness? That is what Krishna's dharma is about. If your intention and actions are towards a larger wellbeing, Krishna is with you. If your intention and action are towards your exclusive wellbeing, he is not with you. That is the statement he is making. Whatever happens, he is constantly trying to push it towards inclusiveness. If anyone comes in the way, he is willing to do whatever is needed.

Whatever morality you may have, ultimately, when things come to a crux in your life, this is what everyone will do. If someone stands in the way of your wellbeing, you will talk to them; you will try to shake hands with them; you will try to restrict them; you will do whatever you can. If nothing works and they still stand in your way, what will you do? You will remove them. Krishna has no qualms about stating the truth. You will also do that, but you do not have the courage to admit it now.

Even in the most hopeless situation, Krishna personally makes a journey from King Virata's city back to Hastinapur. In those days, to make such a journey of four hundred, five hundred kilometers, you have to be super determined towards your purpose – otherwise, you would not have made it. When Duryodhana clearly says he will not give even a needlepoint worth of land and they are hopelessly determined to fight, still Krishna goes there, risking his life.

Had Krishna been a simple man, they would have captured him. Getting killed was considered better than getting captured by Duryodhana. But he takes the risk, goes there, and still sues for peace. Though he knows they are hopelessly determined, he still tries to do his best. But when all attempts to sue for peace fail, he is willing to do what he has to do, unwaveringly. Others also want to do that, but they lack the necessary determination to fulfill what needs to be done, because they are more concerned about their own thoughts and emotions.

Mahabharat Episode 55: The Age-Old Caste System – Discrimination from the Start?

Questioner: Sadhguru, earlier, there were separate categories for different people, such as Brahmins and Kshatriyas, but in modern times, this system has been abolished. Is it still appropriate or possible today to go by the Manu Dharma that was followed in the Mahabharat period?

Sadhguru: The old caste system has broken down today but there is a new kind of caste system. Today the world is driven by the economic engine – money determines what class or "caste" you belong to. When Marx talked about the proletariat and bourgeoisie, he described a kind of

caste system. Because the world is driven by the economic engine today, everything is dictated by economics.

No one ascribes to any other philosophy or ideology in the world anymore. People are talking about economics as if it is a philosophy. How to count your money has become the philosophy of life. You can see how the discourse in the newspapers, in magazines, and on television has changed in the last ten or fifteen years in the world: there is no talk about anything other than economics. This is the capitalistic way of living. It looks like it brings prosperity, and it definitely does in the beginning, but if we do not temper it, we are heading for disaster.

At one point, Krishna speaks about the Kshatriyas, saying that you have to either transform them or put an end to their clan. He says that Mother Earth is like a cow, which gives life. He compares her to a cow because he hails from a pastoral society, where the harbinger of life is the cow. If you have a cow in your house, your children will not die – this was the simple wisdom of those days. He said that the Kshatriyas were squeezing the cow's udder to a point where it was hurting the cow.

All these things are completely gone now. Suppose you lived in a village twenty-five years ago. If someone wanted to milk the cow, first he would let the calf drink something. Then he would milk the cow, and in the end, he left some milk for the calf, so that it could again go and drink after the milking was over. Today, you have a machine that sucks everything out of the cow. And if the calf is male, it is killed instantly; if it is female, it is raised somewhere else. We are definitely milking the cow to the extent that it hurts not just the cow but Mother Earth too.

Krishna spoke like an environmentalist five thousand years ago. He said, "They are milking it too hard. If they get the opportunity, they would like to have more and more. Either we must transform them and they should turn spiritual, or they must be killed." Right now, we cannot propound a philosophy like that, but that is what will happen, eventually.

Either you transform yourself or you will be killed – not by a Krishna, by nature. It is not a question of some kind of punishment for you; it is just a course correction. Either you do it consciously, or it will be done to you in a cruel manner. It is invar-

iably going to happen to humanity. We must either make the course correction consciously, or it will be done to us cruelly. At that time, Krishna decided to first try and transform them. If that does not work, then do the cruel thing, which is what happened at Kurukshetra.

