



The Banyan Seed

Hinduism

The banyan is an immense, majestic tree that, from its branches, throws innumerable new roots towards the ground. These roots become supplementary trunks that give support to the giant branches, allowing the tree to continue growing, expanding its crown, in some cases reaching more than one hundred yards in diameter.

Next to one of these immense banyan trees lived a humble cobbler. A devotee of the god Vishnu, a man considered by everyone to be a person of exemplary honesty as well as compassion, since he always found a way to help the poorest, even though his work gave him little more than enough to support his own family.

One day, while mending footwear under the shade of the banyan tree, Saint Narada went to pay him a visit. Narada Muni is well known in the Hindu tradition as an errant musician and storyteller. Being a friend and personal messenger of the god Vishnu, Narada travels the universe to bring news of the god, as well as to instruct his devotees in wisdom.

Recognising the saint, the cobbler rose immediately to receive him with all the honours, after which he could not avoid asking him a question:

‘Have you been recently in the Spiritual Kingdom of Vaikunthá, abode of the Supreme Lord Narayana?’

‘Yes.’ Narada replied with a smile. ‘It is He who sends me to see you.’

The cobbler opened his eyes wide, not believing what he was hearing. The god Vishnu had sent Narada to see him, when he believed that He would not even have thought of him more than twice!

‘But ...’ –he stammered– ‘why did Narayana want you to come and see me?’

‘The Supreme Lord thought you might like to have the opportunity to ask me any question you would like answered.’ Narada said.

‘Any question ...’ The cobbler muttered looking at Narada with his mouth open.

‘And what do I ask the messenger of Vishnu now?’ The cobbler thought with some anguish. If, at least, he had been told the day before, he would have had all night to prepare a question for his god. But now, suddenly, having to think of a clever question, a question worthy of a wise man ...

Silence stretched uncomfortably between the cobbler and Narada. So that, in the end, the poor man could not think of anything else to say ...

‘And what was Vishnu doing when you found him?’

Narada raised an eyebrow and leaned back. Vishnu had told him that this would be exactly what the cobbler would ask, after which he had given him precise instructions as to what he should answer.

‘Lord Vishnu was passing an elephant through the eye of a needle.’ Narada replied as agreed, unable to avoid a gesture of discomfort at his ridiculous response.

And suddenly, to the wise Narada's astonishment, the cobbler began to cry.

‘I suppose you have not believed me.’ Narada said, putting his hand on the cobbler's shoulder to try comfort him. ‘I did not mean to make fun of you or cheat you ...’

‘Certainly! Only my Lord Vishnu could do that!’ said the cobbler, suddenly. He seemed not to have heard Narada.

Narada stopped short. The humble cobbler had believed the story about the elephant and the needle!

‘There is nothing impossible for Vishnu!’ The cobbler exclaimed through tears of joy. ‘Does not He make possible miracles, more impossible than simply passing an elephant through the eye of a needle? How do you explain, if not by His hand, the blinding brightness of the sun, the dance of the trees with the wind, the celestial colours of flowers and butterflies? Where would it come from, if not from Him, the sweetness of the love we feel for fathers, mothers, wives and children, the beauty of fidelity and the dedication of our friends? But look ...’

The cobbler suddenly turned around and, returning to where he had been sitting, patching shoes, bent down and picked something up off the ground.

‘Look at the banyan seed!’ He told Narada as he turned around. ‘Within this tiny seed there is a tree as immense, as gigantic as the one which covers us with its shadow. We cannot see it yet, but that tree is in there with all certainty.’

And staring into Narada's eyes, he added:

‘If Vishnu can compress a gigantic banyan tree into this tiny seed, how can an elephant not go through the eye of a needle?’

Now the one who cried was Narada. What a great teaching of wisdom the humble cobbler had given him! And now he understood why his friend and lord, Narayana, Vishnu, had sent him to speak with that cobbler, instructing him exactly with the words He had indicated. This time, the messenger of wisdom had not been him, but a cobbler, and Vishnu had managed well to teach him a great lesson. □

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Comments

This is a reduced version of a Vedic story titled in some places 'The Brahmin and the Cobbler,' in which the didactic practice of comparing two models of spirituality and behaviour is used. The adaptation offered here was inspired by the one that Ranchor Prime made in 1992, which is focusses exclusively on the character of the cobbler, ignoring the Brahmin section.

Since we are talking about the banyan seed, I would suggest that it could be accompanied in some telling situations with this shorter story, which appears in the Changdoya Upanishad 6.8.7:

Tat Tvam Asi

A long time ago, in a village in India, there lived a boy named Shvetaketu, the son of a wise man named Uddālaka. When the boy reached the age of twelve, Uddālaka sent his son to study the wisdom books from the great masters. When he reached the age of twenty-four, after studying all the Vedas, the erudite Shvetaketu returned home. But Uddālaka perceived a disturbing change in him: the young man now believed that he knew everything.

One day, Uddālaka asked his son to accompany him to the family garden. In it grew an old and leafy banyan, which had given shade to his father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather and who knows how many more ancestors.

'Shvetaketu, my son,' said Uddālaka, taking the young man under the shade of the old tree, 'I wonder if you have really learnt the teachings of the Vedas. Can you hear what cannot be heard with the ear? Can you see what cannot be seen through the eyes? Do you know what the mind cannot know?'

Shvetaketu seemed confused. None of his teachers had told him about this.

'What do you mean, dear father? Explain, please.'

'Have they not taught you that, if you know a handful of clay, you know everything that is made of clay?'

‘I do not know that teaching,’ said Shvetaketu. ‘Please, father, teach me.’

‘As you wish, my son,’ the father replied. ‘Bring me a banyan fruit.’

Shvetaketu went to a low branch and took a ripe fig.

‘Here you are, father.’

‘Open it,’ Uddālaka said. ‘Tell me, what do you see inside?’

‘I see many seeds.’

‘Open a seed, Shvetaketu,’ said the father, ‘and tell me what you see.’

‘I see nothing at all,’ replied the young man.

‘My son, that “nothing” is the subtle essence of all living beings, which seems as nothing because you cannot perceive it. But out of that nothing emerged this magnificent old tree.’

‘That nothingness, my son, that invisible essence,’ Uddālaka continued, ‘is the Spirit of the entire universe, the Self of all that exists, the ocean of pure consciousness. That is the Truth. That is the Reality. That is the unmanifested Self. Out of that you emerged, just like the banyan tree emerged from that nothingness.’

And, with a slight murmur, Uddālaka added:

‘*Tat tvam asi*. You are that, Shvetaketu.’ □

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This adaptation is based on Egenes & Reddy (2002) and Spiritual Heritage Education Network (1999).

Sources

Egenes, T. & Reddy, K. (2002). *Eternal Stories from the Upanishads*. New Delhi: Smriti Books.

Prime, R. (1992). The banyan seed. In *Hinduism and Ecology: Seeds of Truth*, pp. 2-3. London: Cassell & World Wide Fund of Nature.

Spiritual Heritage Education Network (1999). The Story of Svetaketu.
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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

