



Learn English Through Stories

D Series

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1. The Mystery of Life and Death

By Sudha Murty



One day, a sage named Vajashravas decided to perform a yagna to obtain a boon from the gods. The yagna entailed the donation of cows—a popular practice in those days.

In ancient times, a person's status was evaluated based on the number of cows he or she owned. Moreover, cows were considered sacred and learned sages were frequently given cows as a donation for their services— sometimes by wealthy families and sometimes by the king of the land. The cows given in this way had to be healthy, well-groomed and fit enough to provide milk every day. Such a donation was considered to be supreme and holy. Even today, *godaan* (or the gift of a cow) is considered auspicious all over the country, especially after the death of a dear family member. During *godaan*, the cow is treated like a woman and also gifted a sari and some jewellery.

Nachiketa, Vajashravas's young son, observed the cows his father was giving away and noticed that the cows were old and could not give birth to calves. He remarked, 'Father, you are committing a sin by handing over cows that are unfit for donation. It is against dharma.'

Vajashravas became visibly upset at his son's words. Nachiketa, however, continued seriously, 'I am your son and I belong to you. You must offer the best of what you have. Why don't you give me away instead? Perhaps you can offer me up to one of the gods.'

In a fit of anger, Vajashravas spat out, 'Then I will give you to the lord of death.'

'So may it be,' Nachiketa replied, unafraid, and immediately left home.

He began walking in the direction of Yama's house and reached his destination in a few days. Yama, however, was not at home. He had gone to work.

Nachiketa waited for three days and three nights.

When Yama finally returned, he saw a thin young boy sitting in front of his house. 'I am sorry you have waited in front of my gate for three days without any hospitality,' he apologized. 'Since you are my guest, ask me for any three boons that you desire.'

Nachiketa asked for the first boon. 'Let there be peace between my father and me.'

Yama agreed.

'Please also pardon my father for all his wrongdoings during the yagna, like the donation of old cows,' said Nachiketa, thinking of his dear father.

Yama nodded.

For the third boon, the young boy said, 'Tell me, Lord Yama, what is the mystery of life and death?'

Yama was surprised by the third question. He said, 'That is a mystery even for the gods, learned scholars and sages. People perform penances for years in pursuit of an answer to this question. It is difficult to understand. You are young and have a long life ahead of you. Why don't you request me for another boon from the material world and I will fulfil your desire.'

Nachiketa, however, was adamant, 'Lord, I have observed a lot of death around me, and material possessions survive only for a few days. Such things are of no use to me. If you can, please give me the answer to my question.'

Yama was ecstatic that a young boy, a seeker of truth, was denying the desires of life. So he agreed to teach Nachiketa about self-realization and the beauty of dharma. Yama freed him from the cycle of birth and death.

The human race in every country and every generation thinks about deep and philosophical questions: What is life? What is death? What is the best way to live? The explanation of life, death and beyond, as well as the spirit, has been passed down to us and exists today in the form of the ancient text, *Kathopanishad*.

2. A Rainy Day



Sage Dhaumya was a great teacher and had many students.

In the old days, students stayed with their teacher in a *gurukul* to learn from him, and would also help the guru and his wife with chores. The teacher's wife was often called Gurumata; she would look after the students as though they were her own children. Irrespective of the students' or their parents' status in the outside world, all were treated as equal in the ashram. This is the reason why teachers in our country are given one of the highest levels of respect in an individual's life. First comes the mother, then the father, followed by the guru—Acharya Devo Bhava.

One day, Dhaumya called one of his students Aruni and instructed him, 'Please go to the forest and fetch some firewood. Come back quickly because it may rain soon.'

Aruni ran as fast as he could and began gathering firewood. After he had collected enough, he started on his way back. While he was passing by a rice field that belonged to the ashram, it began raining heavily. *If it rains too heavily, he thought, then the protective edge around it will get washed away; the field will be flooded and the crops will be ruined! I must find a way to protect them.*

Immediately, he dropped the firewood and made his way to the field. He tried to maintain the edge by using mud, wood and stones and whatever else was available. But it was of no use. The rain began washing everything away. In a short period of time, the water threatened to flow over the edge and submerge the field completely!

I must lie down at the edge myself and stop the water from entering, he thought.

Time passed and soon, it became evening. All the students in the ashram assembled for prayer and dinner.

