



Learn English Through
Stories.

J Series

J13

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

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Contents

Keepers of the Kalachakra.

Part 13: 56 to 63.

Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

Part 13

56

Vijay looked at the whiteboard again. He had jotted down the key phases of his proposed research project, and now scratched his head to figure out if he had left anything out. Were the steps in the right order?

Like the nine researchers before him, Vijay had been provided with his own expansive lab. Row upon row of gleaming laboratory tables and equipment stretched under the sunlight that burst down from the generous skylights. His lab was fully equipped with every possible tool that Vijay could ever need, including a photo-ionization microscope, confocal entanglement microscope, hydrogen beam, quantum sensor and laser pulse generator.

Vijay logged into Milesian's network and began writing up his proposed plan of action for Schmidt. He wanted it to be perfect, so he commenced with a short introductory paragraph on his own understanding of what Milesian Labs was after.

'The word physics is derived from the Greek word *physis*,' he wrote. 'That particular word was popularized by the sages of the Milesian school founded in the Ionian town of Miletus in the sixth century BCE. The proponents of the Milesian school thought of *physis* as the endeavour of "seeing the essential nature of all things". The Milesians were also called *hylozoists*, or those who thought that all matter was alive. This was because Milesians saw no distinction between animate and inanimate, spirit and matter. In that sense, the Milesians were much like the *rishis* of ancient India.'

He paused to gather his thoughts before typing further.

'Victor Hugo famously said, "Where the telescope ends the microscope begins, and who can say which has the wider vision?" Both the telescope and the microscope help peer into exactly the same phenomena—bundles of energy in constant motion. Taking that idea further, what if we could find behaviour patterns of planets that mimic the behaviour patterns of subatomic particles? What if the "outside" and the "inside" are identical?

‘Over the years, many researchers have attempted to develop a Theory of Everything, a universal framework of physics that can describe and connect all physical aspects of the universe. But the Theory of Everything has eluded us all. Instead, we have distinct and separate frameworks. Classical Mechanics works for objects on Earth but breaks down at the planetary level. General Relativity works well when explaining stars, planets, galaxies or other high-mass objects, but breaks down at the sub-atomic level. Quantum Field Theory works well in explaining atoms and sub-atomic particles, but falls flat when attempting to explain high-mass objects.’

Vijay checked what he had typed, then continued, ‘In recent times, String Theory is being positioned as the ultimate unifying theory of the universe, but this too is not without its limitations. Maybe our approach has been wrong. Instead of everything, what if we were to try and focus our attention on something? What if certain elements of one theory could be used in the domain of the other? As we start bridging the gap, step by step, isn’t it possible that we may arrive at something that looks like a unified theory?’

57

In a room located two hundred yards away from Vijay’s lab, a bank of Linux-based parallel computers silently recorded everything that Vijay typed up. A team of three specialists kept a watch on all emails, messages, chats, IP activity and phone calls of all ten scientists who worked at Milesian. Their chief was the ex-NSA man, Cracker.

‘How is the new boy doing?’ he asked, stubbing out a cigarette in the overflowing ashtray that lay on his desk.

‘Nothing significant as yet,’ said Cracker’s deputy. ‘As instructed by you, his phone, tablet and computer are being monitored by us. He talks regularly to his girlfriend in New Delhi. But nothing about his work or the company.’

‘Good boy,’ commented Cracker wryly. ‘What about his apartment? All done?’

‘We installed three high-powered bugs in his suite before he arrived,’ said the deputy. ‘All are functioning perfectly.’

‘Did you scan him and his luggage?’ asked Cracker.

‘Upon arrival,’ confirmed the second man. ‘His luggage was clear and so was he. We did not want to take a chance, so we physically checked his bags when he was on a tour of the campus with Schmidt.’

‘Anything out of the ordinary?’ asked Cracker.

‘Just a roll of clingwrap, which seems odd,’ said the deputy. ‘If he needed it, he could have easily picked it up from the convenience store on the premises.’

‘Any electronic equipment squirrelled away?’ ‘Negative,’ said the deputy.

‘Is his dossier complete?’

‘Yes. Educational records, orphanage papers, work history, casual interviews of people who know him, surveillance records, girlfriend’s history. . .’

Cracker nodded. ‘Have you stepped up your surveillance of Mikhailov?’

