



Learn English Through Stories.

J Series

J4

**Adapted and modified by
Kulwant Singh Sandhu.**

<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>

Contents

Keepers of the Kalachakra.

Part 4: 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20.

Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

Part 4

Fifteen

Vijay dropped in at the supermarket near IIT to pick up a few groceries. His requirements were basic. His kitchen had no more than ten items at any given time. He looked at his smartphone to check the list of stuff he needed: milk, bread, fruits, nuts and olive oil.

He walked to each relevant aisle, popping items into the wireframe basket he held. Some distance away, another shopper was also placing things into a basket. He was moving at a leisurely pace, but seemed to be at every aisle that Vijay visited.

Done with his shopping, Vijay walked to the express check-out counter. There were only two people in the line in front of him. As his turn came, he took out his shopping from the basket and placed it on the cashier's conveyor belt. Once the store clerk had rung up his total, Vijay paid in cash. The cashier placed Vijay's items into a shopping bag and handed it to him. Vijay walked out from the store, his mind dwelling on an obscure research paper that had been sent to him earlier in the day.

He did not notice that the shopper who had been in the store alongside him, had abandoned his basket and exited the store immediately after.

Sixteen

The Alcoholics Anonymous meeting was held at the Raffles Medical Beijing Clinic in the Chaoyang District of Beijing at 6:30 p.m. on Saturday.

‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is the regular meeting of AA,’ said the middle-aged secretary in front. ‘Let us open the meeting with a moment of silence followed by the Serenity Prayer.’

A young social worker sat in the third row. After his rehab at a special facility in Shanghai, he had signed an oath that he would continue to attend AA meetings at least once a week. This was his seventeenth since his return to Beijing.

The social worker watched as a lady stood up and introduced herself hesitantly. Other members of the group immediately greeted her by name. It was the established drill. He looked around and saw another vaguely familiar face, but the man did not get up and introduce himself. When the secretary looked at him pointedly, he got up and left rather hurriedly—as if to avoid drawing attention to himself.

‘Where have I seen him before?’ wondered the social worker, ‘has the man been following me? Or am I imagining things?’ Ever since he had stopped the booze, a fog seemed to have been lifted from his brain. It caused him to make connections that he would otherwise have ignored.

Each member got up to narrate their experiences. He awaited his turn, then stood up and cleared his throat. He introduced himself and began hesitantly. ‘Almost every night for ten years, I would pass out drunk, but not before promising myself that this would be the last time that I drank. Alcohol became my crutch (support). I felt that I had earned the right to drink because of the pain I witnessed in my line of work as a social worker.’

There was pin-drop silence as the others listened to him. He was followed by several people who narrated their own experiences. An hour later, he made his way down the stairs of the clinic along with the rest of the members. He did not see the man who had hurriedly left the meeting. He was slinking around by the foot of the stairs, holding an umbrella.

The social worker was on his way to the exit when he felt a stinging pain in his thigh. The man’s umbrella had poked him. He turned around crossly but the man apologized for his carelessness and hurried away into the crowded street.

The social worker had barely taken a few steps into the street before he fell to the ground. By then, the stranger with the umbrella had disappeared.

Seventeen

Sujatha Iyer entered Indira Paryavaran Bhavan on Delhi's Jor Bagh Road. The building housed the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. In her hand was a portfolio containing photographs and specimens of plants that she had personally discovered while travelling all over the country.

Sujatha worked at the Botanical Survey of India, the BSI. Her mandate was to find and document plants and herbs that had economic value for India. The job meant that she was always on the move, traversing the length and breadth of the country in her quest to identify, classify and record every possible plant that India had to offer for the betterment of its people and the world at large.

She crossed her fingers in anticipation of the meeting. She hoped that the Director-General of Forests would help her. She knocked on the door to his office. The man behind the desk, a veteran of the Indian Administrative Service—the IAS—greeted her and offered her a chair.

'Thank you for meeting me,' said Sujatha, as she sat down.

'Happy to assist,' said the Director. 'Now tell me, Ms Iyer, how may I help you?' 'Well,' she began. 'My primary interest is in a plant called *Ophiorrhiza mungos*...'

