

# Nalopakhyanam

the Science of  
Victory



CHRISTINE **DEVIN**

# NALOPAKHYANAM

## THE SCIENCE OF VICTORY



TRANSLATED FROM SANSKRIT BY  
CHRISTINE DEVIN

—

GENERAL EDITOR: KIREET JOSHI

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We would like to thank all those who helped in the publication of this book. The task of producing learning-teaching material for integral education in its highest and broadest sense, was very close to Kireet Joshi's heart. It was his wish that these books be made available to a large number of students and teachers.

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# ILLUMINATION, HEROISM AND HARMONY

## *Preface*

**T**he task of preparing teaching-learning material for value-oriented education is enormous.

There is, first, the idea that value-oriented education should be exploratory rather than prescriptive, and that the teaching-learning material should provide to the learners a growing experience of exploration.

Secondly, it is rightly contended that the proper inspiration to turn to value-orientation is provided by biographies, autobiographical accounts, personal anecdotes, epistles, short poems, stories of humour, stories of human interest, brief passages filled with pregnant meanings, reflective short essays written in well-chiselled language, plays, powerful accounts of historical events, statements of personal experiences of values in actual situations of life, and similar other statements of scientific, philosophical, artistic and literary expression.

Thirdly, we may take into account the contemporary fact that the entire world is moving rapidly towards the synthesis of the East and the West, and in that context,

it seems obvious that our teaching-learning material should foster the gradual familiarisation of students with global themes of universal significance as also those that underline the importance of diversity in unity. This implies that the material should bring the students nearer to their cultural heritage, but also to the highest that is available in the cultural experiences of the world at large.

Fourthly, an attempt should be made to select from Indian and world history such examples that could illustrate the theme of the upward progress of humankind. The selected research material could be multi-sided, and it should be presented in such a way that teachers can make use of it in the manner and in the context that they need in specific situations that might obtain or that can be created in respect of the students.

The research team at the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER) has attempted the creation of the relevant teaching-learning material, and they have decided to present the same in the form of monographs. The total number of these monographs will be around eighty to eighty-five.

It appears that there are three major powers that uplift life to higher and higher normative levels, and the value of these powers, if well illustrated, could be effectively conveyed to the learners for their upliftment. These powers are those of illumination, heroism and harmony.

It may be useful to explore the meanings of these terms – illumination, heroism and harmony – since the aim of these monographs is to provide material for a study of what is sought to be conveyed through these three terms. We offer here exploratory statements in regard to these three terms.

Illumination is that ignition of inner light in which meaning and value of substance and life-movement are seized, understood, comprehended, held, and possessed, stimulating and inspiring guided action and application and creativity culminating in joy, delight, even ecstasy. The width, depth and height of the light and vision determine the degrees of illumination, and when they reach the splendour and glory of synthesis and harmony, illumination ripens into wisdom. Wisdom, too, has varying degrees that can uncover powers of knowledge and action, which reveal unsuspected secrets and unimagined skills of art and craft of creativity and effectiveness.

Heroism is, essentially, inspired force and self-giving and sacrifice in the operations of will that is applied to the quest, realisation and triumph of meaning and value against the resistance of limitations and obstacles by means of courage, battle and adventure. There are degrees and heights of heroism determined by the intensity, persistence and vastness of sacrifice. Heroism attains



the highest states of greatness and refinement when it is guided by the highest wisdom and inspired by the sense of service to the ends of justice and harmony, as well as when tasks are executed with consummate skill.

Harmony is a progressive state and action of synthesis and equilibrium generated by the creative force of joy and beauty and delight that combines and unites knowledge and peace and stability with will and action and growth and development. Without harmony, there is no perfection, even though there could be maximisation of one or more elements of our nature. When illumination and heroism join and engender relations of mutuality and unity, each is perfected by the other and creativity is endless.

The present monograph is entitled *The Science of Victory*. This ancient story by the poet-Rishi Vyasa recounts how heroism guided by wisdom enable two human beings, crushed by adverse circumstances, to emerge victorious from a terrible ordeal. Since they are intensely pure and sincere, they can, even at the worst moments, remain open to luminous intuitions; they can keep their strength and courage; they let themselves be guided at all times by an invisible hand. By constantly invoking a higher force, they place themselves under its protection and they keep their mind and heart open to its action — a force which is actively present in the universe and which pushes towards

justice, harmony and unity. This is an extraordinary demonstration of how, by clinging to the golden thread of love and faith, one can traverse the whirlpools and dangerous undercurrents of the river of life and reach the other shore, on the firm ground of joy and freedom.