‘Yes, but absolutely no communication—as usual,’ said the deputy. ‘It’s almost as though his only communication is with his word-processor. Sometimes, not even that, when he takes to writing by hand.’

‘Any incoming calls?’

‘Just one from an unlisted number,’ said the deputy. ‘They spoke in Russian. The translated conversation is in your daily report. Nothing significant. He’s a weird one. I don’t know why we bother.’

‘Never trust a Russian,’ said Cracker, lighting up another cigarette and dismissing his deputy.

58

The coffee shop on the premises of Milesian Labs was called Food for Thought. It was managed by Daulat Singh, a chef from Garhwal, a region of the Himalayas that was famous for producing great cooks. Daulat had been enticed by Milesian from a luxury hotel chain so that the food at this restaurant could satisfy even the most picky palate. The restaurant operated 24/7 for a reason. Researchers followed their own hours, often forgetting to eat for long stretches at a time. Whatever they wanted, and whenever they wanted it, food had to be provided.

The restaurant was done up in log-cabin style with large glass windows that provided stunning views of the mountains that surrounded them. The walls were panelled in pine and red cedar, broken by stone pillars that had been fashioned from rocks in the surroundings. The menu could suit the taste of any of the nationalities that were working there. From a simple sandwich, stir-fry or pasta to a soufflé, tandoori or filet mignon, Daulat Singh's kitchen could produce it all.

Mikhailov's eating habits were almost ascetic. He avoided sugar, gluten and carbs but compensated with vegetables, fruits, nuts and dairy. His only other constant was chewing gum, his jaw perpetually exercising the spearmint within.

Mikhailov picked up his salad from the optional self-service counter along with an orange juice. He quietly headed over to a table by the window. He used a paper napkin to discard his chewing gum into a bin on the way and then sat down alone.

Vijay walked in and helped himself to a sandwich and a strawberry yoghurt. Tray in hand, he looked for a place to sit. All the tables were empty except for the one occupied by Mikhailov. With a total employee strength of less than twenty-five people—ten scientists and fifteen other support staff—there was never much likelihood of having company at any time of the day.

Vijay walked up to Mikhailov's table and asked, 'Mind if I join you?'

Mikhailov looked up. He was happy in his solitude and idle chatter irritated him. 'I'd rather be alone,' he said to Vijay, turning his attention back to his tray.

Vijay did an about-turn and headed to another table, a tad humiliated by the rejection. That man's peculiar, he thought to himself. Better to maintain a safe distance from him. He sat down and took a few bites of the gourmet sandwich.

Then something happened.

From his seat, Vijay noticed that Mikhailov's breathing was laboured and his face was turning blue; it was evident that he was struggling for air. Then he shoved his fingers down his throat. He's attempting to induce vomiting. Something is stuck. Three minutes for brain damage and six minutes for death.

Vijay rushed over to Mikhailov and pulled him to his feet. He wrapped his arms around the waist of the choking man from behind. He then made a fist and placed it against Mikhailov's upper abdomen. Grasping the fist with his other hand, he pressed into the scientist's stomach with a rapid upward thrust. Once. Twice. On the third try the offending morsel was expelled. Vijay's Heimlich manoeuvre had worked.

Mikhailov gasped for breath, sucking in great big gulps in desperation. He had choked on one of the walnuts in his salad. Appropriate for a nuthead, thought Vijay. Mikhailov looked at Vijay gratefully. And then he did something that he rarely did. It was rather scary.

He smiled.

Mikhailov returned to his lab, cursing himself for allowing his attention to wander while eating. He usually chewed each morsel in a rather deliberate fashion, a consequence of his effort to do everything with awareness. Today he had deviated from the usual by permitting his thoughts to drift to his days in Kashmir.

He ran his hand over his shirt and felt reassured by the rudraksha prayer bead on the chain around his neck. It was a single seed, strung on a simple gold chain, and had been given to him by his grandfather.

His grandfather, Viktor, had found the seed during the excavations that he had carried out at Nalanda during his quest to find Shangri-La or, as the Buddhists called it, Shambhala. Viktor had followed the trail of Nicholas Roerich and Gleb Bokii, Russians who had previously tried to find Shambhala. Viktor hadn't

succeeded but had returned home with a veritable treasure trove of stories and experiences that he would narrate to his fascinated grandson.