Is the varnashrama dharma of dividing a society based on craft or competence still there? Is the world not divided by competence? Whether you like it or not, it is divided. The only thing is we have made it a little more porous. Even at that time, Duryodhana stood up and said, "A man can become a king in three different ways. It need not be by birth." And both Vyasa and Krishna kept saying that a Brahmana is not a Brahmana because of his birth, but because of his knowledge.

Even today, if you go by this standard, aren't there Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras in the world? This is another way to look at the caste system. If your sense of responsibility is only to your individual person and no one else, that you are only interested in your wellbeing, then we call you a Shudra. If you are interested in yourself, your family and your community, then we say you are a Vaishya. If you are interested in the wellbeing of your nation, then we say you are a Kshatriya. If you are interested in the wellbeing of all life upon this planet, then we say you are a Brahmana. That is how the society was divided.

This division was made for convenience and for effective usage of human talent. But over a period of time, every difference transforms into discrimination and becomes ugly. You cannot eliminate the caste system. If you eliminate one kind of caste system, it will come up in another way. We need to provide equal opportunity, not equality. Equality means to decimate the world into one module, which would be the worst crime you could commit on humanity. Two human beings will never be equal, and they cannot be equal in the very nature of things. But every human being should have equal opportunity.

Mahabharat Episode 56 : Yagnas – Timeless Rituals

Questioner: Sadhguru, what is the significance of age-old practices like yagna [ancient form of ritual, usually involving mantras and offerings to a

fire]? Are they relevant in today's times? How does one benefit from them?

Sadhguru: A yagna means a public handling of an inner possibility. When you publicly handle an inner possibility, the profoundness and depth of the possibility will come down, but the scope of the possibility, in terms of how many people it can touch, will be enhanced. Whether to sit and meditate or do a yagna – the challenge is to strike a balance between profoundness and scope – how much of profoundness you will sacrifice for the sake of scope, and how much of scope you will restrain for the sake of profoundness.

Yagna means a disciplined action that will benefit all. If you sit here and meditate, and then you dance around so that everyone benefits from your meditation, it is a yagna. How to perform a yagna? There are many ways to do it. The things that you have normally seen are remnants of the rich culture of yagna, often preserved by people with commercial interest. When we consecrated the Adiyogi linga [at Adiyogi Alayam, Isha Yoga Center, Coimbatore], we took a dangerous step. It would have been so simple and easy for me to do this in privacy, with a few people to help me. The plan was to do a part of the consecration at the shrine [a sacred space in the Isha Yoga Center] and then bring the linga to the Adiyogi Alayam and do the rest of the consecration for everyone else to see. But then life situations overtook us, and we did not do anything at the shrine. We did everything here, which could be life-threatening for the person who is performing the consecration. But there was no other way; dates were fixed; eleven thousand people were here, because they wanted to benefit from something very profound that they would never get to do in their lives by themselves.

We did something very profound with a large scope, touching many people, which could have killed me, but these eleven thousand people were so fantastic; they sat here like one person, which made it much simpler. But still, such things will cause some damage to yourself if you do in public what should be done in close, safe atmospheres.

Yagnas are of many kinds. A yagna could be in the form of mantra, or it could be of pure energy. There are still people who are doing some powerful processes, but largely they have lost their essence and become commerce. That is why in this age we must limit the yagna. It needs to be transformed into an intellectual process.

The Isha Yoga or Inner Engineering that you go through is a kind of a yagna. It is conducted with the rigidity of a yagna. If you come to our programs, we are doing nothing short of a yagna. No fire or chanting, but we are using the sharpness of one's mind to do the yagna.

You can do yagna with your body. You can do yagna with substances around you. You can do yagna with the five elements. You can do yagna with your mind. Or you can do yagna with your emotion. At the Linga Bhairavi, you will see a certain yagna happening that is very emotional.

You can also use your life energies to conduct yagna. You can do atma yagna. There are many ways to do the yagna. In today's world, with the type of education people are receiving, the type of attitude they have towards themselves, the most effective yagna is of the intellect, at least to start with. If people open up, if we find they still have a heart, then we can do emotional yagna. If they are competent of using their life energies, we can do energy yagna. And maybe someday, we can teach them atma yagna.

