

EXIT

Naciketas, the seeker after knowledge, heard of a brilliant Master who lived in the Tibetan Himalayas and decided to find him. After many days of difficult travelling he finally arrived at the entrance of the cave. The sun had long since gone down and as he entered the cave, the glare of a candle irritated his eyes and he was forced to close them for several seconds.

When he opened them, he was able to distinguish the form of a human body which was sitting to the right and in front of the candle. But the body was heavily shadowed and Naciketas was unable to tell whether his presence had been noticed.

In front of the candle was a small piece of paper. Naciketas, though always full of faith, was unsure whether the paper was really meant to be a message for him. After several minutes of uneasy hesitation and no sign of movement from the dark form, he decided to pick it up. On the clean piece of white paper was clearly and legibly written the following:

"In what are the worlds of Brahma woven, like warp and woof?"

"Do not ask too much," Yagnavalkya answered, "lest thy head should fall off."

-- Bradharanyaka Upanishad

A latticework of light illumated the fragments of a dirt path which hadn't been buried beneath leaves' shadows and fallen forms. In a hive attached to an overhanging branch, bees weer veing nourished by the honey which they had produced.

A caterpillar inched its way from one brown blade of grass to another until it reached the edge of the path along which Yagnavalkya's feet, though slowly and carefully placed, crackled the fallen russet leaves.

The leaves became silent and the caterpillar heard a beautiful song and an echo. He believed Yagnavalkya had stopped to avoid crushing him, but soon realized he had stooped to pick up a bird lying on the ground. A vine, long and silkily textured, was attached to the bird's foot. The bird gyrated along the ground, stirring up loose dirt by the flapping of its wings.

It eluded Yagnavalkya's grasp and flew skyward. But the vine was anchored to a mighty tree whose roots had buried themselves deep in the ground. The bird's neck was snapped back and he was forced to again land on the dirt path.

Almost simultaneously, Yagnavalkya and the caterpillar decided to continue their journeys. A lattice-work of light illuminated the fragments of dirt and fallen russet leaves which hadn't yet been buried by the shadows of the leaves remaining on the tree. A beautiful song and an echo once again filled the air.

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He carefully folded the paper and, now certain that it was intended for him, bowed to the Master and walked out of the cave. He spent the next several days wandering through the mountains, reading and rereading the lines of the text. One morning, shortly before sunrise, he understood, and was filled with laughter and joy like a small child. The story was so simple; only the complex involutions of this mind had made him seek for deeper and deeper meanings.

When he returned to the cave, the master's position was unchanged and his face was still covered by shadows. Naciketas didn't know whether he should interrupt the master's meditation, but unable to restrain himself, approached the master and said, "I have understood."

He imagined he saw the master imperceptibly nod his head so he continued: "The most difficult thing to understand was the song of the bird. Why did the text call it beautiful? Especially since the bird was imprisoned. But just as the poetry we admire as moving and beautiful often originates in the depths of the poet's suffering, this bird's song, which sounded beautiful, came from the bird's entrapment.

"Yagnavalkya tried to free the bird, but the bird misunderstood his intentions and tried to fly off, causing itself more pain. The Brahman Yagnavalkya knew it was impossible to help those who were not yet ready and sadly and silently walked off, listening to the bird's beautiful cry of pain."

Naciketas smiled inwardly but tried to keep his mouth tightly sealed and was even forced to bite his lips to keep a self-satisfied grin from his face while he anticipated the master's approval.

He thought the master, recognizing a prize pupil, might even ask him to join the meditation.

Instead, the master bade Naciketas to rise and motioned for him to leave. Confused, Naciketas walked slowly to the exit of the cave. He saw the master's shadow on the wall above his left shoulder. At first he thought he heard words coming from the shadow; then he realized the master was speaking to him and he was listening to the echo:

"Naciketas, how do you know that it wasn't Yagnavalkya who was singing the beautiful song which filled the shadows of the forest?"

Naciketas stared silently at the shadow for several more seconds until the last sound of the echo had completely faded. Then he left the cave and retired deep into the mountains, reading and re-reading the story. He read the text so many times that the paper became a dirty yellow and began to tear in several places. He was perplexed. What had once seemed clear drifted in to a hazy mist.

After several weeks, a haggard Naciketas again sought the Master's cave. The light from the candle was very dim and seemed nearly ready to go out.

"Master, I cannot understand. Bees produce the honey. Honey gives the bees nourishment.

The tree supports the bee hive. But why does the vine of the tree entangle the bird's neck and, while Yagnavalkya sings, force the bird to silently struggle against his imprisonment?

The words of the text do not say enough." He held up the crumpled piece of paper which would have been nearly unreadable even if the flickering candle hadn't been the only light source.

The master was silent.

Finally he spoke. "Naciketas, how do you know the bird isn't happily singing. The text never says the bird was bothered by the vine. In fact the vine was both long and of a silk-like texture."

Even though the master made no further motion, Naciketas knew that it was time for him to leave and walked to the exit of the cave. He waited with his back to the master, hoping for some final piece of insight before his departure. The shadow of the master faintly flickered on the wall of the cave but spoke no words. As he was

listening to the silence he looked down and saw the reflection of light off the hard shell of an insect which was just beginning to cross his path.

Naciketas looked up at the shadow and then turned to face the form. "Master, I think I understand your silence. The text is an early story of the Brahman Yagnavalkya, before he had arrived. He made the same mistake as I, and bent to help the bird, thinking it was in pain, not realizing the oneness of the world and that the bird was happily singing. In his ignorant state Yagnavalkya might have even crushed the caterpillar which was beginning to cross his path."

Naciketas awaited the master's response. This time he didn't have to bite his tongue to keep back a self-satisfied grin, although deep inside he felt the master was just about to wordlessly nod to him with a smile that would indicate approval.

Instead the master bade Naciketas rise and leave. At the exit he paused for a response from the master. But he expected none. He knew he would no longer be able to read the torn shreds

of paper upon which the text was written and there was no place left where he could go to meditate. As he expected, no words came. He stared at the last traces of the master's shadow hanging on the wall. With a resigned despair he smiled at the idea of a shadow speaking to him with a silent echo.

Suddenly he began laughing and burst into song. The shadow echoed his song and instantaneously there was a duet.

Naciketas turned and saw the white teeth of the master smiling in song through the hairs of his long grey beard. The master bade Naciketas to enter and sit beside him.

The candle was behind their backs as both sat facing the entrance of the cave, silently meditating on the shadows of themselves which slowly disappeared as the candle wick decayed into ashes and the last warm piece of wax hardened.