

Chapter 7. Vidura the Counsellor

Of course, the blind king and his queen, Gandhari, were expecting Vidura to call upon them, for they had learned that he had come to town. So when Vidura entered, the king embraced him and shed tears of joy. He couldn't contain himself. He listed one by one the calamities that overtook him and his children and lamented over fate.

Vidura admonishes Dhritharashtra

Vidura tried to console him with profound teachings of the scriptures. But he soon discovered that the petrified heart of the old man would not melt at the application of cold advice; he knew that his stupidity could be overcome only by hard blows. So, he changed his tune and resorted to blame and abuse.

Hearing this, Dhritharashtra was alarmed. He expostulated, "Brother! We are burning in agony at the loss of our hundred sons, and you prick the wound with the sharp needles of your angry abuse. Even before we taste the joy of meeting you after so long a time, why do you try to plunge us deeper into distress? Alas! Why should I blame you for hardheartedness? I am laughed at by all, blamed by all. I have no right to find fault with you." With head bent and resting on his palms, Dhritharashtra sat in silence.

Vidura recognised this as the opportune moment for instilling the lesson of renunciation, which alone could save him from perdition. He knew that his purpose was beyond reproach, for he wanted them to undertake pilgrimages to holy places and fill themselves with sanctity. He wanted them to meet great and good men and recognise the Lord within and thus save themselves. So he decided to use even stronger words with a view to transforming him and the queen. Though filled with pity at their forlorn condition, Vidura had in mind the coming dire days when they would need all the courage that spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) alone could give them, and he was determined to wound them into action.

Vidura shames Dhritharashtra into repentance

Vidura said, "O foolish King! Have you no shame? Do you still find joy in earthly pleasures? Of what avail is it if you wallow in the mire until you die? I thought you had enough of it and more. Time is a cobra that lies in wait to sting you to death. You dare hope that you can escape it and live forever. No one, however great, has escaped the sting. You run after happiness in this temporary world, and you seek to fulfil your desires in order to get some paltry satisfaction. You are wasting precious years. Make your life worthwhile. It is not yet too late to begin the effort. Give up this cage called home. Dismiss from your mind the paltry pleasures of this world. Remember the joy that awaits you, the world that is welcoming you at the end of this journey. Save yourself. Avoid the foolish fate of giving up this life in the agony of separation from kith and kin. Learn to die with the thought of the Lord uppermost in your mind at the moment of departure. It is better by far to die in joy in the thick of the blackest forest than to die in distress in the palace of this capital city. Go, go and do spiritual penance (*tapas*). Get away from this place, this prison that you call home."

Vidura continued his admonition of Dhritharashtra. "You have reached this advanced age; but still, without any shame or hesitation, you are leading a dog's life. You may not be ashamed of it, but I am. Fie upon you! Your method of spending your days is worse than that of a crow."

Dhritharashtra could hear no more. He cried, “Oh enough, enough. Stop. You’re torturing me to death. These aren’t the words that one brother should address to another. Hearing you, I feel you aren’t Vidura, my brother. He wouldn’t have reprimanded me so cruelly. Am I now with Dharmaraja, or a stranger? Have I taken refuge with an alien? What are you saying? Why these harsh words! Dharmaraja fosters me with great love and care; how can you declare that I’m leading a dog’s life, or a crow’s? It’s a sin for you to entertain such ideas. This is just my fate and nothing else.” Dhritharashtra bent his head and moaned.

Vidura laughed in derision. He said, “Have you no sense of shame that you should talk thus? Dharmaraja might, out of his goodness, care for you more than his own father. He might look after you with a love greater than that of your own sons. This is but a reflection of his character. This is but the amplification of the significance of his name. But shouldn’t you plan for your own future? One leg of yours is already in the grave, and you’re blindly filling your stomach in comfort and rolling in luxury.

“Reflect for a moment how you tortured Dharmaraja and his brothers to fulfil the wicked intentions of your vile sons, how you devised stratagems for their extinction. You put them in a wax house and set fire to it; you tried to poison them. You insulted their queen in the most humiliating manner before a vast assembly. You and your abominable brood piled grief over grief on the sons of Pandu, your own brother. Blind, senile, thick-skinned elephant, you sat on the throne, perpetually asking those beside you ‘What’s happening now? What’s happening now?’

“How can you stay in this place, enjoying Dharmaraja’s hospitality, rolling over your mind the iniquities perpetrated by you for his destruction? When you were devising their end, did they cease to be your cousins? Or, did the cousinship emerge now, when you came to them for stay? You tell me so proudly that they are treating you well, without a shred of shame!

“Why speak so much? The disastrous game of dice took place at your initiative, didn’t it? Do you deny it? No. I witnessed that game. I advised you against it then —did you take it to heart? What happened then to the love and sympathy that you now freely pour forth? Today, like a dog, you gulp the food the Pandavas place before you and lead this despicable life.”