Mahabharat Episode 57: Three Keys to Success, According to the Mahabharat

To succeed in one's endeavor, whatever that may be, three aspects are crucial. One is intelligence and skill, another is grace, and the third is proper alignment of situations, which we usually call luck. When the Pandavas went into the game of dice, they definitely did not have skill. Grace, which for them comes through Krishna, was not available then, as they neither took Krishna with them nor did they even inform him. Luck, which comes through Draupadi, was missing as she was also not there. With these three things absent, if a man gets into action, he for sure invites disaster.

Be Skillful and Listen

How to know whether you have the needed intelligence or skill? If you wonder whether you have it or not, you may become unreasonably diffident about yourself. If you think you have it, you may become confident and stupid. The only way to know is to take the grace available and learn to be sensitive to what is happening around you. Everything in existence is speaking every

moment – people do not listen; they cannot listen because too much of their own talk is happening in their head. They can neither listen to grace nor to the alignment of existence.

The danger of speaking on these terms is there are a lot of scatterbrains who suddenly think they hear the coconut tree telling them something. To listen does not mean to imagine. You can only listen when you are not talking. Hearing is not listening. Hearing happens whether you like it or not. Hearing causes distress to the mind – listening brings the mind to stillness. If you listen to something, your mind will become focused and still; if you are simply hearing things, the mind will become distressed – that is the effect of noise. But if you listen to it carefully, even what you consider as noise will bring your mind to stillness. Music is just properly arranged noise or sounds. And the quality of the music depends not only on the musician but also on the listener, on how keenly one listens.

Why Lack of Faith Leads to Failure

These three aspects for successful action flow right through the Mahabharat. During the war, there were certain moments when they listened, and certain moments when they did not. To listen to someone, you need faith in them. Otherwise you hear things and do your own rubbish again. In moments when the Pandavas listened, their lives rose. In other moments, when they thought, “I will listen to what is convenient for me and otherwise do my own thing,” they went down, because listening needs faith. The Kauravas were always down – they had no faith in anything or anyone. The Pandavas’ faith was wavering. When it was on, they would rise and soar. When it was not, they were down.

Where there is no faith, there will be anxiety and fear. Where there is fear, there will be rage. Where there is rage, there will be conflict. That is the essence of the story. Whenever there was faith in them, they were fearless; when they were fearless, there was no rage; when there was no rage, they acted purposefully. But whenever there was no faith, there was fear; when there was fear, there was rage; when there was rage, they lost their sense of purpose and their faculties did not function properly.

Why Rage Does Not Work for You

During the war, Ashwatthama was incensed by his father’s death, particularly the way he was killed. Drona was killed after he was made to believe his son Ashwatthama had died. Hearing that, Drona put his arms down, sat down in his chariot, in a cross-legged posture, in meditation. Dhrishtadyumna went and chopped off Drona’s head, who was unarmed, and sitting with his eyes closed. Enraged by the way his father was killed, Ashwatthama pulled out his ultimate astra, the Narayana Astra. Normally, it would have burnt the whole Pandava army, including the five Pandavas and everything else. The moment Ashwatthama let it out, Krishna said to the Pandavas and their army, “All of you bow down and prostrate to the astra.” Almost the whole Pandava army prostrated, and the astra passed over them. Krishna said, “He can use it only once.” Since Ashwatthama had used his most potent weapon, there was no danger anymore.

The whole story runs on this, and life runs on this: When there is faith, there is no fear. When there is no fear, there is no rage in your heart. When there is no rage in your heart, you will act towards the purpose of your life, without even knowing it intellectually. You will fulfill your natural dharma without even thinking about it. That is the way to act, because the moment you think about it, your thoughts will create endless, contradictory debates in your mind.

People think they can debate and come to a conclusion. You can debate and come to a conclusion only if your opponent is an idiot. When two really intelligent people look at even the smallest aspect of life, they can debate on it for the rest of eternity. You can settle issues by debate only when you or your opponent is stupid. Unfortunately, the modern intellect is trained for debate. They think questioning something or debating about something is intelligence – it is really just entertainment.

