

**THE TEMPLE OF
HANUMAN**

THE TEMPLE OF HANUMAN

by

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ISBN: 978-0-557-19932-7

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The Garden Enclosed, the Fountain Sealed

The religion of God—the journey of Rama, the revelation of Krishna, the way of the Buddha—is a garden enclosed. In that garden is a sealed fountain above a well of fathomless waters. Why sound the depths of that abyss when the fountain pours forth without end? Let them be ashamed who say that fountain has run dry! If you drink from your hands or the bottle, from the cup or a jar of clay, it still quenches thirst. If you bow to Rama, or Krishna, or the Buddha, you bow before the One. If you call Him Vishnu, or Shiva or Brahma, you call upon the One.

This work is not a history, but is in the likeness of a history, or the recollection of a likeness. This work is the dream of a memory, not the dream made real. It is not the work of a scholar or even one well educated. This work is a niche in which I have placed a key carved of rosewood. This key is to a single door to a single chamber of the King's treasury. I offer it to share with you a glimpse of what I have seen and this is the likeness. Let your heart, not your intellect, judge the value of this key and of the treasures in His keep. Judge its worth and assay its truth.

This is what I offer you. But what will we offer Him? What gift is best when He wants for nothing, and the worlds are but dust to Him? Would you carry water to the sea or bring light to the sun? Rumi says, "Bring Him a

mirror.” But even this is not fitting except that you become the mirror. Surrender to Him what He gave you: your life, your will, all that you are or ever will be. The one who offers this becomes the gift and one with the Giver.

God has been kind to me, though I have deserved terrible punishment. Behind my every austerity are a dozen of His laws that I have transgressed. God has permitted this hand to write these words. This, however, is not a sign of His blessing, but of His mercy. While I am entirely in His power, He permits all men to err or to do right, according to their characters and capacities. Therefore, allow me to speak to your heart while blood still flows through these veins. Be kind and forgive me when I speak too boldly or when I am in manifest error. And if at any moment my words contradict the words of the Most Pure, follow God and obey Him, knowing that His way is better for you.

If She pleases, the Handmaid of God will correct me where I have gone astray, but I will not be alive to accept this correction. O daughter of Ahmad, sister of Moses, mother of Jesus, let me be the first to adore You, though I am the least of believers. Let me be among the first to love You. In that forest clearing, along the lantern-lit path, I imagined I saw Your home, its graceful gable crowning walls painted red and green. You held a lantern in Your hand. Did I glimpse You in misty dawn or in hazy twilight? O houri, O Janáb-i-Táhira, O Mona, O Kuan Yin, I saw

Your pale face and Your sparkling eyes framed by black tresses. While the light of the world was failing, You shone like the moon. When You have arisen, I will be long dead. Let me be the dust at Your feet. Let me be the dirt upon the path You will tread, upon that path I have dreamed.

She cherished the scarf with which they choked her. She blessed the waters in which they cast her down. She kissed the noose with which they hanged her. O you who read these words, forgive me and seek God's pardon on my behalf. I am entirely in His power.

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The Shadow Play

What caste are you that you are cast out by His command? What obligation will you fulfill if, by fulfilling it, you are distant from Him? You cannot uphold dharma if in your actions you have rejected Him or if by your actions He has rejected you. There is no dharma except that you must obey Him. If you turn away from His command, you have strayed from dharma, though you may be the father of every righteous act and the paragon of every virtue. O doer, surrender the fruits of what you have done. Give it in the way of charity, but do not be proud in your liberality, for this is not submission. If they accuse you of idolatry, they are right, for by acting to achieve the rewards of your actions, you have achieved your ends and not His. There can be no “you” remaining. You cannot offer what you have also consumed. Such an offering is pollution itself. O widower, cast yourself into the pyre as the moth to the lantern. Let yourself be consumed in fire. Give up all hope for yourself. Cast away worthless ambition. Do not seek His pleasure for some mean reward. Serving Him is sufficient reward for you.

Remember the names of Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva and see that they are in truth One word, One voice, the One unalterable as He alters, invisible as He invests every atom of creation with His command, unknowable even as He is

the source of all knowledge. From the lotus of His navel, He has created the universe.

In Kerala, where I stopped for a time, I saw a shadow play of the *Ramayana*. The day was warm. My eyes gradually dimmed. The shadows took on wondrous shapes in many colors. My mind drifted and I dozed to the sound of Rama's wedding and exile, Sita's abduction and rescue, Ravana's defeat and death, and Rama's coronation.

In his time, Rama was the best of creation, born the oldest of four noble brothers. He was the avatar of Vishnu; he was the presence of God on Earth. His brother Lakshmana was his dedicated friend. His brother Bharata was the exemplar of dharma. His brother Shatrughna was Bharata's dearest companion. Rama was the favorite son of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya and was trained by Vasishtha and Viswamithra. In a trial of strength, he broke Shiva's bow and strung Vishnu's bow and in this there are signs to be understood. He captured the heart of Sita; she became his only wife. After Rama came of age, his father stepped down from the throne hoping to see Rama crowned in his place. But Kaikeyi, Rama's stepmother, conspired to give the throne to her son, Bharata. Calling upon Dasaratha to fulfill a promise he had once made to her, Kaikeyi sent Rama into exile for fourteen years. And though the people, and even her own son, cursed Kaikeyi, Rama was obedient and obeyed Kaikeyi and fulfilled his father's promise.

Renouncing the luxuries of the palace, Sita and Lakshmana followed Rama into forest exile. There they lived for many years as ascetics until Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, abducted Sita, carrying her away to his kingdom.

Searching for his wife, Rama killed Vali, who was king of the monkeys, and crowned Sugriva king in Vali's place. Hanuman, a servant of Sugriva, set fire to Ravana's city on the island of Lanka, returning to Rama with news of Sita's whereabouts. Under Rama's command, Sugriva and Hanuman led their army against Ravana. When Rama defeated the demon king, Sita proved to the people that she had been faithful. At the end of his fourteen years of exile, Rama returned to Ayodhya where Bharata had ruled not as king, but as Rama's regent. Rama was crowned in his father's city. He restored peace in his family, making Bharata his heir and granting Kaikeyi the forgiveness she sought saying, "Though you contrived against me, God made it for good. You are as much my mother as the one who bore me, therefore accept me again as your son."

This I dreamed for nineteen days. I slept undisturbed in the shadow of the temple without food or water. On the evening of the twentieth day I awoke. The play was done. The audience had gone. The performers were packing away their puppets. The one who had played Hanuman said to me, "We have given you a fine gift in exchange for your austerities. Do not squander it." I pressed my palms

together and bowed my head to him. He held up his right hand and said, "You have heard the tale of Rama. Go to Sarnath and hear the tale and the teachings of Krishna."

As I walked away from the temple grounds, a sliver of moon was setting in the west. The greater part of its surface, untouched by the sun, was awash in the light of the Earth. It glowed dimly and ghostly white. I saw in that moon the whole of the *Ramayana*; that splinter so well illuminated, bright like a struck match, and above it the full surface. I thought, "I will not let the brightest part distract me; I will look with deeper perception and see the whole of it, the entirety of it."

By the ceremony of the cord, see how your actions are connected to Him. Perform your duty; honor the righteous who came before you, even as you seek a path like theirs; forgive the unrighteous, even as you repudiate them. Be careful that the cord not wrap around your neck. It is better to break the cord of duty than to be stillborn. A Brahmin stopped me on the road to Varanasi. He said to me, "Foreigner, why are you here?"

I said, "I am passing through."

The Brahmin was not satisfied with my answer and demanded, "What is your name?" I told him, but he said, "No, your name is Shani and you bring bad luck with you in the dust that trails you, that you kick up. I won't let you

pollute the Ganges; I won't let you enter Sarnath. Stay away from my people."

I said, "I mean no harm to anyone." But the Brahmin stood unmoving before me.

An ascetic, a man of great age, overheard our conversation and said to the Brahmin, "Let him go on his way. Shani may bring misfortune, but it is often only apparently so. When Rama was exiled for fourteen years, the world cried out at this misfortune. But in fourteen years, Rama restored dharma to the world. Though the Pandava were exiled for thirteen years, at the end of their exile they restored light to a world in darkness. Do you recall how Shani's gaze caused the decapitation of Ganesha? Yet the head of that holy child was replaced by something better. Or was it misfortune that Ganesha broke off a tusk to write the story of our people? Though Shani may come to break our traditions, what use is the cord of tradition if it ties us to tradition's corpse? Let him pass; we are the ones not moving on this road."

After I entered the deer park, I wandered for many hours. Where the Buddha once stood among his disciples, I saw a television, which was garlanded, covered in flowers and wreaths, surrounded by statues. A hundred people gathered before it, intently watching a retelling of the *Mahabharata*, the story of the conflict between the Pandava,

who were the five sons of Pandu, and their cousins, the Kaurava, the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra. In the field of Kurukshetra, the Pandava with their allies and their armies clashed with the armies of the Kaurava.

I did not sleep as I had done in Kerala. I listened and watched intently the story of the Pandava, the five brothers, and their wife Draupadi and their children. Yudishtira was the eldest son of Pandu. Yudishtira's brother Arjuna was Krishna's friend. Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kaurava, hated and envied his cousins. He cheated Yudishtira of his kingdom, humiliated Draupadi, and sent the Pandava into exile for thirteen years.

When they ended their exile, the Pandava sought the return of their kingdom, which was their birthright. Duryodhana refused, even as Krishna promised his defeat and destruction if he denied the Pandava. Seeking to avert war with his cousins, Yudishtira asked for only five villages, one for himself and one for each of his brothers. But Duryodhana still refused, even as the Pandava gathered an army of supporters, friends and allies.

Krishna, who was the avatar of Vishnu and the face of God on Earth, came as an ambassador, hoping to persuade Duryodhana and his allies, including Karna, Bhishma, and Drona, not to fight and to relent. But Duryodhana was stubborn and ignored the advice of Bhishma and Drona, who loved the Pandava and who knew the Kaurava

could not win against them. Krishna's final attempt was unsuccessful. The war lasted eighteen days. Krishna revealed himself fully to his friend Arjuna, to prompt him to fight, to kill even those he loved. After Bhishma and Drona were killed, Arjuna struck Karna down at Krishna's command. And, with Krishna's advice, Bhima killed Duryodhana. The Pandava defeated the Kaurava, though at heavy cost to themselves and their families. In this way, Krishna restored order to the world, defeated the wicked, and taught the yoga of wisdom.

The program ended and I stood up. In the crowd I saw the actor who had played Arjuna. I caught his eye and he approached slowly through the well-wishers and admirers who clung to him. When at last he stood before me, I pressed my palms together in greeting and congratulated him on his performance. He did not reply, but said to me, "Remember that I flew the flag of Hanuman in battle. Consider the meaning of this. Do not imagine that you are always aware of your duty or that your father's obligations are necessarily yours. This is dharma: seek Him out in the world. Purify your heart and with the eye of detachment find your way not on the basis of what your fathers have done, but according to His will and His command. This is dharma: seek Him out in the world. You will find Him if you but look to Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha and discover that they are in truth One word, One voice, the

One unalterable as He alters, invisible as He invests every atom of creation with His command, unknowable even as He is the source of all knowledge.

“After the river Ganges flowed over Shiva’s locks, it reached the three worlds. This sacred river flowed at once among devas, among men, among rakshasas. Though they have called this river by a thousand names, still it is one, it is the Ganges. Likewise, though He has walked among us with different names, performing different duties, teaching different lessons, consider that He has always performed only His will. The teacher does not teach a single lesson to his students, but teaches them differently every day according to their capacity and according to his goal. Why do men squabble and chatter among themselves and vaunt one lesson over another? They don’t see the source of those lessons. Honor the source of the Ganges, not the little part you have found or the first tributary in which you have washed, as though no other tributary existed. The river extends far beyond the range and realm of your vision.

To see the sea is not to deny the land,

To see the sun is not disbelief in the moon.

Lover of Truth, Truth has no need of you,

Nor does wisdom prefer the wise.

To wash in the Ganges is not an affront to the Indus.

“By His work, men perceive the illusion of the many, but He is and has been and always will be One. Do not doubt this. Do not allow your prejudice to cloud your judgment. Lift the veil of the illusion you have made for yourself and find Him within; open your breast like Hanuman and find Him revealed.”

The Temple of Hanuman

To crush an uprising among the Hindus, the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, marched his army across the plains of southern India. His devotion to the letter of Islam was famous and he had no patience either for rebellion or for the paganism and idolatry he saw among the inhabitants of his empire. During his reign, Aurangzeb razed many Hindu temples and, using the same stones, built mosques in their place. Though he hesitated to put Hindus to the sword and did not often force conversion to Islam, he considered his empire a Muslim one and exerted himself to convert his subjects to the faith to which he and his fathers had sworn allegiance. But secretly in his heart he wondered at the proliferation of faiths among men and how so many millions could deny God and continue to crawl in dust before their worthless idols. He said, "Has the truth not come? Has falsehood not vanished away?"

As Aurangzeb marched with his army through the land, he came upon a temple to Hanuman, the monkey. According to the *Ramayana*, Hanuman served Lord Rama. Rama had been a king of Ayodhya many centuries before. The people believed Rama was an incarnation of God and that Hanuman, his servant, was a deva of great power.

When he came upon the stone temple, Aurangzeb ordered his soldiers to destroy it. The emperor found it

offensive. He said, "Men should not worship a monkey, or make obeisance to idols, for there is no god but God." As he spoke these words, and as his soldiers approached the temple, a young and beautiful Brahmin boy, dressed in saffron-colored robes, came out to greet them. He asked to speak to the emperor, but Aurangzeb's soldiers worried that this was a ruse and that the boy planned some harm upon their master. So they tied the boy's hands and bound his arms and legs in bark and brought him to Aurangzeb's carriage where the Emperor reclined beneath the shade of the many branches of a golden rosewood tree.

Aurangzeb said, "What do you want, boy?"

The child said, "I am a friend, my Lord, and your subject. I am a supplicant. I've come to petition you to spare the temple. I make my home here and have nowhere else to go. Your great army has come and the ground trembles at their approach. Like devas they are arrayed in splendid armor; their arms as thick as the trunks of elephants, their weapons shining and glorious, like rays of the sun shimmering upon a restless sea. Their shadow clouds the world and their shouts terrify rakshasas and devas alike. What will become of those who would oppose this army or their glorious lord, the emperor of this world? Confronted by these men, your subjects are helpless and entreat your protection from them.

“O king of nations, as the black hair on your head and your face is tinged with white, so is your irresistible strength colored with wisdom. O conqueror of the world, you are a splendid jewel befitting both crown and throne. Your father named you properly. You are the greatest of your line. You are the noblest son of noble fathers. You are the strength of God on Earth, and I am terrified before you. I can offer nothing more than friendship and obedience. My poor home is worth less than the least jewel upon your breast; this ancient temple, less than a single stone set upon a ring on your smallest finger. You are the maintainer of what is proper and the keeper of dharma, and lord of the entire world. Allow me to pay homage to your sovereignty and to laud and glorify your name in my temple if you will but spare it.”

Aurangzeb said, “You speak sweetly. Your voice is the nightingale. Your words are honey and heavenly wine. Your beauty is soothing collyrium. But I am Muslim. What have I to do with dharma?”

The boy said, “My Lord, you are the hand of dharma, you are a god among the gods. What you say is law. Be wise as your fathers were wise, for your strength outstrips their own; let your mercy therefore outstrip your strength. This is dharma. Do what must be done and act according to righteousness and godliness. This is dharma. Spare this

poor boy's home upon the hill. This is dharma, O king, O master of the world and conqueror of the nations. I am a supplicant and a servant and make obeisance to you as Hanuman made obeisance to Sri Rama."

Aurangzeb said, "I won't spare this temple or leave one stone standing upon another. I will keep its foundation and you will build a mosque here, a place proper for the worship of God. This temple to a monkey is an offense to God. Idolatry is not permitted in my empire or among my subjects."

The boy said, "Noble king, I'm not a worshipper of idols nor are those who come to this temple. It is holy and consecrated to God. So too would your mosque be holy, even as you built it with the stones pulled down from temples before it. Yet just as your sons are your flesh and blood, honor this temple as you would have your sons honor their father. Build a mosque nearby, for everywhere there are stones not yet used to build a house in which to worship God."

Aurangzeb said, "This wretched and ruined shrine is not holy, nor was it ever. This temple is offensive. Islam is not the child of Hinduism nor should Muslims honor Hindu temples, for there is no relation between them. Idolatry is an offense. The worship of other deities is an offense. There are no devas; there is no god but God."

The youth said, “What makes your mosque holy and this shrine unholy? Our ancient texts commemorate the Land of the Seven Rivers and acknowledge the holiness of those rivers. What made these seven rivers holy? They were not intrinsically so, for what river is virtuous, or faithful, or loving? Recall the mighty Sarasvati, called by ancient priests and sages the best of all rivers, the best mother, the holiest goddess.

*The Sarasvati flows; she is our sure defense, our iron fortress.
Like a chariot she hurtles forward; who could resist her?*

“The river fed a million mouths, and drowned those careless in her current. Yet she went dry and nothing remains of her, except a few broken-hearted remnants and mentions in the *Vedas*. But can you claim that this extinct river never fed those millions or drowned those forgotten children? It was holy; this is true. But consider what made it so?

“Nothing is holy except that Vishnu accepts it, invests it with holiness. God is not for the river; the river is for God and commemoration of Him. If you circumambulate the ashram, remember the One for Whom the ashram exists. What dharma is preserved by a stroll around lifeless stone, except that God commands it?

“Muhammad prayed toward Jerusalem, but God commanded him to turn toward the Kaba. Jerusalem was not commemorated, nor the Kaba. These are but places. Yet you accuse of idolatry those who turn toward the image of Vishnu, or Brahma, or Shiva. Yes, some are in error by worshipping the images themselves. But not all are in error, for others turn to the three names of the One to worship God, just as you turn toward the qiblah, not worshipping the qiblah, but the One who established the direction of prayer.”

Aurangzeb said, “But the Holy Prophet destroyed idols! They were thrown down and cast into cleansing fire. Their presence made the Kaba unclean. Follow Muhammad’s practice and throw these idols down and help us wreck this shrine and accept a sweet reward. I will make you a prince; I will reward you on Earth and God will reward you in Paradise.”

The youth said, “I need no reward. Muhammad did not destroy every idol. Still an image of Mary the mother of Jesus he left intact. Though Christians were in error for their use of icons, Muhammad did not arise among Christians. He was born among Arabs who did not use idols to commemorate God, but to venerate the idols themselves. They worshipped fragments of senseless stone and rotting wood, seeing nothing above this, nothing beyond this. Yet I will allow that this idolatry is a danger

and I will not resist your destruction of idols in this shrine, if you find idols within. But spare the shrine itself.”

Aurangzeb said, “I see no difference in your worship from their error. Don’t think I’m ignorant or unfamiliar with your fairy tales and fantasies of devas and rakshasas. I know the story of Rama and the monkeys that served him. No Muslim could accept these absurdities as true.”

The boy said, “Don’t reject those wise creatures who served Rama nor deny those devas and rakshasas. Just as Rama knew them and contended with them, so too did Solomon know the language of the animals and keep a bird as his closest friend. These Hindu devas, are they so different from angels and djinn and servants close to His throne? Those Hindu rakshasas, are they so different from those djinn and demons enslaved by Solomon, builders of the Temple?”

The Road to Agra

Aurangzeb said, "You have been instructed in the faiths of people of the book. How is it that you remain enslaved to the false religion of my most ignorant subjects?"

The boy said, "O conqueror of the world, conquer your prejudice. It is founded on the slanders spread by ignorant and fanatical mullahs. Do not vaunt your faith too much over the faiths that preceded it, lest then you are unprepared for the faith that supersedes your own. Your venerable fathers saw a little of the light of truth within my faith. Open your eyes as they did."

Aurangzeb said, "Their vision was clouded and they were in error. They prized peace with idolaters over holy war."

The youth said, "O king, you must give up this prejudice and look with a heart purified of pride and without attachment to worldly things. You are a prisoner in the wheel of samsara; escape this world and you will see this evident truth. There is a road from here to Agra. If you are one mile upon that road or a thousand miles, are you not still upon that road? Though you may be upon that road surrounded by desert, or upon that road shaded by forest, is it not the same road? Though the sun may be shining upon that road, though the rain may be falling upon it, the road is the same. That stretch of the road

does not contradict this stretch; nor is the first mile more offensive to it than the last. Rise up above the road and you will see that single path from here to Agra, from this temple to the door of your palace and to the foot of your bed. To deny this truth is to turn your back upon the unity of God. To deny this is to violate tawhid, to be an infidel!”

When the boy said these words, Aurangzeb’s mouth fell open in astonishment. His soldiers became angry and one of the emperor’s guards stepped forward and struck the boy’s mouth with the back of a clenched fist. The boy fell, unable in his bonds to catch himself, and blood dribbled from his lips. The guard said, “Do not speak impudently!”

Aurangzeb remained silent but composed himself. He held out his hands and said, “Do not beat him. Pick the boy up; put him on his feet.” When the boy stood again before him, the emperor approached him with a piece of purple silk and wiped the blood from the boy’s face.

Aurangzeb said, “Little Brahmin, you should be more careful than to speak this way to your betters. With bound hands what defense can you offer? But I am patient and I am sorry that those in my service sometimes act too rashly, without thought.”

