

## The Crest-jewel of fools

A short story will illustrate these points. A king had transferred all responsibility of ruling to his minister and was spending his time in ease. He never worried about anything, be it big or small. He had a personal companion, who was always by his side, more or less as a bodyguard. This fellow was very wise, for he never did anything without deep deliberation about the how, the why, and the wherefore. The king took all this deliberation to be just foolishness and nicknamed him “Crest-Jewel of Fools” (*Avivekasikhamani*). He actually engraved the title on a plate of gold and compelled the fellow to wear it on his forehead for all to see! Many people at court were misled by this and took the fellow to be an ignoramus; they did not heed his words.

The king fell ill and took to bed. The kingdom was combed for physicians who could heal the king. Messengers went to the eight corners of the country, seeking drugs and doctors. Hundreds were busy around the royal patient, but, all efforts failed; the illness worsened day by day. The king was at the door of death.

The king suspected that his end was near; so he hurriedly made some dispositions, spoke to those whom he wanted to meet, and was immersed in sorrow. He had no thought of God or any other auspicious power. He was in terrible fear of death and could not think of anything else.

One day, he called Crest-Jewel of Fools to his bedside and whispered feebly in his ear, “Well; I am going soon, my friend!” Then, the fool said without any compunction, “What? You are weak and cannot walk a few steps; I will order a palanquin. Please wait till it is ready.” “No palanquin can take me there,” said the king. “Then I will order a chariot,” entreated the fool. “The chariot is also of no use,” replied the king. “Of course, then the horse is the only means of journey,” wailed his companion, who seemed eager to rescue his master and spare him the toils of travel. The king said that the horse also could not enter there.

The fool was at his wits end. Then suddenly an idea struck him, and he said, “Come on master! I will carry you there.” The king became sad and said, “My dear friend, when one’s time has come, one has to go alone to that place! No companion can be taken.” The fool was thrown in great doubt. He asked the king, “It is curious, isn’t it? You say that the palanquin won’t reach there, that the chariot can’t go there, or the horse; you say that no second person can join you! Well, can’t you tell me at least where that place is?” The king replied, “I don’t know.”

Immediately, the fool unwound the golden plate with the engraving “Crest-Jewel of Fools” and tied it round the brow of the king, saying, “King, you know so much about the place, even which things cannot go there, but you do not know where it is, and still you are going there soon. You deserve this title much more than I.”

The king was overcome with shame. “Alas,” he said to himself. “I wasted my years in eating, sleeping, and pursuing pleasures, never caring to ask who I am, whence I came, what I am doing, whither I am going, and why I came. The precious time allotted to me has come very near its end. I have no more time for all that inquiry. Death is knocking at the door; children have started weeping; my subjects are in great anxiety. Can I, under such conditions, immerse myself in inquiry? Can a thought that I never entertained throughout my life suddenly arise now, during my last moments? It is impossible. Yes, I deserve the title “Crest-Jewel of Fools” more than anyone else, for I wasted my life in useless pursuits, without any thought of the reality.”

The king let it be proclaimed that inquiry is the best means of knowing the truth, that inquiry must be directed to separating the true from the untrue, the eternal from the temporary, that people should arrive at the conclusion “God is the only true and eternal entity,” and that by their own independent investigation, his subjects must not

only grasp the entity intellectually but must also attain the grace of God by their pure lives. Announcing this lesson to his subjects, the king breathed his last.

Note how the king, blinded by material power and pleasures, misdirected his energies toward the world, away from God, and ended his days in agony.