How to Sharpen Your Intellect and Senses

The intellect is like a knife – if you do not let your intellect be dulled by any identifications, it has the power to penetrate through creation. You can only debate with the information you have. Your information about this cosmos is very limited. You do not even really know a single cell in your body. If you start a debate with this level of infor-

mation, it is just entertainment; you are misusing your intelligence and intellect. If you keep your intellect constantly clean, in the sense that it is not identified with anything but simply looking, it will be like a hot knife that will cut through everything; you will see everything the way it is.

The intellect is given to aid your five senses. The five senses are a problem when your intellect is identified with something or the other. The five senses are a miracle only if the intellect is not identified with the body or the mind. If the intellect is sitting here in a dispassionate manner, it will slice through everything. Then you will see the five senses are five miracles that everyone should know; five miracles that have come to you free of cost. Dhritarashtra came with four senses, so you have to pardon him. But you have no pardon because you have come with five, and still you are not any less blind.

Mahabharat Episode 58: One Act that Changed Krishna Forever

What happened so far: After Ashwatthama found out that the Pandavas had lied to his father about his death and thus killed the unarmed Dronacharya, he sought revenge. Along with Kritavarma and Kripacharya, he sneaked into the Pandava camp at night. Thinking he found the five Pandavas lying there asleep, Ashwatthama cut their throats, only to find out later that actually, he killed the Pandavas' children.

The Brahmastra – A Nuclear Weapon?

The Pandavas pursued Ashwatthama because he had killed their five children. They found him, and a duel ensued between Arjuna and Ashwatthama. Ashwatthama, a desperate, almost deranged man by now, pulled out a Brahmastra. We do not know what exactly it was, but Vyasa's description of the Brahmastra is very close to the description of a nuclear weapon today. He said if someone lets it out and it finds its full effect, the whole world would be destroyed. Because Ashwatthama released a Brahmastra, Arjuna also released a Brahmastra. Then Vyasa and Krishna interfered and said, "Whatever may be your anger, your hatred, or your cause, you cannot use a Brahmastra, because everyone will be destroyed; the planet will be destroyed. Withdraw it!"

Arjuna withdraws his astra, but Ashwatthama did not know how to withdraw his. They order him to neutralize it, but he says, "I cannot neutralize it; I can only redirect it." And because of the meanness of his heart, he adds, "I will redirect it to the future Pandavas who are yet to be born, so that their clan will cease to exist." The only Pandava offspring who was still in the mother's womb, was the child of Uttara, Abhimanyu's wife. Because of the way Ashwatthama redirected his Brahmastra, it would have affected not only that child; no other children would be born in the Pandava lineage after this. It is like they diffused the bomb, but they could not stop the radiation.

Krishna Saves the Pandavas' Progeny

When Ashwatthama uttered this curse, Krishna cursed him, "May you wander with a deranged mind for the full length of the Kali Yuga; may you not die. The relief of death will come to all of us – it will not come to you. With a deranged mind, you will roam this planet," because he killed unborn children. Then Uttara gave birth to a stillborn child, and there was a big cry of distress. They called Krishna because this was the only child left in the Kuru lineage. No other Kuru woman could ever get pregnant because of Ashwatthama's curse. Krishna took the just born infant and put his hand over his body. He spent a certain amount of time, transferring his own life energy into the stillborn child, and within a few minutes, the child came alive and cried. A cry of jubilation erupted. Then Krishna came out of the room. He was unsteady on his legs; his face was pale, he was like half a life. No one had ever seen him like that.

Satyaki, his cousin and a close assistant, who knew him right from his childhood, had never seen Krishna like this – tottering on his legs, weak, pale, without spirit. Krishna sat down on a stone bench. After giving him some time, Satyaki asked, "What is this? Why are you like this? It is just a child. You even fought the battle effortlessly!" Krishna said, "Bringing someone to life is far more difficult than fighting a war. It is far more difficult than killing a million people. For this, I had to pour out my life." No one had ever seen him like that, without energy, liveliness, and joy. Then he closed his eyes and sat in meditation, in a samadhi state, for a period of time. He came back revived, but after that, he was generally a quiet man, not the exuberant Krishna that people had seen before.