The boy bowed and said, “My Lord, you are gracious and kind. And I sometimes speak too bluntly; it is the habit of my people. But we do so not in anger or to offend; we

speak in affectionate anger, as one might chide those we love most.”

Aurangzeb said to his soldiers as much as to the boy, “Speak openly with me. This is my boon to you. But do not overstep these bounds. What you’ve said is clever, but cleverness does not make true. Sweet words are as much within the devil’s power as they are within the prophet’s.”

The boy said, “I don’t ask you to turn your back on Islam, for it is the religion of God. I ask only that you look with clear vision with a dilated heart upon the way of Rama, king of Ayodhya, and you will see within his life and his works signs of God. God reveals Himself to all peoples through many prophets and teachings; tawhid requires that you acknowledge not only the unity of God but also the unity of His messengers.

“O Lord, fear and desire, attachment and short-sightedness are the children of illusion and prevent men from obtaining what is best for them. Look through the lens of perception, with the eye of detachment. See to those distant shores that you too hastily deny exist. The world is far greater than our feeble minds perceive. Acknowledge that greatness while you are alive, though your denial will have no effect on its existence. Look, brave king of nations, and you will see clearly and perceive the beauty of God’s design and the operation of His will and

the work He performs among all men, not just among your own tribe.

“Dasaratha, king of Ayodhya, fathered four sons who were loved by the people. They were the noblest sons ever given to a father. But the king loved nothing in the world more than Rama, his oldest boy. Even in his youth, Rama was handsome, wise, and strong, more even than his noble brothers. Rama possessed every virtue, loved and obeyed his father, and was a wise exponent of dharma. Rama was just and merciful and performed every duty and fulfilled every obligation. Rama knew no other path and was unacquainted with fault or failure, but was quick to forgive the faults of others. He sought no pleasure except to honor and serve his family, his teachers and elders, and he tirelessly looked after the welfare of the people of Ayodhya.

“In looks, Rama was a vision to every eye. His hair was the color of the raven’s wing, his eyes bright and lotus-shaped, his face shining, lighting up the eyes of others as the sun and moon light the sky. He was so handsome that, upon seeing him, the people of Ayodhya neglected their precious idols. They said, ‘Rama is, in every way, more worthy of veneration than any work of art, than any worldly masterpiece. We will pray to Vishnu through remembrance of Rama, for he is truly the face of God on Earth.’

“In warfare he had no equal. His skill with the bow was unrivaled and he could ride horses and elephants with ease and grace. Had the devas and rakshasas banded together to overcome him, they would have failed, for Rama was the strength of God on Earth.

“But Rama was most loved by his father. Dasaratha was overcome sometimes with fear that Rama might leave Ayodhya. Kausalya, the king’s wisest wife and the mother of Rama, consoled her husband saying, ‘Rama will never leave you unless you ask him to go. He is completely devoted to you and would do whatever you command, no matter how difficult and painful.’ Dasaratha replied, ‘I will never let him go.’

“One day, while Rama was still a young man, Viswamithra came to Ayodhya and sought an audience with the king. When Dasaratha heard the name of that venerable sage, his heart filled with joy. Viswamithra was no common ascetic. Once he had been a mighty king, possessing great wealth and power. But because he sought inexhaustible wealth and irresistible power, he threw off the mantle of kingship and the yoke of worldly possessions and became an ascetic, performing fearful austerities to gain the favor of the devas. He gave up the couch of repose for the cold ground and a stone pillow. He traded his beautiful consorts and their sweet caresses for scraps of bark that

scratched his flesh. He swapped an army for the strength only of his own arms and legs. He said, 'I have given up all things that many spend lifetimes to acquire. But what they seek leads only to suffering and blindness. What I have gained is far more precious than all the treasures of every king and all the conquests of every army. I have communed with Vishnu, the One God absolute from Whom all things have sprung and to Whom all things revert and upon Whom every man, god and demon is utterly reliant. God has shown me why I was born among mortal men and what duty I must perform. I am in God's service. This is my single desire: to conform to His dharma, for there is no other dharma but His.'

"With his ministers and courtiers in attendance, Dasaratha greeted Viswamithra in his audience chamber. The king pressed his palms together in greeting and offered the sage water to refresh himself. Viswamithra thanked the king but turned away the water with his hand. He said, 'Noble king, I've come to ask a favor of you.'

"Dasaratha said, 'I'm honored by your presence and am blessed among men to have spoken with you. You are famous among the wise and I will personally fulfill your request, whatever it is. Who could refuse the request of one so holy and so pure?'

"Viswamithra said, 'I've purified myself to make a sacrifice in the wilderness. Before I can complete this

sacrifice, I must perform certain rites upon the altar. Yet two rakshasas have obstructed these rites by their presence. I am, of course, sufficiently strong to cast out these rakshasas, but cannot do so in my state of ritual purity, for violence is unclean.’

“The king said, ‘I understand you completely. I will lead my army to the place where you are performing this sacrifice. We will destroy these rakshasas for you and you may complete your sacrifice.’

“Viswamithra said, ‘No, you don’t need to trouble yourself, nor do I wish to keep your soldiers from their duty here in Ayodhya. I need only the assistance of one.’

“Dasaratha said, ‘Then I will come armed and alone and will defend your sacrifice personally. I’m old, but will risk my life to assist you.’

“Viswamithra said, “No, I can’t keep you from your work here as king.”

“Dasaratha said, “Then who can I send?” But the king’s face blanched. He suddenly knew what the sage desired. When the name of Rama fell from Viswamithra’s lips, Dasaratha lost consciousness. After his ministers revived the king, Dasaratha pleaded with the sage. “No, O Brahmin. Take me instead. Rama is still so young and I can’t bear that any harm should come to him.’

“Viswamithra became angry at this refusal. He said, ‘You have given your word!’

“Dasaratha said, ‘Rama is too young and inexperienced. He can’t face these rakshasas. Take me, master of dharma, and I’ll put these demons to flight.’

“Viswamithra stood up from his seat beside the king and said, ‘Enough! I expected the promise of Dasaratha to be worth something. Since it isn’t, and since I’ve failed in my mission, I will leave you and your family in peace.’

“The king, recognizing his duty, stood up and said, ‘Master, I will fulfill my oath and entrust Rama into your care. I ask only that his devoted brother, Lakshmana, accompany him.’

“Viswamithra smiled and agreed to this, saying, ‘Your love for Rama is honorable. No harm will come to him and he will return to you. You’re wise to follow dharma, for His way is irresistible. It is better to swim with the current, than flail and drown, for in either case the river has its way. But one day you will be parted from Rama again and he will not return to this city while you live. Beware your attachment. See that separation from him as the illusion that it is. Break the wheel of samsara and you will be reunited with Rama forever.’

“O emperor, see the way of God in Viswamithra’s austerities and his sacrifice, a clear path for you. You need not give up crown and throne, but you must give up your most precious notions if you are to see through the illusion.

See in the fulfillment of Dasaratha's promise the straight way and a road to true understanding. You have caught a scent of salt air, but this is not the same as a view of the ocean.

“The sage Gautam had as his wife a beautiful woman named Ahalya. Her skin was light and without blemish and her hair black as midnight. Her eyes, shaped like the leaves of the lotus, shone like stars and her gaze was mesmerizing. She spoke with a voice like the tinkling of bells and her breath was sweeter than any perfume. Her waist was slender and her hips slim and she walked with celestial grace. Ahalya's beauty was so perfect, Indra, king of devas, desired union with her.

“Indra was very handsome and charming and more to her liking than her husband. Yet she remained faithful to Gautam and refused Indra's advances. So one morning, while Gautam went to the river to purify himself, Indra came into her room, wearing the appearance of Gautam. Ahalya hesitated, but at last let him into her bed. When her passions were satisfied, Gautam entered the room. The sage was wise and saw through the illusion, recognizing Indra in his wife's embrace. Gautam cried out and cursed the king of devas with a humiliating chastisement. Then he turned to his unfaithful wife.

“Ahalya cried out, ‘O husband, I was deceived by an illusion. How can I resist Indra, king of devas, when he

comes to me with your appearance, in a form pleasing to me? Have pity on me and forgive my disgrace.’

“Gautam could not restrain his anger. He said, ‘The whole universe is illusion and professed ignorance is not innocence.’ So he turned her to stone.

“After many years, Rama came upon Gautam’s abandoned ashram and recognized the life within the stone. Having pity, Rama released Ahalya from Gautam’s curse and transformed her to her original state. She fell to Rama’s feet and blessed him. Rama removed the stain of disgrace from her.

“Through Gautam’s curse Ahalya realized Gautam’s wish—to lay eyes on God. Solid stone became flesh and blood by Rama’s grace, just as the world took form at God’s pleasure. Where illusion had robbed her of fidelity, and where stone had imprisoned her, Rama had restored her honor and opened her eyes.

“O king of the world, surrender the thing you most cherish and abandon fear. Give up your narrow view of Islam; it is a prison to you. You have overcome many enemies and obstacles and have mastered the world. Your strength of will is famous and your name will be remembered. Now you must choose how it will be remembered, with glory among your descendants or with shame and sorrow? Master yourself and see the truth of

Rama's station through the true prism of Islam. If your pride prevents you, then you will persist in error and your works will be to no good end and you will be a prisoner in the wheel, a victim of samsara.”

The Mutilation of Surpanakha

Aurangzeb said, “You are devious in argument. Pious men should clasp their hands to their ears in your presence. I would accept these words as unalloyed truth, but men of learning and intelligence armed me in my youth. As I learned to fight from masters in the art of war, so too I was taught to reason and believe by the wisest of my father’s court. I am acquainted with your legends, as I am with the *Quran*. I see nothing in common between them. You build arguments on a weak foundation. You contradict your conclusions with the very evidences upon which you rest them. If Rama were a messenger of God, then tell me why his teachings differ from Muhammad’s? In fact, what teachings does Rama bring at all? What guidance has he provided? We have only the *Ramayana*, a wretched patchwork of shameful stories and monstrous half-truths. Consider Rama’s murder of Vali. I am aware of Rama’s strange self-justification, but this is poor solace for Rama’s unrighteousness and his thoughtless violence. He deserved punishment, not praise. But the tellers of the *Ramayana* are all Rama’s partisans and they put words even into Vali’s mouth praising their flawed hero.”

The boy said, “O king, if you had heard Rama’s reasons from Rama’s mouth, you would not slander him. And if you consider what I have said to you today, you would

realize that Rama's killing of Vali conformed to dharma and was consistent with Rama's station. In this you might find Rama's teaching."

Aurangzeb said, "If I accept the validity of these tales of Rama, I cannot put aside Rama's wrongdoing. I will not allow you to fly circles around this. Rama hid himself and attacked and killed one who had not offended him. He put Vali to death, not face-to-face, but secretly and maliciously."

The boy said, "Rama's wrongdoing was only seemingly so. When Rama accepted Kaikeyi's wish, fulfilling his father's oath, and went into exile, the people were distraught and wondered why their prince had put aside his royal robes and put on the rags of an ascetic. A few said, 'Perhaps he has committed a crime and his exile is his punishment at the king's command.' When Rama's brother, Lakshmana, heard this talk, he drew his sword and said, 'Let me taste the blood of anyone who accuses Rama of wrongdoing! He has done nothing wrong. Imagine that he had committed a crime! Even so, a crime from Rama's hand is a mercy and a blessing for those who perceive properly; it is no crime at all. It is only through Rama that we perceive and discern right from wrong. He decrees a thing "Be" and it is. Have no doubt about this, or you are lost. A thousand years of your righteousness will be accounted as nothing if you have not acknowledged the truth of this.'"

Aurangzeb said, “Rama’s expulsion was at the behest of the envious. In this, Rama was innocent. But I have asked about Vali and Rama’s murder of that mighty king.”

The boy said, “Your question is fair, but Rama’s reasons for attacking Vali are clear. Vali did not pardon Rama, but sought pardon from him. Through Rama Vali was revealed just as through Rama was Sita revealed. Without Rama, these two, the one condemned and the one devoted, would remain veiled; Sita’s beauty hidden to Sita and Vali’s ugliness hidden to Vali; even as we are hidden to ourselves without His intervention. We are not less beautiful or ugly in ignorance, but ignorance obscures all and this is the true source of samsara.”

Aurangzeb said, “Still you do not answer me! I have read the *Ramayana* and have found no meaning in it, except that Sita was beautiful but foolish and that Rama was at turns cruel and kind with no apparent motive. This is not scripture; it is a book of fairy-tales fit for children. Rama was merely a man who lost his kingdom to his brother and lost his wife to Ravana and then by prowess and trickery regained them.”

The boy said, “Though kingship was his rightful inheritance, only when the Ravana of opposition was overcome would he be proclaimed king. Rama was born to undo Ravana, and then he might be crowned before the people. Rama did not have to

earn that right, but his mission was first to overcome Ravana in the world.”

Aurangzeb said, “Still, kingship was ultimately the consequence, and the motivating cause of Rama’s journey. This ‘face of God’ among men sounds like many men I have known, despicable in ambition and desperate for a crown.”

The boy said, “He has no use for ambition or crowns conferred by men. Rama was king before Ravana was born; Rama was king while Ravana lived; Rama was king after Ravana’s defeat. Rama was always king; but only after Ravana fell dead were the people able to recognize the king always in their midst. Only after you have put aside worldly desires will you see His face. Until then, there is only the Hanuman of prayer and hope. Though Hanuman may sometimes shrink to the size of a mouse, he may yet expand to fill the sky. Though Hanuman may be concealed in the trees, or be bound in ropes, he may yet set fire to the illusion that is the world. Be careful that if Hanuman burns down the world before your eyes you not hurry to rebuild it as Ravana did.”

Aurangzeb said, “You do not answer me, so let me be more direct. I know the story of Vali. Rama and Lakshmana came upon Sugriva and Hanuman in the forest. Sugriva was Vali’s brother, and Vali was the king of Kishkinda. But Vali had exiled Sugriva for usurping his throne. For

whatever reason, Rama chooses to make Sugriva his ally and called upon the monkey exile to challenge Vali, to fight for the crown Sugriva desired. Now Sugriva knew that Vali possessed incredible strength. He knew also that Vali could not be defeated in a fair fight. Rama said, 'Don't worry. I will hide in the trees and when the time is right, while you and Vali are fighting, I will strike Vali dead with an arrow. Sugriva knew that such an ambush might succeed and accepted Rama's shameful offer of assistance. The rest is as you know. Rama hid himself and, while Vali fought his brother, Rama killed the king of Kishkinda, fulfilling his terrible promise to Sugriva. Yet why? Surely Vali would have been Rama's ally if Rama had come to him instead of his outlaw brother. What crime did Vali commit against Rama? How could any man think Rama was good or decent, let alone a messenger of God?"

The boy said, "When Rama's arrow pierced Vali's flesh, Vali fell to the earth, paralyzed. A moment before he was unmatched among mortals; no man or beast could contend with him; no deva or demon could subdue him. He was the undisputed king of Kishkinda, invulnerable and unconquered until he was struck by Rama's arrow. In a moment, all his strength fled his body and he was powerless. In anguish he cried out, 'The devas promised me invincibility. How is it possible that I am dying from a single arrow?'

“Rama stepped forward and said, ‘What devas may give, I may rescind at will and at any moment.’

“Vali realized that Rama was Vishnu and was the face of God on Earth and that nothing could withstand his power. But, as his life ebbed, Vali asked Rama why he had struck him down. Vali said, ‘My quarrel was with my brother. He betrayed me and attempted to take my throne. Why have you interceded? I was the wronged one, not Sugriva.’

“Rama said, ‘You imagine you know the truth of the matter, but you are wrong. I see inside all hearts and know all truth. Sugriva was crowned, at the insistence of the ministers who served you and the people who sought guidance, after you were absent for a year. All presumed you dead. Only Sugriva held out hope, because he loved you and was the most loyal of your people. But, when you remained missing after a battle with a terrible enemy, even he conceded that you had perished. Only then did he accept the throne; and even this he accepted with tears in his eyes. Yet when you returned, belatedly and tardy to your duties, you accused Sugriva of betrayal and treason and cast him out. You forced his wife to become your own. This is worse than that Sugriva took your throne. He did so not knowing that you were alive. You acted purposefully to harm your brother. And you would have killed him today had I not preserved him from your power. So, when I found Sugriva

in his forest exile, I told him to confront you. I know you are stubborn and that you would attack your brother on sight. I told Sugriva that I would remain hidden from you, so that your heart would be revealed to him. And, as your heart was unchanged, I tipped it with an arrow. You wrongly exiled your brother and stole his wife, yet you imagine that you were the wronged one.'

"Vali continued to argue, 'This all may be true, but I am not subject to the laws of your people, Rama. We are a primitive tribe and we have no such laws of marriage.'

"Rama said, 'Do not quibble with me about my law. My word is the touchstone of right and wrong. To disagree with me about what is right is to abandon what is right. It is not for us to debate, but for you to obey. Do not say your customs differ from my law lest you be put outside of my law; mine is the highest and no custom however hallowed by time and usage supersedes that law. Though I have come before by other names with laws, even these are not now legitimate, except that I invest them again with legitimacy. When I come again by other names with laws, you are obliged to obey them accordingly, not by tying your neck to tradition but by submitting to me in every age and at all times. You are grown; do not wear a child's clothes. You are dying; put aside your armor and don the shroud. You and your people are intelligent and sensitive and civilized;

do not hide behind the lie that you have no moral code or that taking Sugriva's wife was lawful. I alone am the judge of what is and what is not lawful.'

"Vali said, 'This is right and what you say is right. This arrow is my reward for attacking my brother and usurping what was his and for accusing him when he was innocent. By your power I've cast off my ignorance. I was foolish; your arrow enlightens me. I renounce all things in this world and submit.'

"Rama said, 'This punishment is the only punishment you must suffer, Vali. Return to me. You were created as my sign. I made you and have prepared a place for you near my side.'"

Aurangzeb said, "You are Rama's partisan and will rationalize such an act. But what of Surpanakha? She fell in love with Rama and approached him demanding he take her as his wife. But Rama and Lakshmana taunted her for her ugliness and mutilated her, cutting off her nose and ears."

The boy said, "Let me recount that story and you will see how this action was right and just. Surpanakha was not an ordinary woman, but a demon. Lustful desire for Rama's looks drove her. She had no interest in Rama's heart. She was a devourer of men, an eater of human flesh, a murderer of sages, and her lust for Rama was no penance on her part. She took on the appearance of a

beautiful woman, for demons, like the monkeys serving Rama, may take the shape of any creature. So she concealed her monstrous appearance with the veil of deceit and demanded that Rama take her as his wife. Lakshmana could not see her true physical form, but both he and Rama at once recognized the monstrous disfigurement of her heart and her base motives. It was not Rama's love that she sought, but his physical person and she would permit no one to live who might stand between her and the object of her base desire. When Sita appeared, Surpanakha rushed forward to kill her, and to tear her flesh from her bones. But Lakshmana intervened and cut off Surpanakha's nose and her ears, just as you said. But to reveal Surpanakha's true form was not mutilation at Lakshmana's hands, but the outward revelation of the disfigurement Surpanakha had concealed. Rama knew Surpanakha's true appearance and Lakshmana's dagger made this hidden knowledge evident to all who had eyes to see. I doubt that Moses or Muhammad would have acted differently. When the earth opened up and swallowed Korah and his sons, the Hebrews marveled. But Aaron said, 'This is but the outward sign. Korah's enslavement to things of this world, like Pharaoh's drowning, was hidden. God has merely revealed their true state to you.'

Aurangzeb said, "You are a good defender of Rama. But how will you defend Krishna, whose wrongdoing was more

evident still? If Krishna is the knower of right and wrong, if he is the exemplar of divine justice, why his dalliances, his lies, his dissimulation? I think only for a moment upon the women with whom he surrounded himself, many who were married to other men, and I can imagine no defense for him. What of the story that Krishna stole the clothing of the women of Vraj as they bathed in the waters of a lake? If Rama was violent, cruel, and foolish, he was at least not an adulterer, a keeper of whores, who sought nothing in his worthless youth than to indulge his worthless desires.”

The boy said, “Your slanders resound only with the uninitiated. Such weeds take root only in barren ground. These stories of Krishna are not as you portray them, nor as you imagine them. Consider only the *Song of Songs*, and recollect the stories of Solomon and Balamah; yet would you accuse Solomon of adultery, or Balamah of whorishness?

“When Krishna was still young, the daughters of Vraj fell in love with him. Each girl desired that Krishna would become her husband. So they undertook a vow to the goddess Katyayani to obtain what they desired. At the banks of the river Kalindi, where every morning they bathed, they fashioned an image of the goddess in the sand, decorating her with red dye. Each morning, naked before they entered the water, the girls made obeisance to the idol,

and repeated their vow. For a month they performed this vow every morning, setting aside their clothes, praying to the idol, then bathing in the river Kalindi where they swam and sported and sang of Krishna.

“One day Krishna came upon the girls while they splashed in the river. By the riverbank he saw the idol and understood their petition as they sang of him. Yet they were oblivious to his presence. Stealthily he gathered up their clothes and climbed a tall tree. As they sang and played, he called down to them and said, ‘O ladies. I have heard your vow and understand the meaning of your idol in the sand. But I am here among you, and you have no need for idols. Come out to see me.’