Dhaumya began to inquire about Aruni only to find out that he hadn't returned from his errand. Worried, the sage began searching for Aruni, who was like a son to him. The boy's parents had left him in his care, and he could not disappoint them. Paying no mind to the pouring rain, Dhaumya took a lamp and stepped out of the ashram to look for the boy. Some of the students wanted to join him, but the sage refused. 'Stay here where you will be safe. I will go alone.'

Carefully, Dhaumya began walking in the rain. He called out, 'Aruni!' There was no reply.

Dhaumya kept searching for the boy.

After some time, the sage came to the field and saw water everywhere except for a certain patch. He went closer while still calling out to Aruni. To his relief, he heard a faint and familiar voice, 'Sir, I am here.'

He shouted, 'Aruni, I can't see you! Where are you?' 'I am near you, close to your feet.'

Dhaumya looked down and saw the boy lying in the mud like a wall against the rising level of water. The sage ran towards him and tried to help him up. Aruni, however, wouldn't budge. He kept saying repeatedly, 'Sir, let me be. If I stand up, the crops will be washed away. Then what will you eat?'

Without a word, Dhaumya yanked at his arm until the boy stood up.

Quickly, the sage guided Aruni back to the ashram and gave him warm clothing and food. Dhaumya was touched by the boy's sincerity and said, 'I am impressed by the care you've shown for others. You didn't spare a single thought for yourself. You are a model student and from this day on, you will be known as Uddalaka—the one who raises the boundary.'

Today, Uddalaka is remembered as a great scholar and as the grandfather of Ashtavakra, the man who authored a classical scripture known as the Ashtavakra Gita.

Read on to find out more about him in the next story.

3. The Boy with Eight Deformities



Uddalaka, the famous scholar and sage, had a daughter named Sujata, who was interested in philosophy.

When Sujata came to be of marriageable age, she was married to Kahoda, one of Uddalaka's students. In the course of time, the couple began expecting their first child. Since Sujata was a traditional girl, she believed that listening to good things and thinking positively would allow her unborn child to absorb the goodness in the surroundings. So she began attending her husband's classes regularly.

One day, when Kahoda was reciting the Vedas, he made an error. Instantly, the child in Sujata's womb said, 'O Father! You have made a mistake!'

Kahoda, however, did not pay attention and continued to recite. When he had made eight such mistakes, the unborn child began giggling and remarked, 'Despite your immense knowledge, you made many mistakes! I have counted eight till now!'

Kahoda was furious. He cursed his child in anger, 'Well, then, may you be born with eight defects.'

Saying this, Kahoda left the ashram in anger and never returned.

A few months later, his curse reached fruition. Ashtavakra was born, deformed in eight places—two on his feet, two on his hands, two on his legs, and on his chest and head.

Meanwhile, his father was far away attending a philosophical debate in the court of Janaka in the kingdom of Videha. His opponent was Vadin, a great and learned man who was hard to beat. There was a strange condition for the debate—the one who loses would be severely punished by being immersed in water for the

rest of his life. But if the person was successful in defeating Vadin, then he would be granted a wish. Kahoda, however, was so arrogant and confident of his victory that he agreed to the condition and took part in the debate. Unfortunately, he lost and, as due punishment, he was immersed in water and left there to live out his days.

Ashtavakra was raised by his mother with the help of his grandfather Uddalaka. As was natural, Ashtavakra considered Uddalaka to be his father. When he was twelve years old, Uddalaka revealed that he was the boy's grandfather.

Ashtavakra turned to his mother and asked her questions until he was satisfied.

The young boy finally learnt about his father and why he was born with deformities. Ashtavakra had a magnanimous heart. So once he learnt of Kahoda's whereabouts, he decided to attempt to free him even though his father was the one who was responsible for his condition. The next day, he set out towards Videha. When Ashtavakra reached Janaka's court, the gatekeeper did not allow him inside. He thought, *This deformed child doesn't look like he can even communicate properly with the king!*

Ashtavakra requested him to let him pass. 'Please, sir, I want to meet the great king because he is an outstanding philosopher. He is the only one who will be able to understand someone like me. I request you to allow me just one meeting!'

Something about Ashtavakra's demeanour melted the gatekeeper's heart and he opened the gates for the boy.

For a real philosopher, external appearances are never important. It is the internal knowledge that is of supreme value. So when the boy finally met Janaka and spoke to him, the king was in awe.

After the meeting with the king, Ashtavakra also decided to have a debate with Vadin. Vadin was no match for the boy and Ashtavakra easily defeated him. For his wish, Ashtavakra asked Vadin to free all the sages who had lost to Vadin, including his father.