Mahabharat Episode 59:

After the War, the Meanness Continues

What has happened so far: Ashwatthama releases a Brahmastra, cursing the entire Kuru lineage. Krishna steps in to save the just born child of Uttara. After the war, the Pandavas return to Hastinapur. But there are no triumphal celebrations. Too many lives are lost, too much death and destruction has happened. At the palace, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari make last attempts to kill Yudhishtira and Bhima, but they fail. Now the path to growth and prosperity of the Pandava kingdom is clear.

No Winners, Only Widows

Having finished the war, they all move towards Hastinapur. When kings return after such a war – call it great or gory – usually, there is celebration. But here, when they returned, all they heard was the wailing of the widows and orphaned children crying; there was only distress, pain, and grief. Yudhishtira's heart shook, as he heard nothing but intense sounds of misery and grief, because there is no man who is not dead; all men from Hastinapur who had four limbs are dead, because they all went to battle, and they all got killed. When the Pandavas entered Hastinapur, the wailing rose – some in grief, some in anger, some in total hatred towards the Pandavas. The Pandavas had never witnessed anything like this before – people always used to love them. For the first time, they could see daggers in people's eyes, because they, the Pandavas, had caused this whole thing. Yudhishtira asked himself, "What is all this for? I never wanted to be the king. Why did I cause this?"

When the Pandavas came back to the palace, the first thing they did was go and meet Dhritarashtra. When they met him, he spoke words of peace. He said, "You, the sons of Pandu, in many ways have been truthful and righteous. But my son, out of his arrogance, brought this upon himself and all of us. So this kingdom is rightfully yours now – you rule it." Then he said, "I want to particularly see Bhima." When Bhima was about to go forward, Krishna stopped him. Krishna said to put a metal statue of a wrestler in front of Dhritarashtra instead. So Bhima put the statue in front of Dhritarashtra.

The Crushing Defeat of Meanness

Dhritarashtra hugged the statue, thinking it was Bhima, and crushed it. Dhritarashtra was known to be extraordinarily strong. He wanted to kill Bhima, because he could not come to terms with how Duryodhana was killed, how Dushasana was killed, how Bhima ate his heart and drank his blood. He wanted to end Bhima, but Krishna foresaw that and placed a metal statue, which Dhritarashtra crushed. Dhritarashtra had uttered words of peace and reconciliation, but in this act, what was raging in his heart came out. If you talk peace when you are strong and capable of doing things, it is meaningful. If you talk about peace when you are incapable, it is like a beggar talking about renunciation. If you got nothing and you renounce, it means nothing.

Yudhishtira was crowned as the king. And when he came to Dhritarashtra and Gandhari for blessings, putting up a loving face, Gandhari said, "I want to see Yudhishtira, the new king, once. I will undo my blindfold and look at him." Krishna immediately sensed what this was about.

Gandhari's Act of Wrath

One brother among the Kauravas had survived the war. This was because when Yudhishtira came suing for peace, he came unarmed. When he came unarmed, Duryodhana and Karna wanted to take him in; they wanted to imprison him right there. So this Kaurava brother, whose name was Durdasa - Dhritarashtra's son with Gandhari's maid - , stood up, drew his sword and said, "No one is going to capture an unarmed man who has come to sue for peace," and he protected Yudhishtira. Yudhishtira looked at him and said, "I will ensure that you do not die before me." Because Durdasa protected Yudhishtira, Bhima also came in and said to him, "I will ensure that you do not die before me." So Durdasa did not get killed in the war.

Gandhari wanted to see Yudhishtira, the new king. Krishna looked at Yudhishtira and asked him to stand aside. Instead of Yudhishtira, he brought Durdasa in front of Gandhari. When she opened her eyes and looked at him, Durdasa caught fire and burned up. Her intention was to burn up Yudhishtira, but she actually burned up Dhritarashtra's son with her maid.