“The girls were startled by Krishna’s voice out of darkness, but were overjoyed that he was with them, though he had their clothes and was in the tree above them, out of their reach. As Krishna called for them to come out of the river, the girls shrank deeper into the water to conceal their nakedness. Krishna called out, ‘Why do you hesitate? I am here, as you wished. Come out and let me see you.’

“The girls laughed and called back, ‘Please don’t joke with us. We can’t come out. Where are our clothes?’

“Krishna smiled and said, ‘I have your clothes. Come out and take them back from me.’

“The girls scolded Krishna, saying, ‘This is shameful. We love you and are devoted to you and yet you mock us

with your teasing. Return our clothes to us, beloved, for you know the way of dharma.’

“Krishna said, ‘You say that you love me and are devoted to me and that I know the way of dharma, but this is not true. I am myself the way of dharma, yet you do not obey me. Come out and I will forgive you and will return your clothes to you.’

“The girls relented and emerged from the water, modestly covering themselves with their hands and arms. They were smiling, but were bashful and embarrassed. With their clothes over his shoulder, Krishna climbed down from the tree and watched them as they shivered in the cold air. They called out to him to keep his promise and give them their clothes. But Krishna said, ‘You undertook a vow to attain my presence, but you violated that vow by bathing naked. Fold your hands upon your heads and offer obeisance to me. If you do not, your rites and devotions will come to nothing. I am the remover of imperfection. Obey me and attain what I desire for you.’

“Without hesitation they forgot themselves and obeyed Krishna without shame. When they made obeisance Krishna returned their clothes to them. He said, ‘To attain me, don’t worship idols in the sand. Don’t call on Katyayani or Indra, or any of the devas. Yet I am patient with you. If men worship even devas with humility performing rites to

obtain what they seek, they may acquire what they seek, but whatever they attain comes from my hand alone.”

The boy said, “There are many meanings to this story. The literal meaning is the least of them. Krishna represents God, the girls His devotees. They have worshipped improperly to attain His presence, but He forgives them and removes their imperfections. Abasing themselves to the idol in the sand to obtain Him, He appears to them and reveals to them a way to approach Him, though they did not see that simply by His presence He had already granted to them what they sought. Once they obeyed Him, following His dharma, forgetting themselves, their rites were fulfilled and their vows accomplished. In this there are lessons not for young girls who are in love, but for the wise.”

Aurangzeb said, “In other tales of these girls of Vraj as they grew into womanhood they abandoned their husbands and children, even newborns, to be near Krishna. They put aside all marital obligations; they gave no thought to domestic life, to pleasing husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers. How is it worship to disobey God in order to serve God? Explain this contradiction.”

The boy said, “The women of Vraj turned away from woman’s dharma; they threw down social order. They broke the wheel of samsara.

“The tears of those who loved them did not move their hearts. The harsh words of those who censured them did

not cause them shame. How is this right? But consider the difference. Hanuman was Sugriva's servant. Yet when Rama appeared, Hanuman left Sugriva's service without a word and became Rama's servant instead. Sugriva gave this no thought and himself became the servant of Rama.

“To the fettered heart, the gopis acted as harlots. What shame Sita might have called down upon herself had she accepted Ravana's advances. But Ravana was not Rama. If Sita had been married to Ravana, and Rama had abducted her, then dharma would have been served even by adultery. How is this right?

“Krishna stole the gopis away and drew them to his side and did not reject them. He did this because Krishna, and not tradition nor any moral law, was the touchstone of right and wrong. Though it was not right for the gopis to transgress social order and abandon their duties as wives, they exchanged this dharma for a greater dharma, which is utter devotion to God. This devotion, which Krishna tested, made their actions laudable and worthy. Consider how Dasaratha might have been spared. To fulfill his promise to Kaikeyi, Dasaratha had to exile his favorite son. By becoming a prisoner to dharma, he also became a prisoner to the whims of his favorite wife, a prisoner to her error and envy. He begged Rama to overthrow him, that his exile could not come to pass, and that he could not fulfill Kaikeyi's wish, as this would spare him from willfully

abandoning his duty. How often do men adhere to dharma, forgetting the One for Whom dharma exists, the One who establishes dharma and Who may lift it up as surely as He may throw it down? Dasaratha might have been spared his son's exile had he turned to Rama, and said simply, 'Release me from this dharma, for your way exceeds dharma.' God does not bow down to dharma nor is He in service to it.

"No form of worldly restraint restrains Him. No obstacle blocks His way. No law binds Him. No truth encompasses Him. No, He is Himself the source of restraint and the open road, the fountain of law and the wellspring of truth. Before Sugriva fled from his powerful brother, Vali, who could oppose Vali? But Sugriva believed in Rama and when Rama told Sugriva to challenge Vali, Sugriva did not hesitate because all things were within Rama's power and no creature could challenge him. Rama was exiled; only by his consent could he be exiled. Only if such an exile were consistent with Vishnu's purpose in the world could it even be conceivable.

"Likewise, Ravana erred not simply by pursuing his lusts, but also by failing to recognize who Rama was. Had he never touched Sita, he was still in error by not recognizing Rama. Had he recognized Rama, he would have never touched Sita, or had this recognition come too late, he would have returned Sita to Rama and immolated himself in Rama's honor. Rama's friendship is worth

more than all kingdoms, more than all treasures of all worlds. Krishna's love is worth more than all husbands, all children, all duties and obligations. When Sita returned to Rama's side, when she sat upon a throne beside her husband, she said, 'Separation from you was Hell. Nearness to you is Heaven. Even had you been my captor and Ravana my rightful husband, Hell is Heaven with you, Heaven Hell without you.'

"Yet God is not obliged to accept you, even if you are in complete submission. Your submission is desired, but His grace is necessary. When Bharata pursued Rama in the forest, he submitted himself entirely to his brother, offering Rama the kingdom of Ayodhya. Bharata said, 'My mother, Kaikeyi would crown me king if she could. She caused our father to exile you to make me king in your place. But there is none in your place. A crow cannot mimic a swan; an ass cannot imitate a horse. The lantern is not the sun, nor is the face of the moon as lovely as the Beloved. I desire only service to you.' But Rama was not yet ready for Bharata's submission. He said, 'You are my brother and I love you. But I cannot do as you ask. Return to Ayodhya and rule as my regent and, when my exile is ended, I will return to you and accept your offering, but I will not accept it today.' Others, who did not seek Rama's grace, received it without asking. Consider this, if you are wise.

“For Sita, as for Radha and the gopis, there is no congress that quenches thirst, or that calms passion. No union is sufficient except that she becomes indistinguishable from Him and that He becomes indistinguishable from her. She lets loose the bonds of all desire, she lets the reins slip from her grasp. The horses of her chariot, her senses, do not drive her to distraction. The chariot is empty. The horses are stabled. She breaks the wheel of samsara; she is armed with the sword of moksha. She wraps her black hair around her slender neck and hangs herself with it from the rosewood tree in Ravana’s grove. She steps into fire; her pride, her earthly concerns, her love for herself turn to ash. She opens her throat with the sword of moksha; she joyously becomes a fountain at the gates of His palace, the mansion of her Beloved. Drink from that font of blood that you may become intoxicated. His glance falls upon her and He transforms her blood into the wine of His love and offers it in the cup of His unity.

“When Krishna danced with the gopis, the wives and daughters of the cowherds of Vraj, he danced with every one, though each was blinded to any other except Krishna. They say that Krishna only loved Radha among the gopis; but he loved them all. Yet only Radha was entirely devoted to Krishna. Learn a little of your station from this. Vishnu loves all, not any one less than any other, but only those

who love Vishnu, by His grace, are permitted union with Him.

“The story of Krishna and the gopis are parables. Only the literalist sees Krishna’s actions as blameworthy. Only the literalist calls the gopis whores. The literalist does not see, perhaps he is not capable of seeing, that, just as Krishna represents God, so do the gopis represent those who break the wheel of samsara, attain moksha, and by their devotion, and through His grace, attain union with God.”

Aurangzeb said, “Even if I allow that all this is true, that the stories of Krishna and the women of Vraj are but parables and not literally true, how do you explain Krishna’s actions in later life, as an ally to the Pandava? During the battle between the Pandava and their cousins, both sides accepted rules of warfare, hallowed by tradition, blessed by the wise, upheld by righteous men. No warrior should strike another in the legs; no warrior should strike another who is unarmed. Yet Krishna advised Bhima to strike Duryodhana in the thigh and Krishna advised Arjuna to kill Karna when Karna was unarmed. What do you say to this? Krishna ignored the rules that did not suit him.

“Of course I know that the Kaurava, the enemies of the Pandava and of Krishna, also violated the rules of war. On the battlefield passions overwhelm even the best of men. So I do not denounce Bhima or his brother, Arjuna. Overcome

with emotion, they did what soldiers do, disregarding the conventions and niceties of war. Their actions may be reprehensible, they are at least not chivalrous, but I understand their ardor; they are only men. Yet Krishna, who you claim is God on Earth, or His incarnation, or whatever you call it, urged Bhima and Arjuna to abandon the rules of war to which all had agreed. This is shameful. Krishna must be held to a higher standard; he himself must be ruled and guided, more than any other man, by morality and justice. What use has dharma if he himself does not follow it?"

The boy said, "In his time Krishna's standard was the highest; that is your answer. He himself was dharma, that is your answer. You have it all backwards. Dharma and right-acting, morality and justice, men must serve them; but God does not serve them; they exist to serve Him. He is the arbiter of right and wrong. Rules agreed upon by men are not morality; the paths they jointly choose to follow are not dharma. He is in Himself sufficient, and dharma means nothing if not to adhere to His way. Moral laws fashioned by men are not the standard. Upon what are they based? They are founded upon men's pride, their fear, their expectation of morality. But their expectations of a moral code, their definitions of justice and dharma, they are fallible like your own. These expectations often lead away from God's path, from God's messengers, and

from dharma, which is obedience to His law, acceptance of His will, and adherence to His unity in every age. Imagine if Muhammad were to appear before you today. So long as he adhered to your expectations of him, you would honor him. But should he deviate from those expectations, even to the extent of a fennel seed, you would at once denounce him and reject him. Consider the Meccans, when Muhammad arose among them. He told them that their moral code, which included the veneration of idols, was odious and was at variance with God's will. They answered, 'Should we abandon the gods worshipped by our fathers and their fathers before them? This would be contrary to what is right. You are the one at variance!' He did not meet their expectations; is this not the very reason Muhammad was rejected even by his kinsmen, and Jesus was rejected by the Jews? Remember the story that on the Sabbath Jesus formed a sculpture of a bird from clay. The people accused him of breaking the Sabbath. Jesus then breathed life into the clay bird and it flew away. The people were amazed, and Jesus said to them, 'I am the law made flesh. I am the source of law and I transcend it.' Only after the believers put aside their expectations of Him, were they counted among the obedient. Yet your expectations of Krishna and Rama carry the field and leave you wandering in the wilderness of samsara.

“Krishna was the restorer of true dharma, he was its maintainer, and he was its destroyer. Before the war between the Pandava and their cousins, Duryodhana, the chief of the Kaurava, usurped the lands and the birthright of the Pandava. Krishna went as an emissary to speak with Duryodhana. He said, ‘O Duryodhana, your cousins have returned from their exile at the appointed time. You know this. Yet you deny them their rights and keep for yourself what is not yours. Be wise and reasonable befitting your birth and your learning. Allow them to claim the land that is theirs and you will earn their friendship and mine.’ But Duryodhana was stubborn and would not listen. Krishna’s words angered him and Duryodhana threatened him with imprisonment. Krishna said, ‘I will not allow it. If in past or future lives I have been exiled or in prison, it was only because it suited My purpose. But today this threat does not suit My purpose.’ Krishna then shared with Duryodhana and those in their presence a glimpse of his multi-armed form, and all fell away, terrified and adoring. All fell away except Duryodhana who mocked Krishna, saying, ‘I have heard you are God. If this is so, you might give the Pandava a thousand times the lands I possess! Why trifle with my puny kingdom, O Lord of the worlds?’ Krishna bore this mocking patiently and said, ‘What you say is true. But I am not concerned with men’s desires; you

should be more concerned with mine. Grant them their rights and be my friend, for my friendship is worth more than your kingdom, or any other, or all kingdoms together. This is dharma.”

Aurangzeb smiled and said, “Well spoken, boy. Beautifully done. You’re an artist with stories. And yet you never answer me directly. If I were to strike you with an arrow, even as you held the shaft in your hand and as blood poured out of you, you would tell me that I had missed and you would tell me this so beautifully that I would, for a moment, believe you. I understand you, so no need to repeat it. You say Rama and Krishna transcend the rules made by men. But why the lies and misdirection? Why the cheating? Why did Krishna advise Bhima and Arjuna to act without honor? Why did he advise Yudishtira to lie to Drona? Why did he allow this war at all?”

The boy said, “Why did Krishna lie to Drona? Drona had lied about his past. He was born a brahmin, but became a kshatriya instead, all to extract a petty vengeance. Why did Krishna allow Bhima to kill Duryodhana shamefully, by striking Duryodhana on the thigh? Remember that years before the battle Duryodhana had exposed his thigh to Draupadi and said, ‘You are a whore; see that I am strong and will pay you well if you choose me.’ Even Karna was struck down for his faults. See now that Krishna, in

seeming deceit, in truth visited each of these men with the punishments owed them for their actions.”

Aurangzeb said, “Duryodhana was wicked, and Drona a liar, but what of Karna? Kunti, the mother of the Pandava, abandoned Karna as an infant. He did not know who he was or who his brothers were. This was a misfortune, not a sin. Yet he is punished, as though the accident of his birth was a sufficient sin.”

The boy said, “After Arjuna killed Karna, Kunti revealed Karna’s identity to the Pandava, that he was their eldest brother. This news broke Arjuna’s heart and he regretted what he had done, but Krishna said, ‘I am sorry that you have lost a brother, but in truth, Karna lost himself first.’ Immediately Arjuna’s spirits were restored and he smiled, clasping a hand on Krishna’s shoulder.

“Draupadi, who saw this, spoke privately with Arjuna one evening. She said, ‘What did Krishna mean when he said that Karna lost himself? You killed Karna in self-defense, I know. But my heart is troubled by his death, by the manner in which you killed him, and by the revelation that he was your brother. When you first heard the news, I saw in your eyes a terrible uncertainty. But with a few words, Krishna erased that uncertainty. What did he say to you and what did it mean?’

“Arjuna said, ‘Before I fought, as Krishna spoke to me between the two armies when I would not give the signal

to begin the battle, he said, “All these warriors arrayed against you will die. Arise and fight! You will defeat them because, through their karma, because of what they have done, Drona and Bhishma, Duryodhana and Karna, will die. For what they have done, all these warriors will die. Fight! I have chosen you as the instrument to perform My will and to do My justice!”

“Draupadi said, ‘What was Karna’s offense?’

“Arjuna said, ‘You must know something of Karna. He was innocent when my mother abandoned him. He was innocent as a boy raised by a husband and wife who were not his parents. He lacked self-knowledge, but, as he grew into manhood, he stood at the doorstep of self-awareness, and willfully turned away. He took the road of self-absorption. He chose to hate me and the Pandava. He chose hatred over dharma. He chose to be silent when Duryodhana cheated Yudishtira; Karna joined the mocking chorus when you were humiliated, dragged by the hair, and called a whore. Even when he discovered his identity, that he was the eldest brother to the Pandava, he did not accept this and join us, his brothers. He was too fascinated by his dream of killing me, his own brother! Before he knew that I shared his blood, he was in error and might have been excused. But when he knew the truth, after Krishna and Kunti, our mother, both told him, he refused to accept himself, to accept who he really was, and settled to be something less than that. He hid

his true self not merely from me and his other brothers, but from himself.’

“Draupadi said, ‘But why did he hate us and want to destroy us? What was our offense? Why did he embrace Duryodhana, our enemy, and remain in that embrace after he learned he was brother to the Pandava?’

“Arjuna said, ‘Remember the contest for your hand. Before I won you as my wife by a show of skill, Karna stepped forward to gain you, but you rejected him and Karna stepped back, never having competed. Yet, if Karna, after learning who he truly was, had accepted his place as the eldest of the six brothers, we would have honored him and you would have loved him and been his wife, too. Even knowing himself, Karna was not himself. Karna was rejected because he rejected himself. Only until he became himself, could he gain you. Instead, he blamed your rejection of him on me and my brothers, rather than on himself, where the blame truly belongs. In truth, Karna’s hatred was for himself and he willingly allowed Duryodhana’s destruction to encompass him.’

“Draupadi said, ‘Yes, but Karna befriended Duryodhana before he knew his own true identity. And Karna wouldn’t betray that friendship by joining his brothers, who were Duryodhana’s enemies.’

“Arjuna said, ‘Duryodhana was friend only to Duryodhana. If Karna had joined us, Duryodhana would

not have fought and he would have kept his half of the kingdom and Karna, as our eldest brother, would have possessed the other half. Karna would have been a better friend to Duryodhana, even if Duryodhana wouldn't at first have understood.'

"Draupadi said, 'Still, Karna is not responsible. Your brothers still mourn him. He was abandoned by his own mother. Did he deserve destruction for this?'

"Arjuna said, 'Karna deserves sympathy, yes. However, his fate was tied to his choices, to his own karma. He fashioned his own destruction, just as Duryodhana did. Krishna told me to strike Karna down. Karna cried out for mercy and argued that this death was unfair. But where was Karna's mercy or fairness when you needed aid or when Yudishtira was cheated and exiled? Where was Karna's adherence to the rules when he murdered my beautiful son after disarming him? These were clear violations of the rules of warfare. Karna cared for and called upon the rules only when it suited him. He ignored them when it did not. The same was true of Duryodhana. Duryodhana refused to give us our kingdom, and kept what was not his as his own. He mocked you and exposed his thigh to you, treating you like a whore. At Krishna's word, Bhima broke that thigh. The apparent passage of time is not by itself expiation, but merely reprieve, which Duryodhana squandered with plotting and scheming against us. When Duryodhana was

dying and called Krishna a cheater, Krishna was clear, “I have lied to the liars. I have cheated the cheaters. The world is maya and I have created it. I am the origin of deception and the deliverer from deception.”

“Because Kunti abandoned him, Karna was injured. But when he discovered himself, when Krishna and Kunti revealed it to him, when the medicine to mend his injury rested in his hand, he refused to accept it. At that point his abandonment by his mother was no longer his misfortune, but he himself became his misfortune. He had before him a choice between dharma and adharma, between a loving family and worthless friends bent on self-destruction. Look what he chose, knowing the consequences of his choices. Kunti failed him, but his destruction came at his own hands!”

Aurangzeb said, “Say what you like. I will not accept that God employs deceit and trickery. His standard is surely higher than that.”

The boy paused, deep in thought, and then said, “You cannot tie the hands of God. What did Muhammad say? *The unbelievers plot and deceive, but God is the best of deceivers.* You tighten the noose of expectation around your neck, even as you lose your footing.”

Aurangzeb laughed and said, “What pretty stories you tell. But you will not tip my heart as easily as Rama tipped Vali’s. And what would it matter if it were true that Rama

or Krishna was a knower of right from wrong or perceived men's hearts and went among the people to teach them. Am I not doing the same? By your judgment, Rama and Krishna have no more claim to prophethood than I do; were I to claim such a station you would be right to denounce me and the people would be right to overthrow me and put me to death. But I lay no such claim, and if others lay that claim on my behalf, I would certainly denounce and imprison them. Are Rama and Krishna messengers merely because they claim to be or because others believe them to be? Such claims and beliefs do not make one a prophet."

The boy said, "Rama rarely spoke of this claim. Krishna spoke of it only among those who knew it in their hearts already. What is Vishnu's nature? It is unknowable. But see in Sita's test a glimpse of Vishnu in the person of Rama. Rama knew the truth of Sita's innocence and Sita knew her own innocence. When Rama rejected her, he said to her, 'You did not let Ravana persuade you with baubles and trinkets, which are the trappings of the world. You did not succumb to his threats and his persuasions. But you were with Ravana and, although I am aware of the truth of all things, the people have no such knowledge and they will gossip among themselves and cavil against you and slander you with terrible accusations. And if I take you back, won't they mock me as the cuckold? And if I

overlook their accusations, won't they call me blind?' Sita was broken-hearted at Rama's words, but she said, 'I am innocent of any accusation. Let these accusers stay but a moment in Ravana's court and they will betray all things, even themselves. I myself would have succumbed, but I was preserved by my love for you. Those who know nothing of love and accuse me, accuse only themselves; they don't love you as I love you.' Sita then told Lakshmana, Rama's brother, to build a fire and she threw herself upon the pyre, saying, 'Since you have allowed the fires of hell to consume my soul, let this fire immolate my body.' But the fire did not consume her and at this sight the people were satisfied with Sita's innocence. Rama said to the people, 'I did not put Sita to the test; but you put me to the test. Be afraid that I might test you so mercilessly, for that fire would consume the world and all things in it. I alone would be unscathed, unchanged as I am changeless.' All creatures are put to the test. One must pass through fire to be called Vishnu's friend, his companion, his true lover."

Aurangzeb said, "You speak of Ravana as though he were born to sin, but who made him so powerful? Was his invulnerability not a gift from Brahma, a boon granted to him for his many sacrifices and austerities? If Brahma is a name for God, this God lacks perception and offers a terrible power to a terrible creature. What kind of God

offers such a boon to a monster? This is not the God of Islam!”

