

Chapter 4. The Penitential Sacrifice

Yudhishtira feels sinful of war killings

The prince's naming ceremony gave great delight to the subjects of the state as well as to the inmates of the palace and members of the royal household. But Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers, was not content with the joyous festival alone and felt that something more had to be done. That evening, he called for an assembly of all the elders, scholars, pundits, subordinate rulers, and leaders of the people; he prayed for Lord Krishna to preside over the gathering and confer joy on all. The sages Vyasa and Kripa also attended.

Coming to the assembly, Yudhishtira stood before everyone in silence for a few seconds, before he fell at Lord Krishna's and sage Vyasa's feet. He then turned toward the rulers, scholars, and leaders and said, "I was able to defeat foes through your help, cooperation, and best wishes, as well as the blessing of the Lord who is present here and of the sages and saints who had installed Him in their hearts. We were able by means of that victory to win back the kingdom that we had lost. Again, through these blessings, the light of hope has gleamed in hearts that were darkened by despair about the continuation of this dynasty. The Pandava line will be continued by the prince, who today was named Parikshith by the Lord.

"While all this delights me, I must announce before you that I am overwhelmed with sorrow at the contemplation of another side of the picture. I have committed countless sins, killing kith and kin. I feel I must do some expiation for this, or else there will be no happiness for me, for my dynasty, or for my people. Therefore, I wish to take this opportunity to seek your advice on this matter. There are many among you who have known the Reality and have attained knowledge (*jnana*) of Brahman; we have here also the great sage Vyasa. I expect you to suggest some expiatory rite by which I can rid myself of the colossal quantity of sin that I accumulated as a result of this war."

A warrior incurs no sin in a righteous war

When Yudhishtira posed this problem in great humility and with great contrition, Lord Krishna said, "Yudhishtira, you are famous as Master of *Dharma* (Dharmaraja) and you ought to know *dharma*. You know the intricacies of *dharma* and morality, of justice, of right and wrong conduct. Therefore, I am surprised that you are afflicted with grief over this war and this victory. Don't you know that a warrior (*kshatriya*) incurs no sin when he kills a foe who has come to the battlefield armed with intention to kill? Injury or pain or loss that is inflicted on the battlefield during a fight with armed foes is free from sin. It is the *dharma* of a warrior to take up the sword and fight to the very end to save his country, without any thought of self. You have only observed your *dharma*. How can activity (*karma*) along the lines of *dharma* be sinful? It isn't proper to doubt this and give way to despair. Sin can't touch, surround, or bother you. Instead of exulting over this naming festival for the newborn prince, why do you dread imaginary calamities and seek remedies for nonexistent sins? Be calm. Be happy."

Vyasa also rose from his seat and addressed the king. "Sinful and blameworthy acts are inevitable in battle. They should not be the cause for grief. The chief aim in battle should be the protection of *dharma* from its foes. If that is kept before the mind, the sin will not affect the fighters. A putrid wound has to be treated with the knife; it is not sinful to inflict the surgery. A doctor who knows surgery and doesn't save a man by doing it incurs sin. So

too, a warrior (*kshatriya*) incurs sin by remaining quiet, not by using the sword. Dharmaraja, you speak under a delusion. I can understand others less wise being afflicted by these doubts, but I wonder why you worry over this fear of sin.

Not one but three horse sacrifices to atone for sins

“If our words do not carry conviction, I can suggest another remedy to remove all fear. Some rulers in the past have resorted to it after the conclusion of wars, to remove the effects of sin. It is the rite of the Horse Sacrifice (*aswamedha*). If you desire, you can perform this rite as an expiatory ceremony. There can be no obstacle to it. But believe me, you are innocent of sin even without any expiation. Since your faith is shaky, I suggest this rite for your satisfaction.” And Vyasa resumed his seat.

At this, all the elders, scholars, and leaders rose as one man and applauded Vyasa’s valuable suggestion. They shouted, “victory, victory (*jai*)” in order to demonstrate their approval and appreciation. They exclaimed, “O! How auspicious, how significant,” and they blessed Dharmaraja in his endeavour to free himself from the sinful consequences of war. But Dharmaraja was still heavy with grief; he was not free from fear. His eyes were wet with tears.

He pleaded with the assembly most piteously. “However much you assert my innocence, I am not convinced. Somehow, my mind doesn’t accept your argument. Rulers who were engaged in wars might have cleansed themselves by means of the horse sacrifice. Those were ordinary wars, of the usual type. But my case is very extraordinary. My sins are three times more sinister, for I killed kith and kin, I killed holy elders like Bhishma and Drona, and I killed many crowned heads. Alas, my fate! How monstrous have been my actions!

“No other ruler could have done so much iniquity. Not one, but three horse sacrifices (*aswamedha yagas*) have to be performed to cleanse this quantity. Then only can I have peace. Then only can my dynasty be happy and secure. Then only can the administration of my kingdom be safe and meritorious. This must be kindly accepted by Vyasa and other elders and sages.”