Mahabharat Episode 60: The End of the Kuru Dynasty

Bhima's Revenge

Now Dhritarashtra's and Gandhari's hands and legs were tied, and they tried to settle down. Yudhishtira treated them with utmost respect, giving them the maximum comfort possible. But Bhima would not leave them alone; at any given opportunity, he taunted and teased them. Dhritarashtra was known to be a big eater. When they sat down to eat and Dhritarashtra slurped, Bhima said, "That is the sound I heard when I sucked Dushasana's heart." And when he bit on a bone, Bhima said, "Ah, this is how it sounded when I broke Duryodhana's thigh." Like this, he kept insulting Dhritarashtra in every possible way.

Normally, in those days, once your son had a son, you would leave to the forest; this is called vanaprastha. But Dhritarashtra did not leave – because of his blindness, and because the man was heavily attached to all his comforts. But Bhima would not spare them; he would make sure they were miserable on a daily basis. However much Yudhishtira tried to stop him, Bhima would not listen. He said, "We fought the battle, and still Dhritarashtra tried to crush me. Still, the old woman tried to burn you. No! There is no charity in my heart for them."

Taking Refuge in the Forest

When Bhima's insults became unbearable, Vidura advised Dhritarashtra, "This place is not good for you anymore. You must leave to the forest, as is appropriate for a man of your age. Until now, you have not done anything for your inner nature. Your whole life has been busy trying to protect the evil of your sons. Now it is time to do something with yourself. Let's go to the forest." So Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti, Vidura, and their assistant Sanjaya all moved into the forest. The moment they got to a certain ashram, Vidura, who was already like an ascetic, took to serious spiritual sadhana. He left the others and moved into a cave. He was seen only once after that; then he left his body.

The Last Kurus Die in Flames

Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti, and their assistant went on. Now, in the final leg of their lives, Kunti and Gandhari were together. Though they

maintained some kind of civility on the surface, there had always been a bigger battle between them than the Kurukshetra war. Within themselves, more blood had flowed, more meanness had been expressed, but because of the social circumstance and their position of being queens, they handled it on the surface in a certain way. But now, in the final leg of their lives, they were put together with a blind man.

On a certain day, a forest fire happened. Dhritarashtra smelt the smoke and sensed the heat, and he said, "It looks like there is a forest fire. Let us escape!" Gandhari, who had become a very strong devotee of Shiva, said, "What for?" And Kunti added, "Indeed, what for? Why do we want to escape the fire?" They just sat there, and the forest fire engulfed them. That ended one generation of the Kurus.

A Horse Expands the Kingdom

Back in the palace, for the next 36 years, Yudhishtira ruled as justly as he could. The other brothers went out and conquered many other lands and expanded the empire. They conducted an Ashwamedha Yagna. For an Ashwamedha Yagna, they choose a particular kind of a horse and do various kinds of rituals with it. Then they let the horse loose and wherever it went, people would follow. Whichever kingdom it enters, either the king had to supplicate to Emperor Yudhishtira, or he had to enter into battle. So the Pandavas expanded the empire in a huge way, and when the horse came back, they sacrificed it, and Yudhishtira, as the king, was to eat its organs, because the horse had been consecrated in a certain way, to give strength and prosperity to the kingdom. It brought much prosperity to the Kuru kingdom, and Yudhishtira ruled well.

Mahabharat Episode 61: Krishna's End

Gandhari's Curse

Krishna went back to Dwaraka along with his Yadavas – Satyaki, Uddhava, and Kritavarma. They built their empire in a big way. When the war was over, after Gandhari burned Durdasa, thinking it is Yudhishtira, and she was going to leave the palace, she told Krishna, "You are the real culprit in this whole situation. You could have

brought peace anytime. You could have played down the enmity that was there between the cousins. Instead, you took the side of the Pandavas and ensured that all my sons are dead today. May your Yadavas have a similar end. May they fight among themselves and their clan extinguish. And may you, who is known and worshipped as a god, die like any common human being. May you not have a glorious death like my sons who died in the battlefield. You must die like a common human being. And the Yadavas shall kill each other like you made the Kurus do.”

Krishna smiled and said, “Mother, what you are saying is anyway written, because who else can kill the Yadavas unless they kill each other? Yadavas cannot be killed by anyone else but each other, so let it be so. And how I exit this world does not matter for me, as I anyway know how to exit. Do not worry about my destiny. Focus on yours.”