The boy said, “I see nothing peculiar about this boon. God grants us all life, and yet many of us abuse this gift, or steal it from others, or oppress men, or commit sin, or abjure God’s command and exceed the limits of dharma, becoming eager practitioners of adharma. Ravana, by his many austerities, gained God’s favor. Later, even as he abused this power and waged war against the devas, humiliating and humbling saints and righteous kings, Ravana was not punished. This is likewise true of countless tyrants who have arisen and have lived and died and passed tyranny as inheritance to their tyrannical children. But when Ravana stole Rama’s wife and kept her prisoner in the asoka grove in Lanka, Rama arose to destroy him.

“These truths are plain. There is no mystery. Those given great power or wealth by God, by their own folly, by overweening pride, by their own excesses they conjure their downfall and destruction. Did you offer me, O king, this boon to speak openly with you to encourage my impudence, or to find cause to punish me? Yet you know the outcome as surely as God knew Ravana’s outcome.”

Aurangzeb said, “Still, your stories of Rama and Krishna do not satisfy me; your interpretations are stretched beyond credulity. The literal meaning of these

stories is too repugnant to forget; you can caress them all you like to make something indecent seem decent, but I am a Muslim, and my faith is sufficient antidote to your poisonous persuasions.”

The boy said, “You think only of the inessential and reject what is essential. Why must you focus on stories, imagining they are not more than literally true? Must a tortoise and a hare actually run a foot race? Many ordinary stories are literally true, but is there Truth in things simply factual? Within the hearts of those who read only the literal, there is but desert. Krishna said of them, *In flowery words undiscerning men take refuge. They know only the letter of the Vedas, and say, There is nothing more! Driven by selfish desire, their heaven is a selfish desire. They perform rites to attain their desires, but they do not attain liberation.* Yet in the hearts of those who see within these stories, there is paradise. When a man points toward the horizon, you look only upon his finger. The world is revealed through a window of glass; yet you see only the glass and give no thought to what shines through. This is worse than blindness; it is willful ignorance and open blasphemy; it is Iblis’ error. It is God’s test of you to determine if you love Him, or only yourself.”

Aurangzeb said, “When Kaikeyi sent Rama into exile, she wanted to be rid of his person; if Rama had believed

that this exile was merely figurative and he simply stayed indoors, in prayer or meditation, he would not have fulfilled his father's promise. When Moses demanded that Pharaoh set the Israelites free, there was no meaning here of anything but physical freedom from Egypt. These stories have within them plain evidence that the literal meaning is what is important, not any pretended symbolism."

The boy replied, "This is true; Rama did not necessarily act nor did Moses necessarily act according to symbolism but according to the exigencies of their time and place. Yet God is master here. He has preserved these stories in scripture, and through them imparts something beyond obvious and apparent meaning. Why else were they preserved? Rama performed his exile and returned home and Moses freed the Hebrews. But much of the symbolism concealed in these acts becomes plain and evident to those who see in these stories a key to liberation for themselves and for those they love."

Aurangzeb said, "What of moral law? Were the commandments Moses received and which he imparted to the Hebrews intended only symbolically? No, in fact, had the Israelites imagined they might interpret away the literal meaning of these commandments, they surely would have. They are a clever people, but wicked, and would have availed themselves of any imagined immunity from God's law and God's punishment."

The boy said, “I have spoken only of stories, of parables and analogies. The parables of Jesus were not intended to be understood as literally true. Yet the laws of the Torah and the Gospel are not stories, nor are they parables and this is evident even to a child. Only those clinging to pride and desire or ‘wickedness’ think otherwise, and act according to their desire, obeying what suits them, disobeying as it pleases them. Like lawyers they quibble on insignificant matters. But their arguments will not avail them. Such laws as God reveals are to be obeyed exactly as they are without deviation. You are not permitted to interpret away the laws of God.”

Aurangzeb said, “The unity of God is not served by this distinction, between His law and His parables. You speak of tawhid, of union with God, of the unity of God and His messengers, yet you busily draw distinctions between this lesson and that, between this messenger and the other and another still.”

The boy said, “Your argument is facetious. Even you do not believe it. We must concede, as human beings, the apparent divisions of the world of creation; we are small and mortal and have tied ourselves to these divisions and distinctions. Yet the one who sees all things in Him, and the one who sees Him in all things are both correct. On the road of distinction, you may reach the city of singleness. In the city you may find the palace of distinction. Within

the palace stands a throne of singleness. Upon the throne sits the King, in His hand the scepter of distinction. He is the One from Whom all things issue; to Whom all things return.”

The Mountain and the Bowl

Aurangzeb said, “Your children’s stories are wasted on me. You prattle about moksha, samsara, and dharma. What did Muhammad ever say of these things? He said nothing; therefore they have no meaning to me. Such distinctions will not be caressed into singleness with Islam.”

The boy answered, “Muhammad never used the words samsara or dharma, moksha or atman—words common in this land and attached to our traditions. Yet Muhammad surely spoke of detachment and duty, following the straight path and the way to Paradise.”

Aurangzeb said, “But the words you use are different and have different meanings, for how could they be the same when Muhammad did not arise among you and when the words of that apostle of God have never until now reached you?”

The boy said, “O king, why do you see many when there is but One? Yes, our words are different, as our languages are different, as our histories are different. Why must you persist and indulge this illusion that God has not come to us? Has He words only for you and your fathers? You scoff at the notion that God has spoken only to the Jews, for you know that God also appeared among the Persians and the Arabs. Why do you refuse to concede that He has also appeared to my people? You persist in seeing many when

there is but One; you sift through the differences, failing to recognize precious gold, casting it all away like dust.”

Aurangzeb, his eyes blazing, shouted, “Ah, but if this is so, can you explain why the journey of Rama and the teachings of Krishna are inconsistent with the teachings revealed to the people of the Book? The *Quran* and the *Hadith* are a sure testimony of this, that your beliefs share nothing in common with mine. Consider your doctrine of reincarnation, the false belief that men and women, when they die, are reborn again into this same world. This dogma by itself separates truth from falsehood and Islam from such notions as karma, moksha, and samsara.”

The boy said, “What you are saying is not true, though there are many people who believe in reincarnation as you describe it. They believe it must be literally so, but this belief has no firm foundation. They believe it because they imagine that Rama and Krishna likewise believed in reincarnation and spoke of it as literally true. But they did not.”

Aurangzeb said, “I agree that simply because the people believe a thing does not mean that the prophets taught them something false. After all, Jesus never spoke of a trinity, yet Christians consider it an article of faith. Still I know what Krishna says in the *Mahabharata* and when he spoke to Arjuna before the battle, as they stood between the contending armies. How do you explain what

Krishna says? He refers clearly and without equivocation to reincarnation.”

The boy said, “I know the verses to which you refer. Let me address a few. Krishna says, *As the man’s spirit enters childhood, then youth, then old age, so it enters a new body; the wise do not doubt this.* This verse has two evident meanings. First it means that the bodies of the child, the young man, and the old man are manifestly different, though the same spirit resides in this ever-changing body. Second it means that just as a man is born into this corporeal body, when a man dies, his spirit enters a new body. Krishna does not declare that an earthly body is the spirit’s new home once the body has died. Krishna teaches only that the spirit lives on forever. Belief in literal reincarnation is not necessary to understand this teaching.

“Krishna speaks again metaphorically, and says, *As a man leaves ragged clothing behind to put on new clothing, so a man’s spirit leaves his mortal body behind and enters a new body.* Again, this new body is nowhere described as earthly or corporeal. This is no endorsement of belief in physical and literal reincarnation. In fact, to read these verses literally is to deprive them of their true and deeper significance.

“Krishna says, *If a man’s spirit was born again and again, yet he must die. Knowing this, do not be sorrowful. All things born must die, but from death the spirit finds*

new life. See now, O emperor, the truth of this is manifest without reliance on belief in reincarnation. Even as a faithful Muslim you do not have in your hand a key to full understanding of the life that comes to men after they shed their earthly clothing, yet still you know such life will come, just as Krishna reveals. The nature of this life is a mystery to men and neither Muhammad nor Krishna unveils this mystery, for it is beyond our conception. Muhammad speaks of the world to come in worldly terms; so too does Krishna. But these descriptions are analogies only, intending to represent a thing we cannot understand until we have experience of it.

“Yet even so, within a single lifetime we are born into many lives, as an infant, as a child, as a youth, as an old man, and we die again many times, all within the web of samsara. Hear Krishna’s words, *I have passed through many births, Arjuna, and so have you. I have died many deaths, Arjuna, and so have you. But my lives and deaths are not like yours*. Krishna makes clear a distinction between himself as a messenger, as the return of Rama, as the manifestation of God on Earth, and Arjuna, who is not the return of any man and who is not to return again to another corporeal body after he dies, but who nevertheless must strive to sunder the chains of worldly attachment and selfish action, dying to the world and to himself in order to live in union with God. Surely he possesses the attributes of

many men before and many men yet to come, but this is not reincarnation, though again and again such men arise in this world.

“Finally, Krishna speaks of those trapped in samsara. They are warped souls who see heaven itself as the image of their selfish desire. Krishna says, *They have prayers for pleasures and power, and their reward is earthly rebirth.* Endlessly they are reborn to earthly desire, never dying to themselves, though they are already dead. Hear them declare that there is nothing except the transient world, for they learn nothing of the world to come. Those who deny it are right; their denials are forfeiture. This verse does not mean that a man trapped in samsara, once his mortal body dies, is born again to another mortal body. No, it means only that his spirit has not escaped the bonds of illusion and karma. Remember the *Hadith*, when Muhammad said, *Die before you die.* Men who remain trapped in samsara are truly born into a new body in the world to come, but they are, like infants born prematurely, weak and stunted and this is surely hell.”

Aurangzeb could not speak for a moment. When he found words, he said only, “This is not true, for the people believe otherwise. They believe in literal reincarnation.”

The boy said, “Many do. But this belief cannot be established on the teachings of Krishna. Rama himself never utters a word of it, even metaphorically.”

Aurangzeb said, "Why then does Krishna not explicitly deny the doctrine of reincarnation?"

The boy said, "Because his teachings are otherwise unintelligible to a people if he does not speak their language of religion. Moses did not make Christians of the Jews, nor did Christ make them Muslims. Yet they prepared the way; in their words are the first glimmerings of the way to those who have ears for other than literal meaning, to those who are not yet spiritually dead.

"As for reincarnation, too much is made of the matter of bodies and lives; this is inessential. From the vineyard of His will he has pressed the sweetest vintage. Some He keeps in golden vessels, others in silver, others in iron, and still more in earthen jars. Does He empty from cup to cup? Does this wine flow from vessel to vessel continuously? Yet the celestial drinks deeply of this world. From appearance He pours into disappearance. From separation, He pours into Union. The wine is not the cup; even a child understands this."

Aurangzeb said, "What of Krishna's teaching that all men have always been and have existed eternally in the past? If this teaching is true, then the human spirit, like God, is infinitely old and therefore God could not have created men, for how can God create something that is as infinitely old as He is Himself? This belief is a violation of tawhid."

The boy said, “No, your arguments are the violation. What Krishna reveals is consistent with the belief that God created all things, including the world, all plants, all animals, and men. Likewise, He created the spirits of men. But consider what part of man’s spirit is truly eternal? Is it not the Spirit of God within us? You, Aurangzeb, have not always been, but the Spirit of God within you surely has. Understand this truth, Aurangzeb, and you may yet escape *samsara*.”

Aurangzeb said, “You are clever, but I will not succumb. Still these concepts are alien to Muslims. Why this discrepancy? Surely the teaching of God is eternal and therefore ought to be consistent. Why do these teachings diverge so much from each other?”

The boy said, “Krishna found the people clinging to such notions as reincarnation. But upon that notion, Krishna founded a great belief. Thus the people learned according to their capacities and are taught according to the language of faith and righteousness that they speak. There is no error in this.”

Aurangzeb said, “These are but words; such allusions are veils between men and God. Rama and Krishna are not God’s servants, but Muhammad is.”

The boy answered, “How has your wisdom brought you to Muhammad, or your knowledge recognized his station? That you accept Muhammad is nothing, for Muhammad

rejects you. By what virtue have you believed in him? Is it the miracles you have never seen? The battles you have never fought? The judgments you never witnessed? Or the character with which you were not acquainted? Was it his voice that you never heard? Or his eyes that you never saw? Or were you simply born into this faith? Consider yourself fortunate, among the hundred faiths in the world, that you were born into the correct one. But by believing without thought or insight, you may as well believe nothing. Were the companions of Muhammad Muslims because they were born Muslims? Had Muhammad never arisen among them, would they still have shunned idolatry and embraced Islam?

“A man is alive before, now and hereafter. But without detachment, he is forever reborn in this material world, achieving no knowledge of himself.”

The boy continued, “Yet these words are wasted on those who refuse to acknowledge God’s unity. You confuse the secondary with what is fundamental; what is fundamental you confound with what is secondary. I have not mentioned the Buddha, who is himself the return of God among men. Let me quote to you a scrap of his truth, still preserved though his other teachings are much distorted. In the *Dhammapada*, he reveals that, *Those who see the inessential as essential and the essential as inessential fail to grasp the essential and are lost. Those who*

see the essential as essential and cast off the inessential will reach the essential and are rightly-guided. These seeming differences among God's messengers are the inessential. The messengers are, in essence, indistinguishable from one another and differences are merely apparent. In the likenesses, see the face of God. In the differences, see the authority of God. In the likenesses, see the work of every messenger. In the differences, see the mercy of God and the friendship of God in every place among every people since the firmament was raised and men born in the world. The literal truth of reincarnation is inessential. The manifestation of God's authority and power in Krishna is essential. From this, all other things may follow."

Aurangzeb said, "Then why do these teachings differ?"

"If their teachings seem to differ, consider the reason. Their teachings differ because their students differ. His truth is eternal. Yet God conceals what we cannot bear and reveals what we can, according always to our capacity, and not to His ability. Does His ability not far outstrip our capacity? You may fill the cup with wine, but what cup can hold the vineyard? With so much wine, be afraid of drowning. You may fill the bowl with a little snow from the peak of the mountain, but what bowl can hold the mountain? Under so much weight, we are crushed.

"One does not teach identical lessons to children. The child must be brought along. A little knowledge becomes

the basis upon which greater knowledge may be achieved, but not in a single lesson nor even from a single teacher, but from many teachers over many years. The road from here to Agra is straight, but you cannot reach your home in a single step. The temple does not appear ready-built, nor is it constructed from the top down, for such a temple would be unsteady and dangerous. Does one put the niche above the pediment, or the peak beneath the dome?

“Consider that the potter must work with clay from the earth. Though better clays may be found elsewhere, still he is driven to use the clay at hand. Consider the blacksmith, though he may prefer to fashion the plough for farmers, if the people know only axes and consider the plough taboo because it wounds the earth, the blacksmith gains nothing by making ploughs. He will have no customers and the people will not profit by his work. So too did Krishna find the people clinging to such notions and traditions as karma, and moksha, dharma and nirvana. He invested these terms with true meaning. The clay he found was good enough. Thus the people are taught according to their capacities and according to the language of faith and righteousness they speak. There is no error in this, if one looks upon such traditions and teachings with a heart of wisdom through the eye of detachment. But in these different languages and traditions, still you will find universal truths revealed, so that moksha and samsara might be understood not

merely by the Brahmin, but likewise by the monk and by the mullah. These truths are found beneath the accretions of the malicious, the ignorant, and even the well-meaning. Look beneath those accretions and find the truth of it.

“If men have painted the hull of your ship red, you should not imagine that this color inclines it to float. If your wife has applied sandal paste to her face and sweet fragrance to her breasts, she does this simply to appeal to you. Would you say that the sandal paste is her true nature? No, it is decoration. There is no sin in allurements to make herself more pleasing to you. Only the sophist calls this deception.

“Whether by spoon or needle, whether in food or drink, the doctor will prescribe medicine to cure you. He will not choose the method according to your preference, but according to your condition and to your capacity. If Krishna speaks of reincarnation, it is not the literal definition with which he is concerned, but whether, through this word, the lesson is understood. Luqman never concerned himself with whether the tortoise and the hare were in a race, and his listeners were never foolish enough to imagine that the purport of his story required that such a race must have occurred. Do not allow yourself to be more foolish than a child. As for the journey of Rama, the *Ramayana* is a child’s story only if the reader is a child. Likewise the meaning of the words *samsara*, *moksha*, and *atman* are not dependent

on the popular traditions that have grown up around them and the meanings that have accreted to them, any more than the boat consists of only the barnacles that have grown on its hull or the paint that has been applied to it. Look beyond the accretions of today and the traditions of the past and you may yet understand that these words have meaning and are of value; they are not mere idols to be cast down or temples to be wrecked. You believe that Islam is sufficient knowledge of God's will. But imagine how much better you might understand Muhammad if you had some knowledge of Rama and Krishna. See the teachings of our messengers through the prism of your faith and find their value and see that this is the religion of God as surely as Islam is.

Aurangzeb said, "These teachings are inconsistent with the teachings of Islam. I must have better proof than this, little Brahmin."

The boy's voice was strained with frustration, and he said, "You hesitate at this door and your hesitation betrays your impiety. Find, if you can, where my words contradict Islam. To deny the truth of these words is to violate tawhid!"

The boy paused and began again more calmly. "The illusion of the world, which is called maya in our traditions, is the chief cause of samsara. It is the veil concealing the truth from view, concealing the One from the many. It is what deceives us and perverts our reason. To adhere to

His will is dharma; liberation from the illusion is moksha. Moksha is the realization of the Nirvana of Brahman, which is union with God. See through the illusion of this world and the many attachments to your body, passions, friends, and possessions, lovers and families. By knowing Rama's station, by knowing Krishna's station, you may lift the veil a little. Meditate upon them, as upon Jesus or Muhammad and you will find the One. To pursue only your passion and your prejudice is to obey the illusion, is to worship the veil, and not the One behind the veil. This is a violation of tawhid. To cling to your prejudices is to obey the illusion, is to continue in samsara, ever turning and never escaping. This is a violation of tawhid. To acknowledge Moses but to deny Jesus, this is a violation of tawhid. To acknowledge Jesus but to deny Muhammad, this is a violation of tawhid. How you laugh at the Christians and the Jews for their blindness; beware that you are not derided for your own. The *Quran* provides sufficient proof of this: *God has sent messengers before you, some of them He has mentioned to you and some He did not mention to you. These messengers have brought good news and warnings so that men may not claim ignorance before God.* Whether meditating upon one or the other, you meditate upon Vishnu, the One Who is at once immanent and yet transcendent, Who stands behind the illusions and above the illusions, the One Who has appeared to us under different names, living different

lives speaking unnumbered languages, and offering different teachings to those among whom they arose. Such differences themselves are maya, seemingly at variance with one another, but always One. Consider my father. To me, he is my father. To his wife, he is her husband and lover. To his mother, he is her son. At work he is a priest, at leisure he is a storyteller. Alive he is a man and dead he is a corpse. To the Vaishnava he is devout, to the Saivite he is in error. Yet he is at once all of these things, but still only one and not a dozen or a hundred, or a thousand, though he is also all those others. Such is our perception of God. We break Him into the pieces by which our feeble minds might grasp Him, yet He is still One.”

Hanuman's Message

Aurangzeb said, "You speak boldly yet run from my questions like an ass from a lion. You speak of maya and moksha, karma and samsara. Yet you will not say how they are consistent with Islam. That God sent messengers in the past of whom we have no knowledge is not sufficient evidence that Krishna or Rama are among those messengers. Their messages have no resemblance to the messages of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Show me any resemblance and perhaps I will spare this temple."

The boy said, "Let me make things clearer for you and perhaps you will see the resemblance. Maya is the illusion veiling us from God. Karma is born from the actions we take to achieve our selfish desires, driven by illusion. Karma creates attachments to the transient world, imprisoning us in samsara. Samsara is the prison of transient appearance; it is life without knowledge. It is the world as it seems. It is a kingdom ruled by maya. Samsara is the interaction of karma and maya.

"The journey of Rama is the story of illusion and karma. It is the story of selfless action, which is not shameful, and action born of selfish desire, which is the cause of ruin. Consider that central story, that Sita desired the golden deer and, to please her, Rama gave chase. This was the original cause of their separation. Long before, when Rama

decided to leave Sita behind in Ayodhya and spend fourteen years in exile in the wilderness, remember how Sita pleaded and cajoled him, saying how she could never be separated from him and that the difficulties and the austerities of the wilderness were nothing compared to separation from Rama. Sita cried out, 'How many times has our story been recited? Do you know a single one where I remain behind?' But when she saw the deer in the wilderness, gold and silver and beautiful to behold, Sita's mind was captive and she desired nothing except that Rama should acquire it for her. 'Bring it to me, O husband. We'll keep it as a pet or, if you must kill it, we'll rest together on its beautiful skin.' To please her, Rama left Sita's side to capture what Sita desired. But, in truth, desire had captured Sita. Only Rama was worth desiring, but Sita sent him away on a worthless errand, all for the price of a deer. Likewise, Ravana desired Sita, not understanding that Rama, of all creatures in the world, would overcome him and Ravana would lose Sita, his kingdom, and his life. What madness these desires, born of illusion, drive us to! Had Sita perception, she would have rejected the deer, if only to remain near Rama. Had Ravana perception, he would have put away his desire for Sita and lived on with honor.