Then one night, he had taken off the chain with its bead that hung from his neck and put it around the boy's. 'Keep it with you always,' he had said. 'It is very powerful. When everything else fails, this can protect you.'

'How do I use it, dedushka?' the boy had asked.

'Think of it as a rocket,' said Viktor. 'No matter how sophisticated it is, without fuel it cannot be propelled. To make this bead work you need a guru. The only one who knows how to propel it is a sage who lives in India. His name is Brahmananda.'

'Ba-ra-man-da?' asked the boy.

'Brahmananda,' said the old man. 'You will seek him when the time comes.'

Mikhailov had been one of the toppers at Lomonosov Moscow State University and had landed the perfect research position in the Russian Academy of Sciences. In those days, a plum position in the Academy usually meant a KGB dossier. Most scientists were required to cooperate with the intelligence agency and Mikhailov had been no exception.

Viktor had been so very proud of Mikhailov's achievements. Unfortunately, the old man had passed away a few years later. And then Mikhailov had remembered his grandfather's words about Brahmananda.

He requested for leave and travelled to India. He spent several weeks in Delhi and Mumbai trying to trace Brahmananda, but no one seemed to know of him. Dejected, he had dropped in for a beer at Leopold Café, a place frequented by foreign tourists in Mumbai. A chance conversation with a backpacking couple had provided a clue to the sage's whereabouts.

Kashmir.

Upon arriving in Srinagar, Mikhailov had trekked to a little village called Hardas near Kargil. In the mountains surrounding Hardas, Mikhailov had discovered the guru that his grandfather had spoken about.

The commonly accepted story about Brahmananda was that he was very old—much older than most people. Possibly the oldest man alive in the world. Before Mikhailov could even introduce himself, the wise sage in saffron and vermilion robes had asked, ‘What brings you here, Mikhailov? Do you have the rudraksha bindu around your neck? Under your shirt?’

Mikhailov had been stunned into silence. He knew that he was standing before someone whose power and energy were unexplainable.

‘What you have is the bindu,’ said Brahmananda. ‘Every rosary has one hundred and eight beads plus one. Your bead is that elusive plus-one. The remaining one hundred and eight beads are ordinary seeds but the bindu is larger and shaped like a pinecone. It allows the person using the rosary to know when one complete rotation has been completed. These days it is usually an ordinary rudraksha bead with a tassel attached, but yours is no ordinary bindu.’



Mikhailov found that no words were reaching his lips. It was almost as though he had lost the ability to speak. His mind was racing. How do you know who I am? How did you know that I'm wearing the bead under my shirt? Why is this bead so important? Why are there one hundred and eight beads plus one?

'Slow down, son,' said Brahmananda, picking up on Mikhailov's thoughts. 'Let's start with the number of beads. They simply represent the hundred and eight positions of the sun and moon in the sky. But as your grandfather must have told you, that particular number, one hundred and eight, is sacred.'

Mikhailov recalled what his grandfather had said. The distance between Earth and the sun is one hundred and eight times the sun's diameter. The distance between Earth and the moon is one hundred and eight times the moon's diameter. The diameter of the sun is one hundred and eight times Earth's diameter.

'Precisely,' said Brahmananda, reading Mikhailov's thoughts. 'But also remember that when the first three digits are raised to their own power and multiplied, you get one hundred and eight.'

$$1^1 \times 2^2 \times 3^3 = 108.$$

Mikhailov ran through the simple calculation in his head. It was spot-on. But he couldn't be sure why that made the number special. Brahmananda smiled. 'Remember this, son. There's a touch of belief within every doubter and a touch of doubt within every believer. You have to decide which camp you want to be in. Now let's work on this bead's power. And yours.'

Mikhailov had taken leave for a month. Instead, he stayed on at Brahmananda's ashram for five years.

He thought he had found his home, unaware that his world was about to come crashing down.

Mafraqi performed Salah, his daily prayer, for the third time in the day. Praying along with him were several men. It had started with Wudu, followed by Niyyah, the intention to pray involving recitation of the first Surah of the Qur'an. They had bowed, recited something, stood upright again and then kneeled. They placed their hands and face down on the floor and then sat up, repeating the sequence—the Raka'ah. 'Peace be unto you, and on you be peace,' said Mafraqi at the end, finding nothing ironic in the words that emerged from him.