Decadence Becomes a Curse

The Yadavas grew in prosperity. And as they grew in prosperity, they started drinking. They say that there was a party in Dwaraka every night. They lost their morality. Affluence made them completely forget how Krishna brought them from Mathura and the hardship with which they built the new city. Particularly the next generation of Yadavas became really loose.

One day, a group of sages came to town. Krishna’s son Samba went to them along with his friends, dressed as a pregnant woman, and asked the sages, “Tell me, will I have a boy or a girl?” The sages looked at him and said, “You have the imprudence to come, disturb our way of life, and try to fool us? You will deliver an iron mace, and that mace will be the end of you and your filthy clan.” So Samba delivered an iron mace. Fearing that it may destroy his clan, he took it to the beach, smashed it into powder, and threw it in the ocean – except for one last piece that he could not beat into dust and left it there. A hunter walked by, saw this sharp piece of metal, thought it would make a good arrowhead, and took it with him. The dust that Samba had thrown in the ocean, the ocean threw it back on the beach, where weeds were growing.

From Bragging to Self-Destruction

The Yadavas’ lecherous life continued. They were drunk every day. When people get drunk, the same conversations come back again and again. Whenever they got drunk, the discussion was always the Kurukshetra war, “How I killed this guy!” or “You know what I did to that one?” – all this macho talk and bragging happened – one story taller than the other. As the alcohol content in the body kept increasing, the stories kept getting longer and longer. They talked the same old rubbish every time. It made sense only to them because they had lost their sense.

Again, they were discussing the Kurukshetra war. In the heat of bragging, Satyaki accused Kritavarman, “You fought against us on the side of Kauravas. Only because you are a coward, you survived the war. Otherwise, I would have taken your head off.” So Kritavarman said, “I know whose head you can take off – an old man’s whose fighting arm has been severed. And you call yourself a warrior!” This initial debate grew into an argument, then a brawl, then a fight, then it became a battle. Foreseeing this, Krishna and Balarama had confiscated the Yadavas’ weapons. There were no arms in town. Otherwise, because of the way these guys were drinking, they would have pulled out their swords or bow and arrow anytime and used them.

Now they started beating each other with their hands and sticks. When that was not enough, they went and plucked weeds that were growing near the beach, and these weeds had caught the shards of iron from the mace that Samba had crushed and thrown into the ocean. They say the weeds were as hard as steel. The Yadavas beat and killed each other with these weeds. A kind of civil war happened in which the Yadavas decimated themselves. Only a handful were left.

Balarama’s and Krishna’s Death

The great city of Dwaraka was filled with the wailing of the widows, mothers, and children, because most Yadava men had killed each other. Seeing this, Balarama was greatly distressed and decided to leave his body. When he left, he became a large serpent. They say he became Adi Shesha, Vishnu’s bed. Krishna saw how his children Pradyumna, Samba, and others, were all involved in the fight. There was a little sadness,

but he smiled. Everything was going according to script, as it should.

He went and sat under a banyan tree, with his leg outstretched, and he started shaking it. A hunter, who was hunting in the forest, saw the movement through the bush, thought it was a deer, and shot it. An arrow pierced Krishna's heel, with the arrowhead that the hunter had picked up on the beach. In the initial shock and pain of being pierced in the heel, Krishna lurched a bit, then he smiled and closed his eyes. And Krishna left the body.

Arjuna: The Ultimate Defeat

Arjuna, having heard of this disaster, rushed from Hastinapur to Dwaraka. Seeing only women, children, and a few old people, he decided that the best thing would be to take them to Hastinapur. He started taking them towards Hastinapur. On the way, they were attacked by bandits, who took all that they had, and abducted the young women and children. Arjuna, the great hero, tried to pick up his Gandiva and fight them, but he found that suddenly, he was totally ineffective.

Arjuna was no more the great archer and warrior that he used to be. He could not even protect the Yadava women and children against common bandits. It left him in utter shame and distress. He fell on the ground and cried. "Why does it have to be this way that I cannot even use my archery to protect these women and children who trusted me? I could have died in the battle. Why do I have to be put through this?" He rolled on the ground and cried.