"The world is maya, and God has created it. It exists as a means by which to conceal and as a means by which

to reveal. The illusion of the world, properly understood, is a way in which to understand the world to come. It is the womb of the next world, and our development here is crucial to attain to that world fully. In this sense, maya is unquestionably good. Also, maya serves God's purpose by veiling us from truths we cannot yet bear. This too is good.

“Yet maya can deceive. If we look upon the veil and find nothing beyond it, nothing behind it, forgetting even the Creator of it, we tie ourselves to the illusion without understanding the true purpose of that illusion and deriving from it none of its benefits.

“If one lacks perception, what true difference is there between Mara and maya, between the devil and this devilish deception? Iblis is Mara personified. The prince of the separated ones is a master of illusion. Mara declares, ‘By God's authority I will beguile men with the pleasures of the world. I will lie in wait for men along God's straight path. I will come upon them from the front and behind, from the right and the left.’ See beyond maya and Mara cannot trouble you; otherwise you are Mara's slave.

“Consider karma. Ravana heard of Sita's remarkable beauty and sent a servant in the guise of that golden deer to Sita's home in the forest where she lived with Rama and Lakshmana. Sita demanded the wondrous deer as a pet and

neither Rama nor Lakshmana remained to protect her. At that moment, Ravana abducted Sita by a ruse. He took her to his island kingdom in Lanka against her wishes.

“When Rama returned, he and Lakshmana went in search of Sita. Having gained the friendship of Sugriva, Rama sent faithful Hanuman to find Sita and to deliver his message. Hanuman reached the island and arrived secretly in Ravana’s palace and spoke with Sita. She remained a prisoner zealously guarded on the island, though Ravana had promised her the freedom of his palace, his city, and his island if she would share his bed. But Sita would not submit to Ravana’s lust and remained faithful to Rama, her husband.

“Sita’s virtue was a fire in Ravana’s heart; her beauty inflamed his desire; her purity inspired his love and, though she rejected him and would not touch him, Ravana could not release this golden bird from his cage. Illusion and desire ensnared Ravana in wrong action. After Hanuman spoke with Sita and delivered Rama’s message, Sita’s heart swelled with the promise of rescue. Thus, Ravana, to gain his desire, became prisoner. Though Sita was outwardly imprisoned, her mind soared freely to Rama while Ravana was weighed down with the chains of illusion and karma. Had he set free the bird of desire, Ravana would be king of Lanka even today.

“Before Hanuman returned to Rama, he allowed himself to be captured. Bound in bark and hemp and beaten viciously by Ravana’s guards, Hanuman was brought before the king of Lanka. Hanuman accused Ravana of impiety and threatened him unless Ravana returned Sita to her husband. The son of Vayu, standing apparently helpless before Ravana, said to the king of Lanka, ‘Though I seem now within your grasp and a slave to your power, truly you are within His grasp and a slave to His maya. Dispel your ignorance. Release Sita; return her unharmed to her husband and plead for Rama’s forgiveness. He will surely grant it, for He is most forgiving. If you do not release Sita and do not placate Rama, you cannot withstand His wrath, for He is vengeful with those who oppose Him.’

“Ravana was enraged and he decided to punish Hanuman for his words. Ravana’s guards tied cloth soaked with oil around Hanuman’s tail and set this cloth aflame. While his tail burned, Hanuman contracted his body and the bonds holding him slipped away. He threw himself into the air, escaping the guards, and with his tail he set fire to Ravana’s palace. Because of his arrogance and blindness, Ravana’s every wrong action rebounded upon him. His great power, a boon from God, was in truth a curse and the cause of his destruction. His abduction of Sita presaged his own death, though he was before invincible even to devas

and rakshasas. His imprisonment of Sita was a prison of action from which he could not escape. By stealing Sita from Rama, he stole away his own life. By setting Hanuman's tail on fire, he burned down his own palace. By asking from God invincibility he established the means of his own destruction at the hands of men.

“Had Ravana looked with discernment, he would have foreseen this and could have saved himself. But he imagined himself master, though he had not even mastered himself! Krishna saw illusion as a spring to catch men's souls. For men like Ravana there is no liberation, no union with God. So long as their loves attach them to this world, into all worlds they drag this karma chained to their legs and bound to their backs.

“Rama himself possessed self-mastery and his actions were the very essence of dharma and did not tie him to the illusions of this world. Action traps men in samsara only if such action is selfish. Rama's actions were pure, free from the taint of desire. His actions were not sin, but themselves a form of worship. And only through his actions could men understand the meaning of dharma, the purpose of life, and the unity of God.

“Early in their exile Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita entered the Dandaka forest. The monster Viradha appeared to them and blocked their way. He was awful to behold; his

eyes were black and sunken, his mouth a bloodstained gate into hell, and his bloated crooked body was covered in the skins of men and animals. He was as large as a storm cloud and his voice, like thunder, shook the ground and the trees of the forest. His eyes fell upon Sita and lust swelled his heart. He said to Rama, 'Who are you?'

"Rama was not afraid and said, 'I am the oldest son of Dasaratha. This is my brother, Lakshmana. This is my wife, Sita.'

"Viradha interrupted Rama; he took hold of Sita in his monstrous hand and said to Rama, 'You and your brother may go back with your lives. This one I will keep as my own.'

"At this, Lakshmana became enraged and brandished his bow. But Viradha only laughed, saying, 'I have been granted a boon by Brahma. No earthly weapon can harm me. So put away your bow and escape with your lives. This pretty one is my pet. Are your lives so worthless that you would trade them for the price of a mere woman?'

"Rama said, 'Whatever boon was granted, was granted in my name. I may rescind such a boon at my pleasure and I am not asked of my doings.' Rama and Lakshmana each fired two arrows at Viradha; they streaked across the sky like meteors. One pierced his swollen belly. Two more severed his crooked arms. The last struck off his head and

Viradha fell dead where he stood. But before their eyes his corpse was transformed and a beautiful youth stood before them in Viradha's place. He knelt at Rama's feet and then at Lakshmana's and Sita's, pressing the dust upon his forehead. He said, 'Lord, I have been transformed, released from a curse. I have been living as a demon, evil in word, act and intention. You have lifted me from that curse by killing me. For whomsoever God punishes in this world, he is freed from punishment in the next. I am free of my sin by your grace and you have granted me forgiveness at the point of your arrows. Forgive me, Rama. I was blind before, but you have lifted the darkness from my eyes and washed the evil from my heart.'

"Rama held up his right hand and said to the youth, 'Go in peace to the world beyond. I have heard your pleas; I accept your repentance and rescind your debt.'

"See how Rama is the arbiter of right and wrong. See how Rama repays those who trespass against dharma, who act with selfish desire in the world. See how such wrong action rebounds upon itself and how the action of God redeems it entirely.

"When Krishna was still young his friends, stricken with thirst, drank from the Yamuna river, not realizing that Kaliya, the black snake with more than a hundred heads, had taken refuge there and had poisoned the waters. As the poison entered their blood, they died beside the

river. Krishna, who was with them, restored them to life, but determined to purify the river and to banish Kaliya who had contaminated it. Krishna climbed a tree over the flowing waters of the Yamuna, and then dove without fear into the river, as if in sport. The disturbance in the water awoke Kaliya. The serpent opened an eye and saw a boy playing in the water above. Kaliya vomited poison in great quantities, enough to kill a thousand men. But Krishna continued to splash in the water, and Kaliya decided to be done with him. He rose up and wrapped Krishna in his black coils and pulled Krishna down into the river's depths.

“His friends, the gopis and the gopas, stood along the banks, watching with horror. Some were silent, incapable of imagining that Krishna could die. Others wept openly. Few had faith that Krishna could survive Kaliya's attack. Even Krishna's mother feared for her son. She prepared to enter the water, but Krishna's friends held her back, for in those waters she would surely die. They said, ‘He has drowned. Kaliya has drowned him!’ Others said, ‘No, Kaliya has poisoned him!’ Yet others said, ‘Kaliya has bitten him!’ When Balarama, Krishna's devoted brother, heard these words, he laughed. He called out to Krishna, ‘Stop your playing, brother. The people are afraid. Dispel their fear.’

“Hearing this, Krishna expanded his body and broke free of Kaliya’s grasp. Climbing out of the waters upon Kaliya’s back, Krishna began to dance upon the snake’s many heads. Again and again he pressed down upon Kaliya, and the snake became unconscious.

“Kaliya floated as if dead upon the water, blood pouring from his mouths. From the poisoned river, Kaliya’s wives appeared. Though disheveled and in distress for their husband’s sake, they made obeisance to Krishna. They placed their children between themselves and Krishna and, weeping, said to him, ‘O Lord, your punishment of our husband is dictated by his karma. For what he has done, he deserves terrible punishment. But that you yourself punish him is a blessing, a soothing balm, and a gracious gift. Remember yourself as Rama. In hiding you struck down Vali with your arrow. He lay mortally wounded and you revealed yourself to Vali, saying to him, ‘Will you cling to this earth, or go to the heavens of your merit? Choose.’ Vali said, ‘I want nothing more of this earth. By your arrow’s grace, I give up worldly things. Their grip upon me fails. Let me go, yet not even to the heavens of merit, but to the nirvana of grace. Rama, accept me.’ O Krishna, you were merciful then and granted Vali his wish, though he had wronged himself and doubted you. So too has our husband wronged himself and like Vali, he struggles against your decree and committed himself to adharma.

But we believe and obey you. Grant to us our husband's life, not according to his sin nor according to our merits and pleas, but because your grace is greater than any worldly merit and your punishment washes away the stain of even darkest sins.'

"Krishna said, 'Ladies, few have understood punishment or forgiveness. Yet you understand. Few have known the meaning of my grace or my mercy. Yet you are enlightened. But I seek Kaliya's enlightenment. Understand this to understand the meaning of knowledge.'

"Kaliya at last regained his senses. He looked upon his wives and children, then upon Krishna who stood before him. At once he understood. Krishna said to him, 'Your wives have interceded for you; they have petitioned me to let you live. Do you accept their intercession?'

"Kaliya said, 'Krishna, I did not recognize you. I thought you were a harmless boy. Yet now I see that you are the hinge upon which all things turn. Your punishment is Hell, but in your presence I have found a way to Heaven.' Kaliya made obeisance and said, 'Though my wives have interceded, their intercession cannot save me. If you allow me to live, then I might imagine that they have saved me. Yet salvation can come only from you. Therefore I reject their intercession on my behalf and seek your forgiveness; if you do not grant it, then I accept your punishment to attain that forgiveness, to wash away this sin.'

“Krishna said, ‘My presence in the water has purified the waters. My punishment of you has purified you. But this was not enough. Now you have renounced your nature, and this is your path to me. Leave this river at once and do not trouble men again. Go into the ocean with your wives and children.’ Kaliya and his wives and children then worshipped Krishna, and Krishna blessed them. When the snake descended again into the water with his family and swam away toward the sea, the people were overjoyed. Krishna said to them, ‘Only Balarama understood my nature; only the serpent’s wives understood the meaning of punishment; only Kaliya understood the meaning of renunciation. Yet you are the ones rewarded with the purification of these waters and the companionship of God. Perhaps now you will understand the meaning of my grace.’ Only through the illusion of maya, the workings of karma revealed these truths.

“After Ravana abducted Sita, Rama and Lakshmana were attacked by the demon Kabandha. This demon possessed enormous arms that could reach into the three worlds and with these arms he took whatever he pleased. This was a tremendous power, and Kabandha abused this power often. He stole what did not belong to him. He grasped men and animals, taking them into his mouth to sate his unyielding appetite. And he wrecked the sacrifices and austerities performed by others. Kabandha took hold

of Rama and Lakshmana and told them, 'I am hungry for your flesh. If you have erred or are angry, make peace with the world; the guilty upset my appetite.'

"Rama and Lakshmana, however, were no easy prey. With their swords, they hacked off Kabandha's arms at his shoulders. The demon howled while blood poured copiously from his mutilated body, drenching the earth. Kabandha said, 'Only God could overcome me with such ease. Listen to me for a moment, O best of men. Once I was as beautiful as Lakshmi, your wife, and as strong as Indra, your servant. But because I was proud and foolish I sometimes shed my handsome form and took on this loathsome aspect. With my grotesque arms, I harassed the world until one day I angered a sage who cursed me to remain in this form, unable to transform into my original self. At first, I thought nothing of the curse, for this body allowed me to act always as I pleased and no one could stop me. But at last I grew weary of this body and even of my own behavior. I had indulged my many appetites for so long, I could no longer control them; they mastered me and I became their slave. But I took solace in the sage's curse, for he had promised that I would be released from this punishment when Rama appeared and hacked off my arms and immolated my broken body. I ask then, Lord Rama, that you destroy me entirely. Build a pyre for me and cast me into the fire. To die at your hands is my sincerest wish.'

“Rama and Lakshmana fulfilled Kabandha’s request and Kabandha took on his previous form and ascended into heaven. Rama’s seeming punishment was, in truth, the sweetest blessing.

“In their times Krishna and Rama possessed the power, which is the grace of God, to rescind the debts of selfish action. Likewise, their own actions, though selfish or senseless to outward seeming, were in perfect agreement with God’s will. Neither Rama nor Krishna sought reward, though rewards abound to the one who upholds dharma.

“With this, now you might understand what Rama meant when he arrived in Lanka and called Ravana out to fight, ‘I have come to punish you, to put you to death. Show me the courage for which you are famous. I have heard rumors of it, but all I know of it is that you deceived me and carried off my wife to satisfy your lusts. Come out, warrior. My arrows will purify you. With the blows of my arms and with the edge of my sword I will make your blood holy that you may perform your final ablutions in it. Do not be afraid. Death at my hands is inevitable for all creatures for I have already defeated all these warriors.’ Ravana trembled but answered, ‘My life is not yet in your hands.’ But Rama said, ‘From the moment you were born, your life has belonged to me. But you have chosen how I will take it. When you abducted my unwilling wife, you decided. Already I have devoured your life, Ravana, and the lives

of all men. Some I have punished, others I have forgiven, still others I have blessed. Come out, king of Lanka, and face me. If I am Brahma and Vishnu, I am also Shiva and I deprive the world of life.'

“With the tip of his arrow, Rama set the world aright. He pursued right action and was untroubled by illusion. Rama saw all of this according to dharma and was himself at peace, even as Kaikeyi rejected him and sent him into the wilderness. Rama obeyed and never spoke harshly to her, never faulted her or humiliated her and forgave her readily when she sought his forgiveness. See, Aurangzeb, in the examples of Viradha and Kabandha how Rama acted and in the example of Kaliya how Krishna acted. They sought nothing from the fruit of their actions, except to maintain dharma. Because Kaliya understood who Krishna was he sought Krishna's forgiveness. Because Viradha and Kabandha understood who Rama was, they died seeking his blessing, even as they died at his hands. At first, Vali could not understand, but when understanding swept over him, he likewise blessed Rama, though Rama's actions, to others, seemed shameful. Vali realized that Rama's actions were the road to moksha. Surpanakha, however, found no relief. Though her mutilation revealed her, she still saw nothing of her true self and lived on in willing blindness. Likewise Ravana was proud and arrogant even

as he confronted Rama's power. Ravana thought he could overcome dharma and thus he died again and again even to this day. Through this, you might understand the meaning of samsara."

The boy paused. Aurangzeb remained quiet; even his soldiers did not stir. Lifting his head a little, the boy said, "Men allow themselves to continue on this road that does not end but circles upon itself. For these, there is nothing but the wheel of samsara. The world of appearance is a burden upon their backs. Feel it. Samsara is your home. Even now the illusion weighs you down; it exhausts you; your eyes grow weary of the world and the world is weary of you."

Aurangzeb leaned forward a little in his seat, pressing a yellow pillow beneath his right hand. "Tell me, then, how may a man be delivered from this illusion?"

The boy said, "Moksha is liberation from both maya and karma by breaking the wheel of samsara and entering into the Nirvana of Brahman, which is eternal union with God.

"To break the wheel of samsara is to escape forever. It is not enough simply to ignore the illusion. To break the wheel of samsara, you must be rid of all attachments. These attachments are twofold: attachment to things of this world and attachment to ourselves. There is the illusion

of the world around us; there is the illusion of ourselves. Those who seclude themselves from the first, who shut the doors of perception against the lure of appearance, who by disappearance imagine themselves free of all attachment, have not broken the wheel. They are like frightened children who think that by closing their eyes the world outside has vanished. Even if the world holds no more temptation for them and they are safe from its lures, still they have clung to the illusion of themselves and cannot achieve that realization of the atman.

“The one who is fixed on worldly things, transient pain and pleasure, ephemeral love and hatred, bonds of friendship, tribe and family, has built his house with walls of sand.

“The two paths of liberation are holy work, which is work done for the sake of God, and renunciation, which is work done without desire. Yet he cannot find liberation if, in renunciation, he does no work for the sake of God. And he cannot find liberation if, in holy work, he does not renounce his desire for reward. The world may die to us, but until we die to ourselves, we are not free from samsara.”

Aurangzeb was puzzled and said, “What you are saying, I am lost in it. I cannot keep my head above the waters of these words, nor can I fathom their depths.”

The boy said, "To teach you, you must submit, as Moses submitted to Khidr. You must put aside your expectations of truth to learn Truth.

"The wheel is broken by finding the atman, which is the divine spark with you, by acknowledging the unity of God and of His messengers, and by following the teachings of the messengers of God, which is the highest dharma.

"Krishna taught that one may achieve the atman through great effort, but not without God's grace. During the lives of Rama, and Krishna, and the Buddha, God's grace was effulgent and fell everywhere upon the Earth at all times.

"Realization of the atman is independent of all human learning and achievement. No teaching can grant it, no ritual can summon it, no faith can demand it. Yet seek it anyway, through teaching and ritual and faith. This way you may purify your heart, subdue your mind and perhaps, by His grace, He will reveal the atman to you. Selfish wickedness can be subdued by meditating upon the names, lives, and teachings of the messengers of God. This is the road you must take. If you are upon this road at the end He may lift the fog of maya and show you the door to His mansion.

"Detachment is not the throwing away of wealth, but mindfulness of God above all things. So long as you cling to the things of this world, you are deprived.

“When you think of reincarnation, consider the three paths you may take. You may cling to the baubles and trinkets of this world, and you remain bound to the world. You may cling to your pride, your arrogance, and your expectations, and you remain bound to the world. Or you may cling to the coat of the messengers of God and achieve that higher world. Yet know that, in the end, we all return to Him.

“What then is the atman? What use has the lantern without the flame within it? What use has the eye without the mind to perceive? What use has the mind without the atman to find and the soul to tend?

“In every man is the sign of Him, which is the spark of the divine, just as in every lighted lamp is a flame. If the lamp is unlit, what use does it have? You may take a thousand steps or take but one toward the atman. If He smiles upon you, you may discover it. If you have taken a thousand steps, His grace is the thousand and first and you will have reached it. If you have taken a single step, His grace is the second and you will have reached it. It is worth immeasurably more than a thousand steps. Thus the thousand steps and the single step are rewarded more than a thousandfold times by His grace.

“Look upon living men and see how they are weighted down with the burdens of life. They are dead. Look upon men who have achieved the atman, who are dead to

themselves. They are the only ones living. See that samsara is, in truth, the perpetuity of death, not life. See that nirvana is, in truth, the fullness of life, not the emptiness of death.

“Turn then to Rama and Krishna and the Buddha to achieve the fullness of life, even as you die to yourself. Through God alone is this possible. In their days, Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha were the doorways to His presence. Only by passing through them was it possible to acquire knowledge and wisdom that is not mere wind and vanity.

“The road to life is to die to yourself. To die to yourself is to be detached from all things except God. The gopis, in Krishna’s presence, forgot all things, their husbands, their children, their parents, their duties and they were alive only by nearness to Him and were dead only in separation from Him. Consider yourself whether you are alive or dead. So long as you cling to this world, you are deprived of the life of the spirit and even as you walk the Earth you are accounted dead. Smash the chains you have made that tie you to the things of the world and you will ascend alive, while those you leave behind, who bury your body, are the dead. Break the wheel of samsara. Your life will not end; only then can your life be said truly to begin.

“Samsara is the transient world. It is a prison, even if gilded, even if the prisoner is distracted with pleasure

and baubles. A man is sensible who seeks to escape the wheel of samsara if his life is difficult, if he is starving, cold, and without friends. Yet he does not hope to escape samsara; he seeks instead food and warmth and pleasing companionship. If he gains these things, he is fortunate, but he is not free. Reflect upon this, O king of the age.

“All things come from God and to God all things revert. From this there is no escape. At that moment, you will arrive at the mirror of the Absolute and you will be revealed to yourself completely. Your mystery is complex, difficult to perceive as a diamond is difficult to pierce. Then consider how difficult it is to fathom His mystery. Your wisdom is not found by unraveling the mystery of Him, but in recognition that you are incapable of unraveling it. Your knowledge is achieved not by learning the arts and sciences current among men, but through His servants who will lead you to the atman, to moksha, to liberation and union with God.”

The Atman

Aurangzeb said, “Child, you speak of the atman, but I still don’t understand it. My teachers spoke of it as a form of idolatry; they said that it is self-worship.”