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# THE SCIENCE OF VICTORY

## *Introduction*

इतिहासमिमं श्रुत्वा पुराणां शश्वदुत्तमम्  
पुत्रान् पौत्रान् पशूंश्चापि लभते नृषु चाग्न्यताम् ।  
आरोग्यप्रीतिमांश्चैव भविष्यति न संशयः । ।

*“Whoever listens to that ancient and excellent story will get everything that his heart desires, there is no doubt about it.” (Mahabharata, Vanaparva, 79-16)<sup>1</sup>*

### ***A Lesson on Life***

*The story of Nala and Damayanti (Nalopakhyanam), as told in the Mahabharata, seems to begin and end like a fairy tale. Yet what happens in between is anything but a fairy tale — if we give this word the meaning of something remote from real life. On the contrary, this is a universal story containing some of the deepest truths about life.*

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1. Literally: “will get sons, grandsons, cattle, honour, health and happiness”.

*This is about two exceptional human beings, placed in ideal circumstances: the king Nala and the princess Damayanti. It starts with a very pure love between them which is put to the test by the gods themselves. Their marriage is followed by a life of harmony and happiness. Then suddenly the smooth path is interrupted. A crack appears in this beautiful picture and widens more and more. An evil being named Kali enters the king, clouds his judgement and leads him to all kinds of disasters, including loss of his kingdom, exile, separation from the children, parting from his wife, loneliness, suffering and servitude for both of them.*

*Evil, doubts, pain, separation have appeared in the story of Nala and Damayanti, indeed as they often appear in our own life. For how many lives on this earth are not chequered lives? One rises, one falls; one gains, one loses. Rama is all set to be crowned King of Ayodhya and at that very moment he is sent into exile. Shakuntala awaits her marriage and then she is cursed by a Rishi and forgotten by her lover. Vishvamisra is about to reap the fruit of thousands of years of tapasya when he gets angry and loses everything in a second. Rare are the linear lives in which upheaval of some kind does not take place.*

*What does one need for going undefeated through all this? What makes some people sink and other people emerge stronger? And if it is true that the life of a man is a "search after pure Truth and unmixed Bliss", what are the helps in*

this search? And if it is true that human life is susceptible to deviation, how can those deviating forces be conquered?

*How can we learn the art of Victory?*

Since it contains many secrets about this art. or rather this science, the story of Nala and Damayanti is considered an invaluable lesson in human life.

Like all those to be found in the ancient epics of India, this tale contains great knowledge. The poets who wrote them did not intend merely to tell a tale in a beautiful or noble manner or to create an interesting poem, although they did this with great success. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are itihāsa, that is to say, they are “an ancient historical or legendary tradition turned to creative use as a significant mythus or tale expressive of some spiritual or religious or ethical or ideal meaning and thus formative of the mind of the people.” (Sri Aurobindo) Valmiki and Vyasa indeed shaped the minds of the Indian people. They were architects and sculptors of life. Their epics contain a deep reflection on life, on human psychology, on society, politics and religion. If the Mahabharata has been spoken of as a fifth Veda, it is because it is not only a great poem, it is also a body of knowledge.

धर्मे चार्थे च कामे च मोक्षे च भारतर्षभ ।

यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यन्नेहास्ति न तत् क्वचित् । ।

*“Whatever is in this book, pertaining to the four human interests: dharma, personal gain, passion or liberation, is elsewhere [in the world]; whatever is not in the book does not exist anywhere [in the world].”<sup>1</sup>*

*The work of these epics was to popularize the discoveries of the great minds and souls of India through stories:*

*“That which was for the cultured classes contained in Veda and Upanishad, shut into profound philosophical aphorism and treatise or inculcated in Dharmashastra and Arthashastra, was put here into creative and living figures, associated with familiar story and legend, fused into a vivid representation of life and thus made a near and living power that all could readily assimilate through the poetic word appealing at once to the soul and the imagination and the intelligence.”<sup>2</sup>*

*The Vedic Rishis spoke of life as a battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. They said that some forces help you in this battle, and that other forces obstruct you.*

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1. Adiparva, 2.20.

2. Sri Aurobindo

They said that life is a sacrifice, and that as you burn your imperfections in the fire of sacrifice, you can move upwards, you progress from untruth to truth. They spoke of Rita, the right law of action originating in the vast consciousness of truth; and from that concept had come the idea of dharma. Those Vedic notions are present in the Mahabharata, brought out from an inner plane to an outer plane (ideas, ethics, politics), although in the tale of Nala and Damayanti (which is probably a very old story), they still keep their ancient and inner significance.

Indeed this is how the story is presented to us in the Mahabharata: as an ancient tale containing secrets which can help men overwhelmed with doubt and sorrow; as an example pregnant with meaning; as a demonstration of the significance of life. From the story of Nala and Damayanti, it is said in the Mahabharata, Yudhishthira, like all men plunged in a great crisis, could draw benefit.