Mahabharat Episode 62: Bhishma on the Bed of Arrows

Since his coronation, Yudhishtira was always devout, obedient, and faithful; always honoring the elders. That is what saw them through. When the four Pandavas lay dead at the Yaksha's pool, if it were not for his humility, Yudhishtira probably also would have died, or at the least, the four others would not have been brought back to life. There have been many situations in which Yudhishtira's humility, which may look like stupidity, is what actually allowed the Pandavas to live and to succeed. He always tempered them;

otherwise they would have done something brave and been killed.

If you do something brave which does not produce any results and you get killed, that is called being stupid – not brave. If your action is such that you do not care whether you live or not, but you take a situation beyond a certain point, then you could call that bravery. But in a state of reaction, you will see that even a puny little dog on the street, if you really corner him, he will suddenly act brave. Before you die, you give one last burst of something, which may or may not produce results. That is not real bravery, that is just trying to fight off death. If you are fearless, that is different. Bravery means you may have fear in your heart, but you never let it go out of control.

Yudhishtira and his four brothers went to see Bhishma at the very end of his life. Bhishma was lying on the battlefield, all pierced by arrows. Since he had the power to choose the time of his death, he decided that he wanted to die during uttarayana, which is considered to be a good time to die. The war had ended in the second week of December, just before the solstice, so Bhishma hung on. He chose to leave his body on what is now called Bhishmashtami. On that day, before he was to leave his body, the Pandavas gathered around him.

Since Yudhishtira now had the kingdom for himself, he sought advice from Bhishma because he wanted to do his best as the new king. But Bhishma was in pain, so he looked at Krishna and said, "There is only one wish inside of me. Krishna, please fulfill it for me. I want to see your real form! I want to see you in your full glory." So Krishna touched Bhishma's body and relieved him of all the pain, so that he could speak to Yudhishtira. Then he showed his full Vishwarupa Darshana – to Bhishma alone, experientially, while the others stood by. Bhishma said, "All my life, no matter what pain or struggles I have gone through, or however long I have waited in this pain, I could see you, and that is all. This one vision that I have of you is enough for me." And he became willing to advise Yudhishtira on whatever he wanted.

Yudhishtira asked a hundred questions which developed into a very elaborate discourse with Bhishma. He asked, "What is the dharma for a king?" Bhishma said, "A king's first dharma is to worship the gods and to honor brahmanas, who are illuminated men." "Illuminated men" did not

mean someone who is born in a certain family; that was not the idea of brahmana in those days. Your brahmanahood had to be achieved, not by birth. Bhishma continued, “He must conceal his weaknesses. He must know his enemies’ weaknesses and exploit them. A good king must be compassionate but never weak. He must not share his innermost thoughts with anyone, not even his closest advisors.”

“The essence of a king’s dharma is to secure his subjects’ prosperity and happiness. He must be a master at creating discord in his enemy’s kingdom. He must know how to employ spies and sow dissension among those who serve his enemy. The treasury must always be full, because the king’s power stems from his wealth. A king must have an army to defend his kingdom and his people. His spies must be the hardest, most incorruptible men, strong and able to bear long privations, exile, cold, heat, violence, and hunger.”

“A king has to rule, not only with dharma but with adharmas too. The king, on whom his people rely, must never hesitate to be ruthless with his enemies. He must blend trust with mistrust judiciously. He should use one minister to spy upon another. A good king levies taxes as a bee gathers pollen from flowers – gently without injuring his people. But of all those who are close to him, a king should fear his own blood like death. As a kinsman always considers himself to be the king’s equal or his superior, he is more envious than anyone else.”

It is a very long discourse; this is just to give you an insight into Bhishma’s mind. His mind was about doing whatever was needed for the wellbeing of his nation. He was a patriot without any other concerns. That is how he lived all his life; that was the advice he passed on to Yudhishtira. And for Yudhishtira to remain a successful king for thirty-six years, he must have used every advice and even invented a few more.



The Mahabharat series is based on Sadhguru’s talks during the one-time Mahabharat program that took place in February 2012 at the Isha Yoga Center. Through the lives and stories of the varied characters, Sadhguru takes us on a mystical exploration into the wisdom of this immortal saga.

*Still being continued
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