The boy laughed at this. “You have heard and have believed that *Every soul will taste of death*. Yet who has understood the meaning of this? Let me tell you a little of the atman.

“For countless ages Uma dwelt in the pavilions of holiness, beneath the canopy of God’s love and protection, her hem purified of worldly illusion, her face unseen by devas, men, or rakshasas. Behind the realm of appearance and disappearance she arose from her palace. All who saw her were intoxicated by her beauty, by the scent of her perfume, and by the sweetness of her voice. The devas said she was the maidservant of God.

“One of the devas, Vayu, who is the master of wind and Hanuman’s father, approached Uma and asked her about the nature of God. Uma did not answer but demanded to know what power Vayu possessed to dare ask this question. Vayu, who was very proud, said, ‘I am among the mightiest of devas. I am the master of wind. I can blow away any object in the world, however far and for however long I please.’

“Uma placed a single grain of dry rice before Vayu and said, ‘Show me this great power.’ Vayu exerted every effort, but could not cause the rice to budge. Winds that could have torn the Himalayas from their roots did not cause that grain of rice even to tremble. Vayu gave up and was astounded, but before he could speak, Uma said, ‘You can understand as much of God’s nature as you can move this grain of rice. Your power is not yours, but His. You yourself are not yours, but you belong to Him.’

“Vayu knelt and pressed his fingers upon Uma’s feet. She raised her hand and said, ‘Go in peace. You may yet find Him in yourself, but only after being rid of yourself. Within you there is not room for you and Him together.’

“Who puts on filthy rags and imagines them a kingly robe? Who wars with his brother over the rotting corpse of a whore? Who places upon his head a crown of dung and calls himself king? Such is the man who knows nothing of the atman.

“Those who understand this will rise out of samsara and achieve release from the world and its temptations, its mad and shameful passions, its defilements and illusions.

“O king, what we call atman is the divine within every man. We are made in His likeness. We are forged as cups of iron in the furnace of His love, filled with the wine of His essence. This is the likeness. From His vineyard, He pours forth liberally. Drink from the cup of yourself, not

for the sake of the cup, but to taste that wine which is more precious to the believers than their own lifeblood. We may know something of Him from within ourselves, as I may know something of the sun when it warms my body. But I don't confuse my body with the sun.

“All possessions, including reputation and attainment, are gone by morning. All pride is lost, all senses deprived, all achievement sundered, all knowledge forgotten. Do not put store in these things for as quickly as they come, they go. A man, drunk with wine, achieves a moment of bliss; but bliss flees with the dawn.

“Between your individual self and the Universal Self, which is the atman, the difference is as darkness and light, or as illusion and the Real. The atman is not the self if by self you mean the man that you are or the life that you lead, for these in fact are at variance with the atman. The Universal Self is not yourself; it is His Self. Look for it and you might find it. Do not worship your self as if it were the atman. If the individual self is not tamed, it runs wild without direction, without purpose. He cannot die to himself, but lives again and again, finding no peace, no escape from attachments or from the wheel of samsara. Forget this illusion of yourself, this lifeless mask, and know that true Self and achieve that better life, which is union with God.

“He is the goal; know yourself and this is both road and destination, door and palace, throne and king.

“Shut your eyes to what you imagine you are and find Him within yourself. Die to yourself and live within Him. Without this, you die as many deaths as you have desires and yet you are reborn into desire as often as you die. That is the road to misery and is the wheel of samsara. No intellect can unravel it. No scripture can make it clear. But He has placed a sign of Himself in the lotus of your heart. Give up your knowledge and know with His knowledge.

“Do not act for the sake of acquiring the fruits of action nor drink from the wine of those fruits. To act only to acquire the reward of your actions is to be paid in full. That reward is fleeting and desire is only further inflamed. For the one who makes love, for a moment it is enough until that moment passes; when is there ever enough?

“Of the things you possess, the atman is all that has value. It is God’s treasure and your mind is but the vault for it. Remove the treasure, and what value has the vault? Compared to the atman, some say, life is an empty game. Remember Yudishtira, the older brother of Krishna’s friend Arjuna. At a game of dice, Yudishtira staked and lost a handful of pearls. He then staked and lost women and servants, gold and land, even his own kingdom. He staked and lost his brothers, then himself, then gambled away his wife, Draupadi. See how a game of dice is meaningless,

until you have staked all things upon it. By living, you have staked your spirit. Life has value only in the outcome for the atman. Without the atman, life is an empty boasting of worthless desires, a heap of bones, a sea of blood, a desert of ashes. The pauper in rags holding a begging bowl, if he has unveiled the atman, he is among the wealthiest of creatures. The king on his throne, surrounded by servants, holding a key to all the world's treasure, he is less than a beggar if he has not found the atman.

“Discover the atman and rise above samsara. Remember the palace Purochana built for Arjuna and his brothers, which was called the House of Joy. Within was every luxury, every comfort. But hidden in the walls, Purochana had sealed oil and straw. He awaited a propitious time to set fire to the palace and kill the Pandava as they slept within. Yudishtira, Arjuna's older brother, was thoughtful and ordered a tunnel be dug into the floor of the palace. That night the Pandava feasted and, at the end of the evening, they set fire to the palace themselves and escaped into the tunnel. From a distance, the brothers watched the House of Joy as it burned, consumed in fire, leaving nothing behind except blackened earth.

“Here is a story if you are thoughtful. The House of Joy is attachment to the things of this world. Do not wait, sleeping in comfort, for Purochana to set the fire. Instead, find a way to the atman and set the fire yourself and escape.

The House is samsara, the tunnel is moksha, the way to the atman.”

Aurangzeb said, “I have heard your people speak of the atman as God and of God as the atman; that there is no difference.”

The boy thought a moment and then said, “The wise say atman is Brahman and that Brahman is atman, making no distinction between the two. But this understanding is not subtle, and the atman and Brahman both are not grasped by logic or intellect; their meanings are subtler than any subtlety and hidden behind many veils. Words cannot describe this; by describing, words place limits. But who will understand my meaning if I am without words, if I am silent? Let me express what is inexpressible. You know that He is within all things; but through the human temple His light shines brightest in all creation. But the temple is not God Himself, for though He is found in every atom of His creation, He likewise transcends His creation entirely. He is immanent, He is the atman; He is transcendent, He is Brahman.

“If the atman is a droplet, He is the well of fathomless waters. If the atman is a flicker of light, He is the sun. If the atman is a looking glass, He is what you find reflected. Attachments and desire obscure that glass. Cleanse it and be free and reveal what is in your heart.

“After Ravana’s defeat, Rama and Sita were crowned in the city of Ayodhya. As a gift for Hanuman’s loyalty and friendship, Sita gave him a string of pearls. She said, ‘With these as a token, remember Rama.’

“Years later, Hanuman was seen unstringing these pearls, trying to open them up, grinding them into powder. The people of Ayodhya said, ‘What are you doing? Those were Sita’s gift to you.’ Hanuman said, ‘I am opening them to find Rama within them; that is the true gift.’ The people did not understand and Hanuman said, ‘Rama is everywhere in everything, even in my heart.’ The people laughed at him and said, ‘Show us what is in your heart; we too would like to lay eyes on Rama.’ Innocent of their mocking, Hanuman agreed. He opened his chest before their eyes, revealing in his beating heart the face of Rama.

“Hanuman had no use for pearls, except that they might bring him nearer to God. He had no use for his body, except that God dwelt within. Hanuman is the temple. No mosque is holier than what is within you, but you must wash away all worldly defilements. Sacrifice all things at the altar of the atman. The temple of Hanuman is in the likeness of a looking glass. See what is in it, worshipper. But if with pride you have fouled its surface, you will see nothing. Though the atman within you is shining, you are blind to it.

“This illusion of your self existing in time in the world, is a veil over His true self. These are different things, who you imagine you are and the hidden mystery within you, which is the spirit of God. There is that Highest Self, though even this name deceives. To realize that Self, you must lose yourself entirely, releasing the bonds that tie you to samsara.”

The boy then recounted a story of Ravana. “Ravana was born with ten heads, or so the story is told. When Ravana was young he was a devotee of Shiva and performed thousands of years of penance. He purified himself and undertook terrible austerities, hoping to please God and earn merit in His sight. After many long years, however, Ravana received no blessing or acknowledgment. Therefore Ravana struck off one of his heads and, staunching the flow of blood, continued to fast and meditate for another thousand years. Again he received neither blessing nor acknowledgment. Striking off his second head, Ravana continued undaunted. Again and again, over many thousands of years, Ravana repeated this act until, his single head remaining, he prepared to strike it off. But before he struck that final blow, Shiva appeared to him.

“Ravana, overjoyed, stayed his hand and knelt before the object of his devotions. Shiva said, ‘You may complete your tapasya by cutting off your head. But if this is not pleasing, I will grant you a boon for the nine heads you

have already lost.’ Ravana thought a great while and, placing his sword in the dust, said, ‘Grant me invincibility against devas and rakshasas and all other celestial beings.’

“At once granting this wish, Shiva disappeared from sight as suddenly as he appeared. Ravana abandoned his austerities and, with his terrible power, became ruler of the rakshasas and waged war on the devas.”

Aurangzeb said, “This story is absurd, as are all your stories.”

The boy said, “You say this because you do not know the meaning of the story. You hold a sealed bottle of wine and ask how you can drink the bottle itself. You hold a handful of cooked rice and wonder how you can eat your hand.”

Aurangzeb laughed at this. He said, “Then tell me the hidden meaning of the story.”

The boy answered, “Rather than putting down his sword, Ravana would have served himself better by leaving his last severed head in the dust at God’s feet. His austerities were not complete. He had not achieved the goal, which was to please Shiva, but substituted his own desire for God’s desire for him. In his worship, he attained his own ends, not God’s. Ravana’s heads, which were the emblems of his ego, stood between him and the atman. With ease and tranquility Ravana had surpassed all devas and rakshasas. He had walked through nine doorways of

sacrifice, performing what no other could perform. But he could not open that final door and was blind even to its existence. Had he completed his tapasya and struck off his final head, he would have achieved union with God. But he squandered this in order to possess a moment's mastery over the transient world. Ravana, demon king of Lanka, seemed the most powerful creature. But he was himself merely a creature and when he was defeated, neither his invincibility nor the sacrifices he had performed to achieve it, were of any value. He could not strike off his head to find the atman because he loved himself too much. He could not abandon the illusion of rank and power in the world because he bowed down to the world. He could not break the wheel of samsara because he worshipped the wheel. He possessed wisdom, but was unwise. He was knowledgeable, but knew nothing of himself. He was a worshipper of God who neither heeded God's law nor acknowledged God's manifestation in Rama. His invincibility did not avail him, nor did his wisdom advise him, nor his knowledge inform him. The atman was within him, as it is within all men, but he never found it.

“Illusion and action that is tied to selfish desire give rise to attachments that draw you away from the atman. Look within and you will find God enthroned. But instead you turn away and wander in the wilderness of illusion. How

far you have wandered and yet come not a step closer while *He is closer to you than your jugular vein.*

“You may say that the atman is you, and this is true. But likewise you may say that it is not you; and this also is true. To achieve the realization of the atman, you must die to yourself. By ego, action, and illusion you are drawn away. Let go of all these things and you will come to the end of reason. Yet when I speak of reason’s end, I mean the true outcome of reason, not its extinction. By reason learn that the mind cannot grasp Him nor word describe Him. Reason gives us knowledge and establishes, by its own proofs, its own limits. Through reason learn of reason’s inadequacy. This is the greatest achievement of the rational intellect. Know that you cannot know Him, and your knowledge has borne fruit.”

Aurangzeb said, “How then can we know Him, if not by reason or intellect?”

The boy said, “You may know Him in the unity of the messengers of God and by the command, ‘Know yourself to know God.’ The mystery was born within us and lives within us at all times, hidden even to ourselves in the lotus of the heart. You know the *Hadith*. God has said, *Man is My mystery and I am man’s mystery.* He lodges in the heart. Give up the pretense of yourself and find Him within yourself revealed. God is the atman; the atman

is God. But this does not mean that you, Aurangzeb, are God. No, Aurangzeb is in the way. Renounce him and find God within you. The atman within you, as within all men, is His gift, His grace. In the *Quran* it says, *Within you are the signs of God. Can you not perceive?* And likewise that holy book says, *God shows His signs to men both in the world outside and within themselves.* These verses are sufficient proof that, though Muhammad does not say the word ‘atman,’ he speaks of it clearly. Your people know Muhammad, Moses, and Jesus. Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha are known to mine. These are men who loosed the bonds of attachment to all things and who revealed God from within themselves. He resides within us. Thus see in the atman that we may reconcile the unquestionable truth that God appears as a man among all men, and know how that is even possible that He might shine through the human lamp. Though only at His command through His grace do these messengers arise among men, still, as with Adam, He breathed His spirit into all men and women. Though we are *poor, plain, obscure and little* you and I may yet find a portion of it within ourselves.

“I have said in every man is the sign of Him, which is the spark of the divine. I have said look upon living men and see how they are weighted down with the burdens of life. They are dead. I have said that samsara is, in truth, the

perpetuity of death, not life. See that nirvana is the fullness of life, not the emptiness of death.

“The true believer is alive before, now and hereafter. But without detachment from his dearest possessions and his expectations of God, he is dead, forever reborn to desire of this material world, achieving no knowledge of himself.”

Aurangzeb said, “At one moment you speak of life, and you mean life; at another moment you speak of life and you mean death. At one moment you talk of death, and you mean death; at another moment you talk of death, and you mean life. Why are these meanings inconsistent? Why do you contradict yourself? Is life not life, and death not death?”

The boy replied, “One day a poor farmer saw Hanuman in the forest, within sight of his farm. Hanuman took a special interest in the farmer’s home, though it was dilapidated and barely inhabitable. The poor farmer said to his wife, ‘Hanuman has come to us. This is surely a blessing and perhaps he will change our fortunes.’ But Hanuman did not visit the farmer and remained in the trees and hillsides nearby, singing songs and chanting verses about Rama. At last, prompted by his wife, the farmer went into the forest to speak to Hanuman and seek his blessing because their poverty was desperate. He said, ‘Best of

monkeys, friend of Rama, your coming is auspicious. My wife and I are very poor and I know that you surely have the power to relieve us of the burden of poverty.' Hanuman said, 'The burden of poverty is like the burden of life. Wealth may even weigh upon men who have none of it, for neither wealth nor poverty has value. You are not liberated from poverty by mere wealth. Consider this and ask from me something better and I may grant it to you.' The farmer said, 'Your words are mysterious, incomprehensible. I am not a Brahmin or even well educated. To understand you is to me like chasing after wind. You know a way for us out of poverty; tell me.' Hanuman said, 'Though you did not understand me, still I will give you a way to fulfill your wish. But you must do as I say.' The farmer agreed and Hanuman said, 'You must tear down your house. This is my answer to you and the way that is best for you. Set fire to it tonight. Tear out its walls tomorrow. Then dig out its foundation. Do not leave a single stone standing upon another.' The farmer said, 'What you suggest is madness! I am poor and yet you promise me a path to wealth by destroying the only thing of value I have remaining to me?' and he refused to do it. Hanuman merely shrugged and leapt from the ground into the trees, and then left the forest altogether. Many years went by and the farmer and his wife died and a new owner took possession of the house.

Like the farmer before him, he too was poor but had heard the story of Hanuman's advice and decided, 'Though I am poor, I will do as Hanuman says. And if I become wealthy, I will devote myself to pure work without expectation of reward.' He tore down the house and when he discovered the vast treasure buried beneath its foundation, he gave of that wealth freely, expending only on himself what he needed to live. But, while he lived, the wealth he uncovered was inexhaustible and he spent his many years spending it in the way of charity to others."

Aurangzeb said, "Answer my question, hypocrite!"

The boy said, "After the Buddha ascended, his disciple and cousin Ananda spoke to Buddha's followers who despaired of the Buddha's departure. Ananda said: 'Always alive in Him, you do not find Him until you are dead to yourselves. Always alive, but sleeping, you do not awaken until you wake to Him. Always free from this world, you are prisoners until you let go of the world. His living creatures wander in death, and imagine they are alive. His sleeping children revel in dreams, and imagine they are awake. He has set you all free, but still you cling to the chains of this world. The world does not bind you, except that you bind yourselves to the world. You self-imprisoned ones imagine that life is death and death is life, for you lack perception. Know that all is death except what brings you nearer to Him.'

“If these notions are so alien to Islam, inform me and I will remove the stones from this temple with my own hands. Can’t you see that the path of Rama, of Krishna, of the Buddha leads to knowledge achieved by believers who steadfastly follow the path of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad? Why is this proof insufficient to you? What darkness in your heart holds you back?”

Vishnu's Bow

Aurangzeb said, "If I concede that these concepts, as you have described them, do not contradict the truth of Islam, still nowhere here is there proof that Rama or Krishna are God's messengers."

The boy said, "I have already explained this, but you resist. I have submerged the stone of your prejudice in the deepest waters, yet you say you are dry. Not a drop of this pure water has entered you. How can I argue with one who refuses to acknowledge what is so manifestly clear?"

"You will know the messengers of God through the urna, the eye of your heart, the eye of detachment. Who could cleanse the Kaba after unnumbered generations of pollution and idolatry? Muhammad arose, but the power was God's alone. Who could part the sea? Moses lifted his hand, but the power was God's alone. Who could walk upon the water? Jesus stood upon the waves, but the power was God's alone. Thus, see in this duality, His singleness. In the Kaba, Muhammad spoke and acted with God's authority; to the people he was God. When Moses spoke to the people with authority, to whom belonged the authority? The authority was God's alone; any suggestion that Moses spoke only on behalf of Moses is impiety. This is already what you believe.

“Janaka, king of Mithila, was Sita’s father. When Sita came of age, Janaka offered his daughter in marriage. But the king laid a terrible condition upon her suitors. Janaka required that her prospective husbands make a display of their might and valor by stringing Shiva’s bow. Princes and kings of neighboring lands entreated Janaka that he require some other test, but Janaka would not relent. The queen pleaded with her husband, for she believed no living man, no deva, no demon could accomplish what Janaka demanded. Still, Janaka would not renounce his oath, though secretly he too feared that this oath was rash and that Sita would have no husband. Many great and famous men tried but none succeeded even in lifting the bow.

“When Viswamithra came to the city with Rama and Lakshmana, Janaka showed the princes Shiva’s bow. In Sita’s presence, Rama lifted the bow with ease. He restrung it, and fitted an arrow upon it as though it were any other bow. And, with the slightest twist of his wrist, Rama snapped the bow in half. The sound of Shiva’s bow breaking was terrible. It shook the foundations of the three worlds. Sita recovered her senses and she placed a garland around Rama’s neck and became his wife.

“The sound of the breaking bow reached Parasurama in the mountains. Instantly he traveled to Mithila and into the palace where he saw Shiva’s bow broken in two. Enraged, he demanded the life of the one who had broken

it. While Janaka's most fearsome men stood cowering, Rama approached Parasurama and said, 'God entered your spirit once; you were born to show His strength on Earth, but you have become arrogant.' Parasurama became insane with anger at these words. He held aloft the bow of Vishnu and mocked Rama, saying, 'Little prince, if you can lift this bow, then I will know that you broke Shiva's bow and then I will kill you.' Rama lifted the bow and, to Parasurama's horror and astonishment, easily fitted an arrow upon it and pointed it at Parasurama's heart. Rama said, 'I do not want to kill you. You were great and wise in your time. You were my token and my right arm. Yet I am exalted well above your ability to help or harm me. I am merciful and I forgive you for failing to recognize me and for daring to put me to the test, for it is you who have been tested.'

"Parasurama pressed his palms together and bowed to Rama. Rama said, 'I will fire this arrow into the heavens and will destroy your austerities and religious merit.' Parasurama smiled and said, 'O Rama, having attained your presence, I have no use for such merit.'

"Parasurama's eyes were opened, and he no longer sought to acquire merit to enter paradise. After seeing Rama and speaking with him what was paradise? In Parasurama's hand was a cup of silver, upon his head was a crown of precious stones, upon his hip he carried an axe of gold. He could no longer call himself poor. He said, 'Who

could break Shiva's bow, but Shiva? Who could fix an arrow upon Vishnu's bow but Vishnu? Upon the body of Shiva, see the face of Vishnu. Upon the shoulder of Vishnu, see the bow of Shiva and upon Shiva's shoulder, see Vishnu's bow. Just as the daughter of Janaka is likewise the wife of Rama, there is no difference between them, though the duties of wife and daughter are different. There are not two, there is but one.' Recite from the *Rigveda*: *God is but One in truth, but the sages call Him by many names.* Recite from the *Quran*: *By whatever name you call Him, all His names are beautiful.*

"I have already said this about the Sarasvati; God invests some, appoints others, manifests Himself through others. But consider your own belief in Muhammad. I do not deny the validity of His station, but what proof does he bring, except the testimony of the *Quran*? Moses is proven by the testimony of the *Torah* and Jesus by the *Gospel*. See within the *Ramayana* similar testimony and within the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* further such testimony."

Aurangzeb said, "These are not compelling testimonies or convincing proofs that Rama or Krishna were messengers of God."