Dhritharashtra renounces his style of living

Hearing Vidura’s words, which pained him like hammer strokes, Dhritharashtra developed a distaste for his style of living. Vidura’s intention was to prod him into the life of a recluse and of spiritual practice, so that he might realise His Self before it was too late. Finally, he felt that Vidura was speaking the truth and giving him a true picture of his low nature. He said, “Brother! Yes, all that you have said is true, I admit. I have realised it now. But, what am I to do? I’m blind, so I can’t go alone into the forests for spiritual practice. I must have a companion. What shall I do? For fear that I may suffer without food, Gandhari never leaves me even for a moment.”

Vidura saw that Dhritharashtra had modified his attitude and had seen light. He emphasised his original advice. “You became blind due primarily to this attachment to the body. How long can you be burdened with it? It has to be dropped by the wayside some day, some place. Know that ‘you’ are not this body, this package of nauseating things. To identify yourselves with the physical frame is the sign of extreme foolishness. The body is being besieged perpetually by death, with His army of diseases. But you are unaware of it; you don’t care for the pro and the con; you snooze your fill and snore. This drama has an end, remember. The curtain has to come down.

So hie toward some holy place without delay and meditate on God and save yourself. Let death come and carry away your body there; that is the most excellent end. Don't die like a dog or fox, somewhere, somehow. Arise and go; develop detachment. Give up this delusion and escape from this house.”

Thus was planted in the heart the seeds of renunciation. Dhritharashtra pondered long and broke into tears. His lips quivered. He moved his hands from side to side to contact Vidura. At last, he held his hands and said, “Vidura! What can I say to you who gave this most valuable advice, advice that is certain to promote my best interests? Though you are younger in age, your spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) makes you senior to all of us. You have full authority to speak as you like. Don't consider me as someone outside your circle. Hear me with patience. I shall certainly follow your advice.”

He then began to describe his condition to his brother. “Vidura,” he began, “How could I leave here without informing Dharmaraja, who looks after me with more care than even a son? It wouldn't be proper. And he might insist on coming along with us; his nature is such. Save me from this dilemma. Take me to a place where I can engage myself in spiritual practice.”

When he pleaded thus, Vidura replied, “Your words sound strange. You aren't going into the forest to eat banquets, to witness carnivals, or to enjoy the beauty of the scenery. You are giving up everything with a full sense of detachment. You are taking up a life of austerity and spiritual discipline. And, in the same breath, you are talking of ‘taking leave’ of kith and kin! This is odd. You resolve to lay down the body in the pursuit of the Ideal, but you are considering how to get the permission of men who are related to you through the body. These bonds cannot help spiritual practice. They can never liberate you. Bundle them up and sink them deep. Move out of this place with just the clothes you wear. Don't waste a single moment of your life.” Thus, Vidura advised him without mercy; he didn't change the tune of his song; he emphasised the importance of immediate renunciation.

Dhritharashtra was on his bed, listening intently and ruminating on the next step. He said, “Vidura, what you say is quite true. I need not describe to you my special difficulties. This body is decrepit; these eyes are blind. I must have someone at least to guide my steps, right? Your sister-in-law has blinded her eyes by a bandage so that she can share my handicap and suffer similarly. How can we two blind persons move about in the forest? We have to be dependent on others all our lives.”

Vidura saw the tears rolling down the cheeks of the old man; he pitied his plight, but he never revealed his pity. He said assuringly, “Well, I am prepared to take you to the forest. I am ready. What greater pleasure have I than to release you from here for this sacred purpose? Come, arise. Start.” Vidura stood up. Dhritharashtra also rose from his bed and stood on the floor.

Off to the forest, with Gandhari

Gandhari stood by his side, with her hand on his shoulder. She pleaded, “Lord I'm coming with you, ready for anything.”

But Dhritharashtra said, “O, it is very hard to guard women in the jungle. The place is infested by wild beasts, and life there is bound to be full of privations.” He spoke in this strain for a long time. But she argued that she could not desert her lord, that she could stand the privations as much as he, that it was her duty to continue serving him until her death, that she was only following the tradition set up by the gems of Indian womanhood, that it is not *dharma* to prevent her from observing her *dharma*, that life in the *zenana* without him would be unbear-

able for her, that she would welcome life in the jungle with her lord. She fell at the feet of her lord and demanded permission to accompany him.

Dhritharashtra was silent. He did not know what to say. It was Vidura who spoke. “This is not the time to discuss niceties of *dharmā*. How can this lady, who never stayed away from you a single moment, suddenly leave your company and live apart? It is not proper. Let her also come; we shall take her. For those who march forward to do austerities, there should be no fear or delusion, no hunger or thirst, no grief or suffering. It is not asceticism (*tapas*) to complain of these or anticipate these. When the body itself is being disowned, what can privations do? Come, there is no justification for delay.”

Vidura moved forward, leading Dhritharashtra silently followed by Gandhari, who had her hand on his shoulder. The saintly votary of God, Vidura, took the pair, unnoticed by the guards and the citizens, through the side streets and out beyond the city limits. He hurried them on so that they might reach the forest before dawn. But the Ganga had to be crossed in a boat, and no boatman was there to take them across before sunrise. So they had to wait on the bank of that holy river. Vidura made them rest for a while in a bower and arranged for a boat to take them to the other bank in the dark.