When Yudhishtira spoke thus, tears dropped on his cheeks; his lips quivered with sorrow; his body was bent with remorse. Seeing this, the heart of every sage melted with pity. The king’s subjects were moved in sympathy. Vyasa and even Vaasudeva were affected. Many pundits shed tears without being aware of it. The assembly was struck dumb with astonishment. All knew in a flash how soft Dharmaraja’s heart was. The brothers —Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva— stood with folded palms in reverential humility, awaiting the word that would assure relief from the Lord, who was in the presidential seat.

Then, the assembly, with one voice, approved the three horse sacrifices, to relieve Dharmaraja’s distress. One sage gave expression to the opinion of the assembly. He said, “We won’t stand in the way of your desire. We accept it wholeheartedly. We shall celebrate the rites (*yagas*) in the best scriptural way until the final rites. For we seek peace of mind for you more than anything else. We are prepared to do anything that will give you satisfaction.” This was acclaimed by everyone in the gathering.

Krishna finds the funds for the horse sacrifices

Hearing this, Dharmaraja said, “I am indeed blessed; I am indeed blessed.” He gave his grateful thanks for the promised cooperation. He walked toward Krishna and Vyasa and fell at their feet. He held Krishna’s feet and

pleaded, “O Madhusudana! Didn’t you hear my prayer? Didn’t you witness my grief? I pray that you grant us your divine presence at the coming sacrifice (*yaga*), that you ensure me the fruit thereof and save me from this burden of sin.”

Krishna smiled and lifted him up from the ground before Him. He said, “Dharmaraja! I shall certainly answer your prayer. But you have taken upon your shoulders a burden as heavy as a range of mountains. This rite is no small affair. Moreover the performer is the celebrated king, Dharmaraja! This means that it has to be celebrated on a scale befitting your status. I know that you have no wherewithal for this very expensive undertaking. Kings derive money only from their subjects. To spend the money squeezed out of them on a rite is not desirable. Only well-earned money can be used for such holy rites; otherwise, it will bring evil instead of good. Nor can your subordinate rulers come to your help, for they also have been miserably impoverished by the late war. It is clear they have nothing to spare.

“Aware of all this, how could you accept to celebrate three horse sacrifices (*aswamedhas*) in a row? I wonder how you found such audacity in spite of these adverse conditions. And, you have already announced it publicly in this great and distinguished gathering. You didn’t give Me even a hint about this costly idea. Had you done so, we could have thought out some plan. Well, it is not too late. We shall take a decision after some more deliberation. It doesn’t matter if there is some delay.”

Dharmaraja listened to the Lord’s words and laughed a hearty laugh! “Lord, you are playing a drama with me, I know. I have never decided upon an act without deliberation. Nor have I ever worried about money or the wherewithal. When we have as our guardian —You, with your inexhaustible grace— why should I worry over anything? When I have the wish-fulfilling tree (*kalpataru*) in my garden, why should I worry, seeking roots and tubers? The all-powerful Lord, who has been guarding us all these terrible years as the eyelids guard the eye, won’t give us up at this juncture.

“For You who can whiff huge mountains into dust, this little pebble is no problem at all. You are my treasure, My treasury. You are the very breath. Whatever You may say, I won’t hesitate. All my strength, all my wealth is you and you alone. I place all my burdens, including the burden of state and this new burden of the three sacrifices (*yagas*) on Your feet. You can do anything you like. You may value my word and carry out my intention or you may discard it and cancel the sacrifices. I have no concern. I am equally happy, whatever you do. It is Your will, not mine.”

Of course, with the Lord who resides in the heart, no special pleading is needed. The Lord melted; He lifted Dharmaraja and helped him to stand. “No; I spoke in jest to test your faith and devotion. I wanted to demonstrate to these subjects of yours how strong your faith in Me is. You need have no worry on any score. Your wish will be fulfilled. If you follow My instructions, you can procure very easily the money needed for the celebration of the sacrifices. You can get it without harassing the rulers and squeezing the subjects.”

On hearing this, Dharmaraja was delighted. He said, “Lord we shall honour Your command.”

Then Krishna said, “Listen. In bygone times, a ruler named Maruth performed a sacrifice (*yaga*) in a style that no one since then could approach. The hall where the sacrifice was celebrated, along with every item connected with it, were of gold. Gold bricks were given away as gifts to the priests who officiated; golden images of cows were given instead of cows, and plates of gold were distributed instead of lands! The *brahmins* were not able to carry them home, so they took only as much as they could lift or carry. The rest they just cast away. Those

pieces of gold are now available in large quantities for your sacrifices. You can collect them.”

Dharmaraja didn't agree; he had qualms about it. He said, “Lord, that is the property of those to whom it was given. How can I use it without their permission?” Krishna replied, “They cast it away fully conscious of what they were doing and what they were discarding. They are not alive today. Their children know nothing about the existence of this treasure. It is now under the earth. Remember that all treasure inside the earth that has no master or owner belongs to the king of that realm. When the king wants to take possession of it, no one has the right to object. Bring that treasure soon and prepare for the celebration of the sacrifices,” commanded Lord Krishna.