The boy said, "Your own belief is irrelevant. I have laid out before you the carpet of true faith, but you will not kneel upon it. I have shown you that nowhere are Rama's journey or Krishna's teachings inconsistent with

Islam. Nowhere is there contradiction. Fanatical mullahs who were your teachers have led you astray, have created contradictions where before there were none. In the field of misunderstanding, they are sowers of hatred and reapers of human blood.”

Aurangzeb said, “If this is your defense, I have defeated your arguments. Muhammad never claimed to be God, yet Krishna did. If Krishna is only God’s messenger, then he cannot be God. If he is the pen and God is the author, why would the pen claim the station of God or be worthy of personal adoration? This is a violation of tawhid; this is the point of divergence between true faith and shirk.”

The boy replied, “If the author sets ink to paper with the pen, and with the pen in hand he writes the words, ‘I am the author,’ who would call this statement untrue? Muhammad has spoken with the words of God; in this he becomes Him. If the author is not visible to you and yet you see evidence of the pen at work, turning in the direction of the pen and declaring, ‘Here you may find the Author,’ you are not in error turning to the pen. If God’s spirit is the light and Krishna is the lantern holding a portion of this light for all men to see, the Light of all lights, you are not in error turning toward Krishna, or recognizing his station, at once as a man and also as the face of God on Earth. Remember, Iblis’ error. God breathed his spirit into Adam. Adam was the mirror catching the reflection of God, yet Iblis did not

bow to God through Adam, for he misunderstood. He was ignorant and imagined that, in that bow, God and Adam were separate when, in fact, at that moment God and Adam were one. Consider the atman, the spirit of God within you and you will understand that, in the diversity of the world, there is only Him.”

The Rains

Aurangzeb said, "If my teachers are in error, still there is terrible confusion among these faiths. The religion of God is chaos, a mingling of messages and meanings intended for some, but not others, intended for different ages and different peoples. God would surely not permit such a confusion of tongues. What purpose would such confusion serve?"

The boy said, "The message of Moses traveled not far from the Hebrews among whom he arose. The message of Jesus spread further, but still does not embrace the world. The message of Muhammad spread further still, yet many have not heard of him. This is the world. This is how it has been. When Rama left the world and ascended into heaven, the world grew dark, and each day darker still, until Krishna arose to restore what had been lost, to renew religion, to reveal new law according to the needs of the people. The people had lost their way and the teachings of Rama had faded almost beyond recognition. Krishna restored and renewed the world.

"Just as the sun rises, still it sets and night comes. But with morning, the sun swallows up the stars and humbles even the moon. Just as the rains come, still the rains end and springtime rules over the world.

“After Rama defeated Vali and restored Sugriva’s wife and kingdom to him, Sugriva said, ‘For what you have done, I pledge you my loyalty and life; my people and I will fight in your cause to restore your wife to you, as you have restored mine to me. I will fight under your banner and with you as Lord. We will defeat Ravana. Do not doubt this!’

“Rama thanked Sugriva, but said, ‘I have restored righteousness to you and your people and I will lead you in war against Ravana to restore righteousness to the world and to ascend my throne. But winter is coming; the rains will start to fall. I won’t lead you to fight Ravana in muddy fields and swamps. But when the rains stop, come to me in the forest and I will again appear before you and we will then find Ravana and destroy him.’

“Sugriva said, ‘I will obey exactly as you command. I am your servant and, when the rains have stopped and the trees and flowers green and blossom again, I will return to your home in the forest at the foot of this mountain and offer my treasures, my armies, my very life to you.’

“Months went by while Rama awaited the end of winter. At last, the rains ended and the creatures of the forest reappeared. Cranes and swans returned to the waters. Fish spawned and flowers bloomed. Day and night, which had been silent except for the steady patter of rain, now filled with the sounds of spring. Rama awaited the fulfillment of

Sugriva's promise, but Sugriva did not return, nor did he send his army, nor even a single messenger.

“Lakshmana was enraged and spoke to Rama, accusing Sugriva of impiety. He said to his brother, ‘He was grateful when you killed Vali, but this gratitude was only a show. Restored to wife and kingdom, he has forgotten you. He bowed so sincerely, his monkey hands clasped together. But like a monkey, he has busied himself with other things, forgetting his benefactor, his friend, his God. I will seek Ravana's kingdom myself and you and I will destroy him and his supporters and rescue Sita. This is within your power, O Rama. But I promise that once this is accomplished, I will return to Kishkinda and cut the throat of that ungrateful monkey, slaughter his army, and burn his kingdom to ashes.’

“Rama said, ‘All of these things you say are within my power. But what you propose is not pleasing. Lakshmana, I know Sugriva has failed to keep faith with me and has forgotten his promise to me. Go to Kishkinda and remind him of his promise; if he repents, I am forgiving and he will keep my friendship. If he is obstinate, repenting only his promise, then return to me immediately and I will know he has become my enemy.’

“Lakshmana's anger did not cool, but he obeyed his brother and journeyed from the forest to Kishkinda, the city that Sugriva ruled. As he approached the city, Hanuman,

the best of monkeys, saw Lakshmana approaching and understood what was in Lakshmana's heart. Hanuman spoke with Tara, Sugriva's favorite wife. She said, 'Send female warriors to block his way. Lakshmana will hesitate if faced with women. Then speak with him and tell him why Sugriva has not fulfilled his promise. Then, with Lakshmana at the gate, announce his arrival to Sugriva. Let no one stop you.'

"When Lakshmana reached the gates of the city, a well-armed troop of women blocked his way. Lakshmana was still angry but could not decide what to do, though he could overpower any warrior. Hanuman came forward to speak with Lakshmana. The brother of Rama demanded an explanation. Hanuman said, 'I remember Sugriva's promise to you. But Sugriva won't see me. He doesn't leave his bedchamber, but keeps company with women who serve him day and night. He is fat with food; his lusts and whims are satisfied; he drinks only the wine of forgetfulness and indolence. But now that you have come, I will announce to him that you are at the gates of his city acting as Rama's emissary awaiting the fulfillment of that forgotten promise. Though he is my king, today I won't allow Sugriva's guards to keep me back. The king will hear this message whether he likes it or not.'

"Lakshmana said, 'Go quickly, Hanuman. These warriors, even women, won't keep me waiting long.'

“Hanuman would not be barred from Sugriva’s bed chamber. Throwing Sugriva’s guards aside, he boldly approached Sugriva who lay upon his bed. The women around the king scattered before Hanuman as leaves before a great wind. Hanuman scolded him, saying, “You are tardy, king of monkeys. It is spring and Rama wonders what has become of you. Lakshmana awaits at the gate of the city for you to present yourself; welcome him and tell him why you haven’t fulfilled the promise you made to Rama.’

“For a moment, Sugriva didn’t respond. But a look of horror dawned upon his face. He leapt from his bed and took Hanuman by the shoulders. He said, ‘Rama forgive me! What have I done?’ At once Sugriva, with a guard of honor trailing behind him, rushed to the city gate and, seeing Rama’s brother, the king burst into tears and fell to Lakshmana’s feet. He said, ‘Faithful Hanuman has waked me from a long dream. Forgive me. I have no excuses to bring before you. Lead me to Rama, and let him do with me as I deserve.’

“Lakshmana’s heart was moved by Sugriva’s words; his anger slipped from him like rainwater from a leaf. He said gently, ‘Rama will surely forgive you; he has told me himself that if you will keep your promise to him, he remains your true friend and your supporter.’

“Sugriva immediately gave orders for the disposition of his army, and sent his finest soldiers as scouts to find Ravana’s kingdom. Then, he threw off his kingly robes and dressed as an ascetic and, with only Hanuman in attendance, followed Lakshmana back into the forests to face Rama.

“Sugriva hung his head, not noticing the beauty of the trees and flowering plants and birds singing sweetly. With every step, as they approached the mountain where Rama waited, Sugriva’s heart became heavier. But Rama appeared suddenly from the thick forests at the foot of his mountain home. He was smiling, with his hands open. Saying, ‘Welcome, king of monkeys,’ he embraced Sugriva, then Hanuman, and then Lakshmana.

“Sugriva opened his mouth to beg Rama’s forgiveness, but Rama interrupted him, saying, ‘The rainy season was longer than usual and delayed our plans. But now you’re here, and your promise to me completely fulfilled.’

“Sugriva began to cry and said, ‘O Rama, you know the truth and how I failed you.’

“Rama said, ‘King of Kishkinda, do not abase yourself or be troubled now. What has passed has passed. I am your friend. You don’t need to explain yourself. I foresaw this moment before you ever made your promise to me, before you were even in your mother’s womb. Now you are here before me; your determination greater than ever, your

loyalty to my cause complete, your friendship unassailable, your love for me beyond question. When I sided with you against Vali, did you think this moment was hidden from me? This is a joyous meeting and I welcome you with delight.’

“Hearing this, Sugriva’s burden was eased and joy and happiness filled him; he said, ‘All that time I spent, having forgotten you in my ignorance and hedonism, all the pleasures I enjoyed were nothing, not even a spark beside the sun of this moment.’ When Hanuman heard these words, at that moment Rama entered his heart and the fresh green forest shone with the glow of Paradise.

“This story has often been repeated, this history relived from age to age. After swearing fealty to God, men forget Him after a time. When His messenger ascends, they revert back to old habits and are found indulging their vile whims so that, upon the return of God’s messenger, that fealty is forgotten. During God’s absence among men, much is lost, the pallor of death falls over the world. But upon God’s return, for He returns to all men in every age, what is forgotten is remembered, what is lost is restored, and the world turns green again.

“Remember Sampathi, the ancient bird, wounded and mutilated by the sun. Sampathi was the brother of Jatayu who died defending Sita from Ravana. Sampathi approached Hanuman and sought word of Jatayu. When

Hanuman told him the tale, Sampathi wept piteously. Sampathi said, 'When Jatayu and I were young, we flew into the heavens higher than any other creature. But the sun plotted against us and set me on fire, scorching me. I fell to earth, barely alive, unable to fly again. Only by staying in my shadow was Jatayu preserved and he swore to me that he would find a way to restore me, but now my hope is gone. Although I am proud that Jatayu died honorably, in defense of a woman, I must die alone and unloved.'

"Hanuman said, 'Jatayu defended not just any woman. He died defending Sita, the wife of Rama.'

"Sampathi's eyes brightened and he said, 'My brother has saved me after all! I was told that I would be restored if ever I heard the name of God!' And as he said these words, the great bird transformed before Hanuman's eyes, his flesh becoming strong, his feathers restored, his gigantic wings shadowing the forest. Hanuman was in awe of this majestic bird and said, 'Surely you are descended from Garuda, the mount of Vishnu!' Sampathi said, 'Victory is Rama's. All things are possible through him.'

"Yet the return of God's messenger also precipitates a terrible reaction and a violent rejection from those who practice adharma and from those who oppose God. Though Ravana knew he would die at Rama's hands, and his every hope had fled, still he awoke his gigantic brother,

Kumbhakharna, who slept six months at a time, to crush Rama's army and to resist the restoration of dharma. Kumbhakharna injured Hanuman and Sugriva, but in the end he could not overcome Rama.

“Likewise, opposition to the return of God among men takes many hidden forms, even among the kinsmen of God's messenger. Duryodhana in his time was the incarnation of men's weakness, selfishness and malice. Dhritarashtra, his father, who meant no harm and hoped only to keep peace between his sons and his nephews, was often overruled, overwhelmed, and overcome because of his weakness for Duryodhana, his oldest boy. Do not let the Duryodhana of anger and greed make the Dhritarashtra of decency impotent. For brief moments Dhritarashtra shone, but Duryodhana always extinguished that light. Yes, Dhritarashtra rescinded the debts of the Pandava, but at the prompting of Duryodhana compelled the Pandava to gamble again.

“When the war was decided, Ghandari, the wife of Dhritishatra and the mother of Duryodhana, cursed Krishna. She said, ‘All that you have built will be broken. All that you have staked will be lost.’

“Krishna said, ‘This is true. But another will come to rebuild what was broken, just as I have rebuilt it. The defeat of your sons and the victory of their cousins is but

a single stone set into the monument of justice and peace. If it is later cracked, it will be fixed; if it is later lost, it will be replaced, but the monument will rise and my cause will be vindicated.

“First came Rama, then darkness; when the world turned away from Rama, I appeared. When the age of darkness begins again, take shelter with the Buddha.”

Aurangzeb said, “What testimony did the Buddha give to his claim of enlightenment? If any, still we have only the testimony of the one who alleges enlightenment, or those near him who are his partisans. For me, the *Quran* is sufficient testimony to Muhammad’s claim, but what does the Buddha bring?”

The boy answered, “When the Buddha achieved awareness, they say he pressed his fingers to the ground so that the earth itself might acknowledge this truth. To this testify the best known records. Consider the changes his teachings brought and the millions who acknowledged the truth of his teachings; consider the hearts he changed and the worlds of faith and love he built. Even today, his teachings mostly lost, the Buddha is the father of much good in the world. Surely this is sufficient testimony; if not, what testimony could ever suffice you? By what measure do you judge?”

Aurangzeb said, “The Buddha does not teach the existence of God who created the world; his followers

say that ignorance created the world. This is error and sufficient testimony that the Buddha was no messenger of God.”

The boy said, “No, the Buddha taught that our perception of the world, the world as we make it in our minds, is born of ignorance.”

Aurangzeb said, “The Buddha says nothing of God! In what scrap of remaining scripture does he speak of Him?”

The boy said, “When the Buddha speaks of the ultimate reality, the reality that is both transcendent and immanent, he does not say ‘God,’ but there is not another word for it. It is not remembered that the Buddha ever spoke of union with God, but there is no other way of understanding the path to true awareness, freedom from suffering and illusion. Among us, he was promised by Krishna, ‘Take refuge in Buddha.’ He was the shelter of his age, and they were righteous who sought shade beneath the pavilion of his holiness. I cannot speak for those who claim this or that teaching for the Buddha; but consider that his birth, his life, his death are all harbingers of others yet to come, to restore religion. Yet you come with Muhammad’s message, much distorted by your refusal to acknowledge those in whose path Muhammad himself has walked.

“Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha were God’s messengers. No one in this land doubts this. In Brahma’s

name they created a new order. In Vishnu's name they maintained and preserved dharma. In Shiva's name they destroyed what came before, however hallowed. This destruction was not repudiation, but the unfolding of God's will. The young man does not repudiate his infancy; nor does the old man reject his youth; for the path of infancy and the path of youth arrive at their ends. The butterfly does not cling to the cocoon, nor the heron to the egg from which she hatched. The old man does not sleep in the crib of his infancy. Nor does the young man crawl into the grave."

Aurangzeb said, "You still run from my questions, boy. You say that Rama died and the world strayed. Then Krishna arose and restored religion. And Krishna died and the world strayed again until Buddha appeared. You have spoken of Rama and Krishna at length, but have said nearly nothing of the Buddha. Tell me, if you can, which stories and scriptures of the Buddha are authentic and how they are consistent with the journey of Rama and the teachings of Krishna."

The boy said, "If you had listened to me, you would not ask. You would know the truth of the Buddha and acknowledge his station. You would cast away the accretions of tradition, the manipulations of monks, the dissimulation of doubters. You would see him emerge,

calm, at peace, tolerant and wise from the thousand myths that have descended upon him like a black rain.

“Find the truth of Buddha in the stories of Krishna and Rama, for these are stories he told to his disciples. After the Buddha ascended, Ananda, his cousin and closest disciple, said, ‘He told us of Rama and Krishna that we may learn a little of him. He recounted their trials, their troubles and teachings that we might recognize them in him and him in them. They are the past lives of God among us; they are His past lives and His future lives; for He descends among men from time to time to renew dharma, to establish justice, and to show us the surest path to self-annihilation, which is union with God. As many times as He has appeared among men, so too will He appear in the future. Though he was my cousin, Siddhartha Gautama who walked among men and was a man like me, He was the Buddha who walks among us in every age. Seek Him out in every world of His worlds. This is dharma.’”

Aurangzeb said, “Yet the Hindus and the Buddhist agree on little doctrine. Hindus worship a multitude of gods, neglecting God. And Buddhists worship no gods, neglecting God. How do you explain it?”

The boy answered, “I have explained it to you again and again. I will not deny that some Buddhists are godless, and others worship too many gods. But the essence of the

Buddha's teaching emphasized liberation from the fruits of action. There are many disciplines, hallowed by time and tradition, that are intended to shake off the vision of maya, like so much dust, from our earthly bodies. Yet consider the long years, the painful austerities and deprivations men undergo, and yet they remain prisoners of samsara while those closest to God, motivated by a single desire to be near Him, who by this choose His will over their own and extinguish all other desire, they are in an instant transported to Him and are in union with Him. Ascetics may see these devotees as children but playing. Consider the gopis, the women closest to Krishna. Laughing they have broken the wheel. Praising, singing, and loving Him, they become not His consorts, but His true friends and companions. They smile upon Him, and He upon them. And for this smile, ascetics would offer up their lives and all pleasures. Yet even with this offering they may not obtain that smile from Him that the gopis attained through love. Love is often maya, yes. But love of God is the key to His treasury.

“As for the various scriptures belonging to the Buddhists, they do not know that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* themselves are his testimony. Ananda said of the Buddha, ‘The wise are right to say that the *Vedas* are best understood through the study of the actions

and words of Rama and Krishna, for He is Rama and He is Krishna and He Himself is the *Vedas*. To seek Him is dharma. To find Him is to find within yourself the atman. To obey Him is to break the wheel of samsara. To love Him is to achieve union with Him.”

Shahadah

Aurangzeb said, “You argue well, but take Ravana’s example to heart. Give up the Sita of your error and live.”

The boy said, “Have I come to wreck your temple? Or offend your religion? I wonder who is in error. Though our worship may be wrong, your persecution confirms us in error. Speak to them as I speak to you, acknowledge their traditions, and honor the prophets of God who have come to them, and they will convert to your religion and these temples will be cleansed of idols. If you persist in this persecution, however, you place enmity between them and your people and the mission of Muhammad fails among them just as the mission of Rama and Krishna fail with you, though I have spoken only truth to you. How will they acknowledge Muhammad as the face of God on Earth if you will not acknowledge Rama or Krishna likewise? Perhaps they could be convinced even if you remain silent about Rama and Krishna. Perhaps they would put on the robe of Islam, but not while you dishonor Rama or Krishna and accuse Rama of ignorant cruelty and Krishna of perversity and deceit. Those who would make infidels and apostates out of Muslims have leveled similar charges against Muhammad. Did such charges turn righteous believers against Islam? Yet you expect your slanders will

convert those devoted to Rama or Krishna. O hypocrite, see what your hypocrisy has made of you.

“You believe Islam is sufficient knowledge of God in this age. I don’t dispute this. But imagine how much better you might understand Muhammad if you had some knowledge of Rama. Imagine how much clearer Islam becomes when you understand the wisdom of Krishna, the manly virtues of Rama.

“More than encumbrance by earthly desires and worldly possessions, a man is also weighed down by his own mind, if that mind is in the service of desire, pride, and ignorance. If he takes as his master his own expectations and prejudices, considers his own feeble and faulty judgement as the standard by which to judge what is true and what is false, his own fanaticism slanders and enfeebles him. He does not see that he has rejected God. He has taken his own opinions as his god, setting up as idols the many tokens of his ignorance, and has turned to himself to worship none other than himself. Such was Ravana’s state that, having been granted such blessings by God, he elevated himself in his own opinion and thus denied the atman, the sign of God, that sign that is not mind or body within himself. Into the jaws of many lives Ravana fell; he falls even today. Do not allow yourself to be the reincarnation of Ravana. Reject that wasted life; die to yourself and be born into Him.”

Aurangzeb said, "None of this is an excuse to let this temple to a monkey remain standing!"

The boy answered, "This temple is not for a monkey. This temple was built to remember a lowly believer, Hanuman, who served Lord Rama and Sita as best he could. This temple is like the body of a believer. Do not destroy it; you cannot convert one that you kill. Consider how Hanuman's obedience is of value, even as Fatimah was obedient to Ahmad, even as Magdalene was obedient to Jesus. Would you wreck Fatimah's home and call yourself a friend to Muhammad? Would you turn Magdalene out and call yourself a disciple of Jesus? Leave Hanuman's temple alone lest you wreck your own heart, which is the temple of true worship. No one with true insight worships Hanuman; he is merely a remembrance of Rama. Men turn to Rama or Krishna as a remembrance of Vishnu. If men come to this temple, it is because they aspire to Hanuman's station as a friend of God. Be God's friend and you will find a brother, a sure companion and trusted servant in Hanuman."

Aurangzeb said, "Little Brahmin, you cannot win this argument. I have been lenient with you and granted you leave to speak openly with me. But you are putting yourself in terrible danger, for whatever oath I give, His law supersedes it."

The boy said, "I cannot renounce what I have said, even when faced with the likelihood of defeat, for Rama awaits,

concealed, and will do what is right. As Sugriva and Vali battled, Rama was invisible, but his arrow was poised. If my cause is true, even against terrible odds, He may yet smile upon us and grant me victory. But even if defeated, the cause is not less true, nor ever lost.”

Aurangzeb said, “You have tested me beyond my limits. But you are a child and I am fair. Recite the shahadah and live. If you refuse, I will put you to death. Recite it; it is best for you.”