'Ophi—what?' asked the IAS man. He hated unpronounceable Latin names.

'*Ophiorrhiza mungos*,' said Sujatha. 'This particular plant is usually found in the Western Ghats of India, but I am convinced that a variant of the same plant can also be found in the north and north-east of India.'

'What is so important about these plants?' asked the Director.

'The *ophiorrhiza* family of plants is critical in developing chemotherapy drugs at a lower price in India,' explained Sujatha. 'The northern variants of this plant could hold the key to making cancer-care affordable in developing countries.'

'And why do you need me?' asked the Director.

‘Some of the forests are no-go areas,’ said Sujatha. ‘Particularly those which lie along the Chinese border. I need your clearance.’

‘Get your boss at the Botanical Survey of India to send me an official request in writing,’ replied the Director. ‘He must specifically mention the coordinates of the locations that you wish to visit and the exact dates. By the way, my permission would be insufficient in this matter. You will need a Home Department no-objection certificate as well as a security clearance from the Ministry of Defence. Let me see what I can do.’

Sujatha smiled her thanks.

‘Don’t be grateful just yet,’ said the Director, noticing her expression. ‘I’m not making any promises. The wheels of government turn slowly, if at all.’

Sujatha left the premises of the Ministry feeling content that she had, at least, done her best. She made her way to Jor Bagh Metro Station.

She did not notice the tall stranger with a gaunt face lurking a few steps away.

Eighteen

Sujatha allowed the machine to sense her smart card and waited for the gates to open. She walked through and waited for the Yellow Line that would take her to Hauz Khas. When the train whooshed in, she entered and settled down in one of the front seats. She closed her eyes, allowing her mind to wander.

Sujatha’s parents had died in a car crash when she was just five. Her uncle, neither interested in feeding another mouth nor bearing the responsibility of a future dowry, had bundled Sujatha off to her maternal grandmother.

Unfortunately, her grandmother passed away the very next year. Penniless and homeless, the six-year-old had taken to begging outside the Sringeri temple when Amma, the administrator of the orphanage, had spotted her and taken her in.

Nineteen

It had taken some time for Sujatha to regain an interest in things. All she had seen until then were death, loss and a profound loneliness. If it hadn't been for Amma, she would have been leading a life of begging, or even worse — prostitution. But she was bright. And slowly but surely the spark within her was fanned back to life.

She excelled in academics and debates but hated swimming. Her friends loved splashing in the neighbouring lake, but she would remain on the embankment, never entering completely into the water. Her friends would often pull her in, but she would remain frozen at the edges, too terrified to move.

After having nearly drowned, she developed an interest in medicine, helping out in the hospital attached to the orphanage, thus understanding basic medical procedures.

Sujatha loved nature and spent hours caring for each individual plant and blossom that grew around the orphanage. Amma always assigned her the job of stringing together flowers for the temple deity. Given Sujatha's love for flowers and plants, she felt almost guilty for having to pierce those delicate scented petals with needle and thread to link them together.

Some months later, Amma asked Sujatha, 'Why do you wince whenever you're stringing those flowers into garlands, Sujatha?'

Sujatha looked up and replied, 'Everything has life, Amma. Today in school we learnt about the scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose and his crescograph with which he proved that plants feel pain just like animals. Don't you think it will be just a matter of time before we show that there is life in everything, including the everyday objects that we consider lifeless?'

Twenty

Amma loved gathering the kids and narrating to them mythological tales from Hindu epics. On the day of Dussera, which celebrated Ram's victory over Ravana, she would tell them the story of Ravana and how he was slain.

In the surrounding night, the children listened breathlessly to their foster-mother's almost dramatized tales of the derring-do of heroes of the past. The fireworks and party bombs and simulated rockets zoomed to the sky above them, showering multicoloured sparks below, the entire extravaganza mirrored in the wide eyes of the children's upturned faces. 'Ravana was the demon-king of Lanka,' said Amma, swiftly bringing the little minds down to earth. 'He was born to the Brahmin sage, Vishrava, and his wife Kaikesi, the Daitya princess. Thus, Ravana was partly Brahmin and partly Daitya. At birth, he was named Dashanana because he was supposedly born with ten heads.'