Prayers over, Mafraqi sat cross-legged on the thick rug that had been spread on the pockmarked floor of the cave located near the town of Raqqa in Syria. Given that he controlled the city, he could have chosen to live in more comfortable quarters, but he seemed more at ease in caves. His preference was a hangover from his days in Afghanistan. He was dressed in black robes and a black turban, possibly his effort to indicate that his roots went back to the Abbasid caliphs. His dark eyes and thick, white- streaked black beard matched perfectly with his robes.

He looked at the men who were now seated in a circle around him, men who had chosen to follow him in their noble cause of re-establishing the Islamic caliphate. Mafraqi knew that his words were more powerful than bombs. His speeches had succeeded in inspiring an entire generation of Arabs to thirst for that pure and noble Islamic empire within which the will of Allah would prevail.

The Americans had announced a reward of twenty-five million dollars for his death or capture. But Mafraqi was like an inflatable punching toy that would bounce back no matter how hard one hit it. On several occasions there had been reports of his death, but they had all turned out to be false. His death would be celebrated by the Western world and he would pop up in a video a few days later, almost mocking them.

'Anyone who says anything that seems remotely sympathetic to Muslims is dying these days,' said Habib, Mafraqi's second-in-command. 'The German Chancellor visited a mosque and quoted a verse from our holy Qur'an to tell the world that Islam is a religion of peace. The Chancellor is now dead.'

'Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake,' said Mafraqi as he mopped his forehead with a small towel. 'They are playing into our hands.'

'How?'

‘What is the purpose of killing people who are open-minded about Islam?’ asked Mafraqi, not expecting an answer. ‘To allow more hardliners to flourish! And that suits us perfectly. Muslims who want to reform our religion must not be ceded space. Reformers want Islam to accept homosexuality, adultery, equality of women, freedom of speech, blasphemy, and separation of religion and state. Our greatest danger lies in these reformist tendencies.’

‘Why?’ asked Habib, naively.

‘Because if we ever wish to achieve our dream of establishing a global Islamic caliphate, we need ordinary Muslims around the world to feel alienated and angry,’ replied Mafraqi.

‘That can only happen if Islam is rigid in its ways. The backlash from the secular West will transform ordinary Muslims into staunch defenders of the faith.’

‘I understand,’ said Habib as the truth of the Caliph’s statement sank in. ‘Have you spoken to Sadiq?’ asked Mafraqi. ‘Is he prepared?’

‘He is awaiting your nod,’ said Habib.

‘Good,’ said Mafraqi. ‘They can kill any number of Muslim holy warriors around the world, but they cannot kill the ideology that sparks holy war. For every man killed, a hundred more will emerge. The West is helping us by demolishing moderation. Our caliphate needs moderation in moderation.’

And it's another day and it's time for me, Masoud, to jot down my thoughts. I'm glad that my words finally seem to be flowing.

There are those who say that the word Islam means 'peace'. They are mistaken. Islam actually means 'submission to the will of Allah'.

Recently, the German Chancellor visited a mosque and quoted a verse, I think it was Surah 5:32, from the Qur'an. The verse says, 'Whoever kills a human being, except as punishment for murder or other villainy in the land, shall be regarded as having killed all mankind; and whoever saves a human life shall be regarded as having saved all mankind.'

But for every verse of peace I could find you a verse of violence. I have made a note of several such verses.

Surah 4:95—Allah hath granted a grade higher to those who strive and fight. . .

Surah 8:12—strike them upon the necks and strike them from every fingertip...

Surah 8:60—terrify the enemy of Allah. . .

Surah 9:29—fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day. . . So, I wonder, is Islam is a religion of peace or a religion of violence?

Well, the verses that came to the Prophet in Mecca were verses of peace. These passages focused on brotherhood, tolerance and charity, hallmarks of the Islamic faith.

But the later verses are the sword verses. They came to the Prophet after his move to Medina. We should remember that Islam grew by leaps and bounds only after this event. Just goes to show you the power of the sword!

The question then arises, which verses should one believe? Islam enshrines within it a concept called naskh—or abrogation. If later verses conflict with earlier ones, then the later verses are considered the final word.

It seems to me that terrorists seem to treat the contradicting verses as their greatest asset. They can continue Jihad, sanctioned by the Medina verses, while average Muslims can continue living their lives peacefully, secure in the conviction that Islam is about peace as per the Mecca verses.

This dichotomy seems to suit terrorists fine and they take full advantage of it.