The boy laughed, and his laughter angered Aurangzeb. The emperor said, “Recite it and live. Recite it and Paradise will be your reward.” And as the Temple of Hanuman behind them smoldered and the soldiers pulled the rocks apart and slew those worshippers who had sought refuge there, the boy smiled a peculiar smile.

The boy said, “Rewards may come from scriptures, from sacrifice, from austerity and charity. But the reward that is most perfect is attained only through renunciation of worldly rewards, through wisdom and faith, and these are open to those who know Him and who obey Him and follow the path He has revealed in the age for which He revealed it. This reward is peace, quietude; it is an end to disturbance and distress. It transcends pain and pleasure; it is beyond good and evil.

“Heaven awaits those who worship Heaven; and Hell awaits those who worship Hell. Yet Heaven and Hell will

pass away. Those who delight in the higher nature, who desire the higher nature, are requited. Those who delight in the lower nature, who lust after the lower nature, are requited. They are granted entry through the doors of Heaven or Hell. But these rewards have their ending in time. Worship Him; the reward is eternal and you will find liberation. He is the Word and the source of the Word. He is the Voice and the One Who sees all. You may find Him within you, for He is everywhere always present. He is the throne, and the One Who sits in the throne. He is the scepter, and the One Who holds out the scepter. He is a river of clear pure water, and the source of all waters. He is the kiss and the One Who kisses, the embrace, and the One Who embraces. He is at one moment Rama, at another He is Krishna, at another the Buddha. Today He is Muhammad. Yesterday He is Jesus and He is Moses. Tomorrow He is the King of Glory, Ancient of Days; He is the return of Himself. The One you worship is not another than the One I worship. Soma brings illusion, but the Soma of His grace brings liberation from illusion. If He offers, drink deeply and give no thought to the opinions of men.”

Aurangzeb’s patience ran out and he motioned to his guards, but before his eyes, the boy transformed before them, contracting his body, becoming much smaller. His saffron robes slipped from his body and the hemp and bark binding him fell uselessly into the dust. Astonished,

Aurangzeb's soldiers hesitated. As they stood slack-jawed, the boy transformed again, becoming many times his original size, taller even than the temple the soldiers had destroyed. And the boy's face became a monkey's face and his smile filled the sky. He said, "You are not satisfied, not yet devoted and not yet separated from the things and appearances of this world. I have spoken words only according to your capacity to understand them and you have understood these words only according to your willingness to accept them. You are yourself the analogy. You will find only in yourself the limitations of your faith and your intellect."

Leaping above them, out of reach even of their arrows, Hanuman spoke from the heavens, his voice booming. "Like Ravana, you were granted a boon by God but you have squandered it in your ignorance. You could have been noble; in moments you have been great and strong, but your pride has blinded you. You call me Iblis, but you are the one with a single eye, unable to perceive, in your own faith, the depth it possesses and the power it has to embrace me."

As these words resounded and shook the earth at their feet, Hanuman said, "There is no God but God. I declare that Moses is the Messenger of God, and Jesus is the Messenger of God, and Rama is the Messenger of God,

and Krishna is the Messenger of God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God. This is the declaration I have recited for over a hundred generations; I was a believer before you were born.”

The Journey of Hanuman

In Kerala, as I dreamed during the shadow play, I saw Hanuman and he spoke these words to me.

“Near the end of Sri Rama’s life as I kneeled by his deathbed, tears like the Ganges pouring from my eyes, a ring slipped from the king’s finger and rolled to the floor. Where the ring rested, a tiny hole opened in the Earth and swallowed it and the ring disappeared from my sight. Sri Rama said to me, ‘Hanuman, you are my ancient friend and my faithful servant. Please will you find my ring?’

“I said, ‘The Earth has taken it; I will find it and return to you.’ At once I shrank down and slipped through the tiny hole in the ground in which the ring had disappeared. For ages I fell, but when I reached the end of the world I found myself in a poorly lit cavern of extraordinary size filled with crumbling statues and broken monuments. It was the throne room of the King of Ghosts.

“That king was terrible to see, more terrible than Kumbhakharna, or Indrajit, or Ravana raging in battle. For the first time in my life I trembled. From the darkness he emerged, gigantic, yet barely discernible. I saw only his eyes and his teeth as he spoke. The rest was blackness.

“The King of Ghosts said to me, ‘You are in my domain and you are in my possession. Whatsoever has passed away comes eventually to me, for I am the keeper of all

memories. They are like flowers robbed of sunlight; I watch them fade, wither, and vanish into dust.'

"I said, 'I'm in Rama's service and you're not permitted to detain me. You, like all devas and rakshasas, like all men and monkeys, all creatures in the Earth living, dead, and yet to be born, are in his service.'

"I made out in the dim light that the King of Ghosts pressed his palms together in homage. He said, 'What command does he bring me? I will fulfill it, though I am the least of his servants.'

"I said, 'I have come to find his ring. It slipped from his hand and fell here, into this cavern.'

"At once, the King of Ghosts brought before me a great golden tray covered with unnumbered rings. They were all nearly identical, and I sifted through them with my hands. I said, 'I can't tell if any of these are Rama's, or even if they all are.'

"The King of Ghosts said, 'Whenever an incarnation of Vishnu is about to ascend into heaven, his ring falls here. These are all his, and yet not any one is his. When you return to Rama, you won't find him waiting. But keep searching as he commanded you.'

"My heart was broken and I said, 'How can I search when it's too late? I failed to find his ring as he commanded me and now I've lost him as well. What will I do?'

“The King of Ghosts said no more, and I returned to Rama’s room. Vasishtha, Rama’s priest, saw me and he said, ‘Rama has ascended and is again with God.’ But my mouth would not open and I bathed Rama’s sandals with my tears.

“I left the kingdom and lived a long time in the forests, chanting Rama’s name, hiding myself from people. Though my heart swelled with the sound of his name and the stories people told of him, still such memories were both a blessing and a curse. I wandered for ages, as though falling again into darkness, meditating upon my failure to fulfill Rama’s final command to me.

“One day I came to the forest of Vrndivana and saw Krishna decorating Radha’s hair by a gentle river. I turned toward them, but Krishna approached me without delay and embraced me, as though recognizing me. He smiled and said, ‘O Hanuman, my ancient friend, my faithful servant.’ At the sound of his voice, I couldn’t speak. I fell to his feet and, clasping them, wept without shame. Krishna lifted me up, embracing me again and laughed joyously. ‘Why are you crying? Don’t you see? You have found the ring at last, the ring I told you to seek.’ On his finger shined Rama’s ring.

“At that moment, I was in paradise.”

When Hanuman finished speaking, he opened his chest with his monkey's hands and he revealed to me what he enshrined in his heart.

This is dharma: seek Him out in the world. You will find Him if you but look to Rama, Krishna, and the Buddha. You will find Him if you but look to Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad and you will discover that they are in truth One word, One voice, the One unalterable as He alters, invisible as He invests every atom of creation with His command, unknowable even as He is the source of all knowledge. And this is dharma.

The Deer Park

When the actor playing Arjuna finished speaking to me, he left. I remained in the deer park. The crowds dispersed. Workmen removed the television, the garlands and idols, and litter from the ground. Sitting where the Buddha once taught his disciples, I considered my many faults and failings. I regretted every word I uttered that hurt another soul or was untrue. After the workmen left, I listened to the lullaby of birds and rustling leaves and grasses. Twilight turned to darkness. I remembered a dear friend and in this memory she became the mirror in which I found myself reflected.

I am a libertine, but think constantly of God.

I am a cynic and a pessimist, but the future of this world fills me with joy.

I am unapproachable, but would readily give my life to a stranger.

I am a weakling, but can lift the veil of this world.

I am worthless and ashamed, but have in my possession an unmatched talent.

I am utterly lost, but have been led to the place I belong.

I am arrogant, but hide my name.

I contradict myself, but am unerringly consistent.

I am an infidel, but seek the protection of the believers.

I speak for dozens, but the voice is always mine alone.

I am a puppet wondering at strings.

Little that I say touches you, but others tremble with delight.

*Yet I am bound to you, my friend, and do not know these
others.*

Sleep washed over me. I dreamed a final dream of Rama and Sita. In the city of Ayodhya, after Rama was crowned king and Sita his queen, the servants of Rama began to whisper darkly to each other. Because Sita had been the captive of King Ravana, they surmised that she had become his lover. But after Rama killed Ravana and rescued Sita, Sita had proclaimed her innocence and Rama accepted her again.

In her private chambers, Sita kept a large wooden chest. Neither her maidservants nor the servants of her husband were given access to it. She kept the chest carefully locked. The servants imagined any manner of items were within the chest—gold and jewelry, silken tapestries, or keepsakes from her wedding to Rama. An elderly servant of Rama, however, suspected Sita and imagined that the chest contained a keepsake of Ravana—perhaps a lock of his hair or a portrait of him. The servant shared his suspicions with Rama, and impressed upon him the need to look within the chest to discover the truth.

Rama said, "I am aware of the truth, but I will look." Rama and his servant went to Sita's chambers, and found Sita sitting pensively beside the chest. Rama said, "Will you open this chest for me?"

Sita said, "Is this the king's request, or my husband's? Or is this the request of a suspicious servant?"

Rama said, "Will you give me the key?"

Saying nothing, Sita placed the key to the chest in Rama's hand, closed his fingers around it, and left the room. At once, Rama dismissed the servant. Rama thought awhile and then he and several of his bodyguard secretly carried the chest, unopened, into a farmer's abandoned field. There, they buried the chest deep in the ground and no one in the household ever spoke of it again. May God conceal your secrets as He has concealed mine.

O Merciful God, if this work leads to harm, let this harm fall upon me alone. But if it has pleased You, forgive this poor mimic, let the believers pray for me, and conceal from men my name for all time. These are the wages I desire; remembering that You have power over all things.

Glossary

adharma, failure to conform to one's duties and obligations; adherence to injustice; see *dharma*.

Agra, city in India that served as capital to the Mughal Empire.

Ahalya, wife of the Hindu sage Gautam; turned to stone for her dalliance with Indra; restored to life by Rama.

Ahmad, "praised one" in Arabic; another name of Muhammad.

Ananda, cousin and a chief disciple of the Buddha.

Arjuna, friend of Krishna; one of the Pandava; one of the sons of Pandu and Kunti; spiritual son of Indra, king of the devas.

ashram, a spiritual retreat in Hinduism; a hermitage where sages gather to live and worship.

Aurangzeb, Mughal emperor of India (1658 to 1707).

avatar, manifestation of God in human form; used specifically in reference to Rama, Krishna, or the Buddha.

Ayodhya, name of the ancient city, capital of the kingdom of Kosala in northern India; ruled by Rama.

Balamah, apocryphal name of the Queen of Sheba; more commonly called Bilqis.

Balarama, older brother of Krishna.

Bhagavad Gita, chapter of the epic *Mahabharata* in which Krishna urges Arjuna to fight.

Bharata, brother of Rama and son of Dasaratha by his favorite wife Kaikeyi.

Bhima, older brother of Arjuna known for his strength; one of the Pandava; one of the sons of Pandu and Kunti; spiritual son of the deva Vayu, god of the wind.

Bhishma, great uncle of the sons of Pandu (the Pandava) and the sons of Dhritarashtra (the Kaurava); sympathized with the Pandava, but fought on the side of the Kaurava in the epic *Mahabharata*.

Brahma, a name for God; the creator; one aspect of the Hindu “trinity,” which includes Vishnu (the sustainer) and Shiva (the destroyer).

Brahman, God in His transcendent aspect.

brahmin, the priestly caste in Hinduism.

Buddha, avatar of God; preceded by Krishna and Rama.

ceremony of the cord, a male initiation ritual in Hinduism occurring between the ages of six and twelve.

Dasaratha, father of Rama and king of Kosala.

devas, celestial creatures of the Hindu pantheon, not to be confused with God.

Dhammapada, Buddhist text containing aphorisms and teachings ostensibly delivered by the Buddha as recounted by his disciples.

dharma, the duties and obligations of men and women in all aspects of life.

Dhritarashtra, brother of Pandu, father of Duryodhana and the blind king of Hastinapura.

djinn, supernatural spirits in Islam.

Draupadi, wife of the Pandava; Arjuna won her hand in marriage by a show of skill; became wife to all five of the brothers because of a misunderstanding.

Drona, born a Brahmin, lived as a Kshatriya; trainer of both the Pandava and the Kaurava in the arts of combat.

Duryodhana, eldest son of Dhritarashtra; king of Hastinapura; killed by the Pandava during the battle of Kurukshetra recounted in the *Mahabharata*.

Ganesha, Hindu deva worshipped as the “remover of obstacles” and as the scribe who took down the text of the *Mahabharata*.

Garuda, the bird companion of Vishnu.

Gautam, a Hindu sage, husband of Ahalya; not to be confused with Gautama the Buddha.

Ghandari, wife of Dhritarashtra and mother of the Kaurava.

gopas, male cowherds of the town of Vraj; companions of the young Krishna.

gopis, wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the gopas; female companions of Krishna.

Hadith, sayings and customs attributed to Muhammad.

Hanuman, monkey son of Vayu, subject of Sugriva, and servant of Rama; preeminent among the monkeys who fought with Rama against Ravana.

Hastinapura, capital of the kingdom over which the Pandava and the Kaurava fought in the epic *Mahabharata*.

houris, celestial female in Islam.

Iblis, the devil in Islam.

Indra, king of the devas.

Indrajit, son of Ravana, the demon king of Lanka; killed in battle against Rama.

Janáb-i-Táhira, Persian for “the Pure One.”

Janaka, father of Rama’s wife, Sita, and king of Mithila.

Jatayu, giant bird who fought, and was killed by, Ravana after Ravana’s abduction of Sita.

Kaba, literally, “the cube,” in Mecca. The geographical direction of adoration and the focus of pilgrimage in Islam.

Kabandha, demon killed by Rama.

Kaikeyi, favorite wife of Dasaratha and mother of Bharata; famous for exiling Rama from Ayodhya to secure the throne for her own son.

Kalindi, another name for the river Yamuna.

Kaliya, serpent that lived in the Yamuna river and poisoned its waters; defeated and exiled by Krishna.

Karna, a son of Kunti; spiritual son of the sun deva; not knowing his true birth, he sided with Duryodhana against his own brothers, the Pandava.

Katyayani, name for the goddess of the Hindu pantheon; sometimes associated with Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu.

Kaurava, cousins of the Pandava, the 100 sons of Dhritarashtra and his wife Gandhari; defeated by the Pandava in the battle of Kurukshetra.

Kausalya, oldest wife of Dasaratha and the birth mother of Rama.

Kerala, Indian city famed for its shadow plays.

Khidr, mysterious saint in Islamic tradition who instructed Moses.

Kishkinda, kingdom of intelligent monkeys ruled by Vali and then by Sugriva.

Kosala, Rama's home and kingdom with its capital at Ayodhya.

Krishna, avatar of Vishnu after Rama and preceding the Buddha.

kshatriya, the Hindu warrior caste.

Kuan Yin, the female bodhisatva, or future buddha.

Kumbhakharna, brother of Ravana; he slept for months at a time but was awakened by Ravana to fight Rama; killed by Rama.

Kunti, wife of Pandu; mother of the Pandava and of Karna.

Kurukshetra, battle fought for the kingdom of Hastinapura between the Kaurava and the Pandava.

Lakshmana, brother of Rama who joined him in exile.

Lakshmi, name for the goddess of the Hindu pantheon and consort of Vishnu.

Lanka, the island of Sri Lanka.

Luqman, according to the *Quran*, a prophet of God; often associated with Aesop.

Mahabharata, the Indian epic that culminates in the story of the battle of Kurukshetra; the *Bhagavad Gita* is one chapter of the work.

Mara, the devil; the personification of evil in Hinduism.

Maya, the illusion of the world.

Mughal, the name given by Muslims to their empire in India.

Pandava, the five sons of Pandu and Kunti; cousins of the Kaurava.

Pandu, the king of Hastinapura who went into exile and turned his kingdom over to his brother Dhritarashtra, despite Dhritarashtra's blindness.

Parasurama, a lesser (or partial) avatar of Vishnu.

Puranas, Hindu religious texts taking the form of stories relating history, religion, and tradition.

Purochana, an architect in Duryodhana's employ who built the "House of Joy" for the Pandava to live in; he planned to burn the house down while the Pandava were inside.

qiblah, the direction of prayer in Islam, usually in the form of a niche, toward which Muslims pray.

Radha, the consort of Krishna.

rakshasas, demons in Hindu mythology.

Rama, an avatar of Vishnu preceding Krishna and the Buddha.

Ramayana, the Hindu epic that tells the story of Rama, the abduction of his wife Sita, and the defeat of the demon king of Lanka, Ravana.

Ravana, the demon king of Lanka who abducted Sita and was killed by Rama.

Rigveda, ancient Hindu religious text; one part of the Vedas.

Rumi, a preeminent Sufi saint and poet in Islam.

Saivite, Hindus who worship God in His aspect as Shiva.

Sampathi, older brother of Jatayu.

Sarasvati, extinct river famous in ancient India and mentioned in the *Vedas*.

Sarnath, city in India by the Ganges; the location of the deer park in which Buddha taught his disciples.

shahadah, the Muslim declaration of faith; "There is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger."

Shani, the planet Saturn; famous in Hindu astrology as the bringer of misfortune.

shirk, polytheism; the violation of tawhid.

Shiva, another name for God; the destroyer; part of the Hindu “trinity” of God and an aspect of God; compare to Vishnu, the maintainer, and Brahma, the creator.

Siddhartha Gautama, the name of the historical Buddha.

Sita, wife of Rama who joined him in exile and was kidnapped by Ravana.

soma, an intoxicating drink with narcotic properties used ritually in early Hinduism.

Song of Songs, the *Song of Solomon* in the Old Testament.

Sugriva, the younger brother of Vali; crowned as the monkey king of Kishkinda after Vali’s death.

Surpanakha, a female rakshasa; sister of Ravana; attempted to kill Sita; mutilated by Lakshmana.

tapasya, a Hindu practice of physical and spiritual austerity to achieve the fulfillment of a wish or goal.

tawhid, the Islamic religious doctrine of the unity and oneness of God.

Uma, another name of the goddess in the Hindu pantheon.

urna, the “third eye” of Hinduism and Buddhism; the eye that perceives things spiritual.

Vaishnava, Hindus who worship God in His aspect as Vishnu.

Vali, brother of Sugriva and the monkey king of Kishkinda; killed by Rama.

Varanasi, Indian city; also known as Benares.

Vasishta, Brahmin priest in the household of Dasaratha; responsible for the early training of Rama and his brothers.

Vayu, god of the wind; Hanuman's spiritual father; Bhima's spiritual father.

Vedas, ancient Hindu scriptures.

Viradha, demon killed by Rama.

Vishnu, another name for God; the maintainer; part of the Hindu "trinity" of God and an aspect of God; compare to Shiva, the destroyer, and Brahma, the creator.

Viswamithra, Former king who became an ascetic and completed the training of Rama.

Vraj, town in India in which Krishna was raised.

Vrndivana, the forested area around Vraj.

Yamuna, a river through Vraj; also known as the Kalindi river.

Yudishtira, eldest brother and leader of the Pandava; son of Pandu and Kunti; spiritual son of the personified deva of dharma.

Excerpts from the Bhagavad Gita

Note: *The verses below were drawn by the author based on multiple English translations of the original Sanskrit text. These verses form the basis of the discussion of reincarnation in the chapter The Mountain and the Bowl.*

Tears are wasted on the dead; the wise do not grieve for the living or the dead.

In time, I have always been and you and these kings of men; and we will always be.

Putting on the body of the child, the youth, the old man, the wise man does not wonder that in death the Self passes to a new body.

When you have passed beyond pleasure and pain, delight and misery, you become fit for immortality.

He dwells in the body, but this body has an end in time, yet he is immortal.

One imagines he can kill; the other that he can die. Yet the one who kills does not kill and the one who dies does not die.

Through birth he did not come to be. Through death he does not cease to be. He is eternal.

Put aside these tattered clothes and don the robe of immortality. Discard this life and achieve that life to come.

Even if you imagine he is born again and again and he dies again and again, you still should not grieve for him.

The Self within is beyond death; so do not grieve for him.

In death, you gain the next world; in triumph, you gain this world.

In flowery words undiscerning men take refuge. They know only the letter of the *Vedas*, and say, "There is nothing more!"

Driven by selfish desire, their heaven is a selfish desire. They perform rites to attain their desires, but they gain only death in rebirth to selfish desire.

Through many births you and I have passed; yet I remember My lives, and you do not remember yours.

He who knows the divinity in Me escapes all bodies, in life and death, and comes to Me.

The one who dies without coming to Me, if he strove to come to Me, goes into the heaven of his merit; he is born into the house of the pure and noble.

In that world, he may be born into the house of the wise, though such a birth in this world is rare.

In that world among the wise, if he continues to seek me, he recovers the knowledge of this world.

In this world, and in worlds to come, he is cleansed of sin, he attains Me.

Having come to me, he rises above many lives and many worlds, sheds his earthly body and his celestial dwelling, and attains supreme perfection in Me.

All worlds pass away; but attaining Me, you will not pass away.

Those who deny My truth do not attain Me and know nothing of the life beyond this life.

At the end I destroy the world and all its creatures; and when the day begins again, I create the world and all its creatures anew.

Take shelter in Me and you will discard all bodies, all worlds, all lives, neither being born nor ever dying.