'Was he good or bad?' asked one of the more pragmatic children, getting down to basics.

'Ravana was belligerent and egotistical even during his youth,' Amma answered him, picking her words carefully, 'but he was also an excellent student. Under Vishrava's guidance, Ravana mastered the Vedas, other sacred scriptures and the arts, and became an accomplished player of the veena.'

'How did he become powerful?' asked another little boy, indicating his puffed-out cheeks and brandishing the pimple-size bumps on his flexed arms.

Amma wanted to laugh out loud and squeeze the little imp to her chest, but kept a straight face as she went on with the rest of the story that has kept listeners down the centuries— children, men and women—riveted. 'Ravana was a devotee of Brahma and he performed severe austerities over thousands of years to gain his favour. Pleased with Ravana, Brahma offered him a boon— absolute invincibility against gods, demons, wild beasts and spirits. Ravana knew that no mortal human could ever defeat him and so he did not bother to include humans in that list. The omission led to his downfall.'

'Then, how did he come to rule Lanka?' asked Vijay.

'Ravana's brother, Kubera, also known as the banker to the gods, owned Lanka—a sublime island that was fabulously wealthy and had been designed by Vishwakarma, the celestial architect,' said Amma. 'Ravana took over

Kubera's territory by force and then set about establishing his rule over the people. Surprisingly, Ravana proved himself to be a compassionate and capable king. Lanka and its people prospered under his reign.'

'Wasn't Ravana also a devotee of Shiva?' asked Sujatha.

'Not to begin with,' said Amma. 'Ravana attempted to uproot and move Mount Kailash, and disturbed Shiva and Parvati with his antics. Furious, Shiva pressed one of his toes on the mountain and trapped Ravana underneath. Ravana now realized his mistake. He sang songs in devotion of Shiva for many thousands of years until Shiva eventually released him. Pleased with Ravana's devotion, Shiva bestowed on him an Atma Lingam of immense power. Shiva also gave him the name Ravana, which translates to — he with the terrifying roar.'

'What is an Atma Lingam?' asked Vijay.

'We don't know,' said Amma. 'All we know is that it gave Ravana immense power, perception and knowledge. Ravana then proceeded to establish his dominance over several kingdoms. It is said that he even invaded the heavens and defeated the Devas. But Ravana's weakness was women. He not only had several wives, principal among whom was Mandodari, an elegant lady often eulogized for her sagacity, beauty and strength of character, but also a massive harem filled with women he had captured during his conquests. It was his insatiable lust that drove Ravana into abducting Sita, Rama's wife.'

'And Rama went to Lanka to save her?' asked one child.

'Yes,' said Amma. 'Rama teamed up with the Vanaras, a forest clan that included Hanuman. He used their expertise in building a bridge across the sea to cross into Lanka. Rama then offered Ravana the opportunity to return Sita and avoid battle, but Ravana remained adamant. Ravana's brother, Vibhishana, advised him against fighting Rama but ended up banished by his brother for showing weakness. Vibhishana, who knew all of Ravana's secret powers, was pushed into the arms of the enemy.'

'How did Ravana eventually die?' asked Sujatha.

'In the battle, all of Ravana's sons and warriors fell and he was compelled to confront Rama directly,' said Amma. 'Rama used all his weapons to decapitate Ravana of each of his ten heads, but a new head would promptly replace the fallen one. This was supposedly because of a container of amrit—the nectar of immortality—that Ravana had stored in his stomach. Based on Vibhishana's

advice, Rama used his celestial weapons to target Ravana's abdomen and thus destroy the nectar. This strategy brought about Ravana's final downfall.'

'The end of the villain,' said a child with a sigh of satisfaction.

'Ravana may have been a villain, but there is no denying that he was an accomplished man,' said Amma. 'His knowledge and understanding of sacred texts were remarkable. He remained a great devotee of Shiva and even composed the dance known as the Shiva Tandava Stotra. He was an effective and capable ruler who brought great prosperity to his people and kingdom.'