Vadin kept his word and freed all of them. The sages came and blessed Ashtavakra while Kahoda stood to a side, feeling ashamed of his behaviour.

Vadin then disclosed his true identity. 'I am the son of Varuna, the god of water. My father wanted me to perform a yagna, but it was hard to get sages to agree to live underwater for such a long time. That is why I created this debate and the punishment. Through this contest, I was able to send the sages to the water world to help my father.'

Soon after, Ashtavakra returned to the ashram with his father. Kahoda instructed him to take a dip in a holy river nearby. When Ashtavakra did so, all his deformities disappeared.

Ashtavakra was a man of self-realization and Janaka frequently called upon him to debate with him and to learn from him. This conversation between the king and Ashtavakra is documented in what we now call Ashtavakra Gita, or 'the book of self-realization'.

4. The Order of a Guru



The great sage Dhaumya had many disciples. One of his students, named Upamanyu, was very devoted to his guru and lived in the gurukul with the sage and other students.

One day, Dhaumya decided to test Upamanyu's devotion and asked him, 'My dear child, what do you eat every day?'

'I eat whatever I am given,' replied Upamanyu.

'From today, give me all the food you get.' This meant that Upamanyu would not have anything to eat.

Upamanyu nodded, happy to listen to the guru's orders.

For the next few days, Upamanyu gave his share of the food to his guru. To Dhaumya's surprise, Upamanyu looked healthy and well. So he asked, 'What are you eating these days, child?'

'Sir, I give you all that I get, but I also began going from house to house asking for alms to feed myself.'

'No, Upamanyu, don't do that. This means that there will be others who won't get anything from those homes because of you.'

Upamanyu nodded.

Days passed and Upamanyu still looked hale and hearty. Dhaumya asked, 'How are you managing these days?'

'I drink the milk of the cows when I take them out for grazing,' said Upamanyu.

‘Child, please stop doing that immediately.’ The sage wanted him to be as hungry as possible so that he could test the nature of Upamanyu’s obedience and devotion.

Upamanyu agreed.

The next morning, he took the cows to graze. He felt ravenous, but there was nothing to eat or drink. In his effort to stay true to his word, Upamanyu unwittingly ate the leaves of a poisonous plant, as a result of which he soon became blind. Unable to see anything, he lost his way and fell into a dry well. That evening, the cows came back to the ashram on their own, but Upamanyu did not.

Dhaumya waited for Upamanyu for hours, but he did not turn up. The sage became worried. He took a group of his students and went in search of Upamanyu. They called out to Upamanyu for a long time until finally, a voice replied, ‘Sir, I am here.’

When Dhaumya went towards the sound of the voice, he found Upamanyu in a dry well—blind and hungry.

The sage prayed earnestly to the Ashwini Kumars, the divine physicians, to restore Upamanyu’s eyesight. The Ashwini Kumars came to Upamanyu and handed him a special medicine. He, however, refused to take it. ‘Unless my teacher tells me to, I will not take it.’

‘Child, you must consume this medicine. If you don’t, you will be blind for the rest of your life,’ said the Ashwini Kumars. ‘In that case, it is better to remain blind than to disobey my dear guru,’ responded Upamanyu with affection.

Hearing this, Dhaumya was pleased and blessed him, ‘You have passed the test, my dear student. From this day on, you do not have to learn any more of our scriptures because all the ancient learning will now come automatically to you. Come now, please, take the medicine.’

Upamanyu smiled and nodded and took the medicine. Within minutes, his eyesight had returned. Later, he went on to become a sage of great repute.

5. Grammar page

The Present Perfect Tense

Use the **present perfect tense** to talk about happenings in the past that explain or affect the present. The verbs **have** and **has** are used as “helping” or auxiliary verbs to form the present perfect tense.



It's **been** very wet today.



Kim's **cut** her finger.

Sam **has scored** two goals.

I've just **finished** my shower.

Uncle Tom **has lost** his wallet.

John **has gone** out.

The Lees **have moved** to Ohio.

It **has not rained** for months.

Have you **found** your keys yet?

Tim **has made** two spelling mistakes.

They **have opened** a new shop.



To form the **present perfect tense** join **have** or **has** to the past participle of the verb:

have + past participle

has + past participle

The **past participle** of a regular verb usually ends in **-ed**, just like the simple past tense. But the past participles of irregular verbs don't follow this rule.