***"Was there ever a man more miserable than me?"***

"Never was there a more miserable man than me", kept repeating Yudhishthira. He was a king, and he had lost his kingdom. He was the elder and the wisest brother; he was regarded as Dharma-raja, a model of moral rectitude, and now he was being accused of bringing misfortune upon himself and his family by not resisting the lure of gambling.

Even his closest friends reproached him for pledging himself, his brothers, and even their wife, on the gambling board. Time and again that fateful scene would come back to his mind when, through his own fault, the proud Draupadi was dragged by her hair into the assembly hall and publicly humiliated, like no other woman had ever been. How could he sleep when he relived that moment, remembered his helplessness and the sarcasm of his enemies? He had been trapped by an expert in the art of cheating and made to play dice while he himself did not know the secret of this game (अनक्षज्ञस्य हि सतो 52.44). And what was in store for him now? He had gambled and lost; now, as per the agreement he had to live a life of exile in the forest along with his brothers and their wife. As if this was not enough, his dearest brother, the great Arjuna himself had left for a far-off region in the north in quest of the science of divine weapons. When would he return? Would he ever return?

Yudhishthira felt so lonely. How much he missed the presence of the compassionate Arjuna! How unbearable to hear over and over the harsh words of his brother Bhima! And what should he answer when, impatient with what he saw as passivity, Bhima pressed him to break his word and take arms against their enemies? "You will gamble again anyway, this is certain. Even after all that has happened, you will not be able to refuse the game!" taunted Bhima. It hurt so much! Sorrow and shame seared Yudhishthira's heart and dried his



mouth. At night, unable to find rest, he kept tossing on his bed of torture and bitterly lamented over his misery. "No, indeed, never was there a more unfortunate man than me."

One day a great sage, one of those Rishis who lived in the forest-hermitages of ancient India, appeared where the brothers lived. They all welcomed him according to tradition. After some time, Yudhishtira found him alone. He sat at his feet and bared his heart to him. His pain, his worries, his doubts, his helplessness, he all confided to the great Rishi. And he concluded with the one thing that seemed to him a certainty in his ocean of miseries, "Was there ever a king more miserable than me?"

"Yes, there was", answered the Rishi gently. "Once upon a time there was a king who was more unfortunate than you. He was alone in the forest, separated from his wife, without brothers or friends, much more lonely than you are. He was not even able to reflect on dharma as you do, because his mind was clouded. If you want to listen to that ancient story, I will tell you about the king Nala who had to bear a greater ordeal than you and who triumphed over his miseries."

This is how the story of Nala and Damayanti is introduced to us by the great poet Vyasa in the Vanaparva of the Mahabharata: as a tale of courage and endurance in the face of adversity; as an example of what fate can do to man and what man can do to fate; a lesson of hope given to a man who is very close to falling prey to despair. Through this story, the

Rishi wants Yudhishtira to have a deeper understanding of the play of invisible forces in life. He reminds him that there are times in one's life when one can become a plaything in the hands of some of those forces, which are out to obstruct and destroy; but he shows him how, even in these circumstances, one can be protected and guided by some other forces, and how one can get free from one's fear and destructive sense of guilt by surpassing one's limitations and ignorance. For the central idea in the poem is that of the spirit of degeneracy, the genius of the iron age: an evil being suddenly takes hold of a man who till that day had been an ideal of purity and loyalty, brings all kinds of calamities into his life, but eventually is overpowered by a steadfast conjugal love. Nothing more tonic and refreshing for the soul than this tale of two capable minds struggling with hardships and difficulties. Nothing more strengthening than the story of this two-headed hero whose aspiring and unconquerable spirit ultimately triumphs. Nothing more elevating than the story of this unwavering love, pure and strong enough to make a man and a woman pass through some of the worst crises one can ever meet in life, and emerge victorious.

"In the same way as Nala regained his kingdom, you also will meet good fortune again," promised the Rishi to Yudhishtira after telling the story.

*"Was there ever a man more miserable than me?"*

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*"Considering that men's gains are always unstable, one should not be perturbed by success or failure."*

अस्थिरत्वं च संचिन्त्य पुरषार्थस्य नित्यदा ।  
तस्योदये व्यये चापि न चिन्तयितुमर्हसि ।। 79.12

*"The apprehension you have that you will be again invited by an expert in the game to play dice, that fear I will destroy."*

भयात् त्रस्यसि यच्च त्वमाह्वयिष्यति मां पुनः ।  
अक्षज्ञ इति तत् तेऽहं नाशयिष्यामि पार्थिव ।। 79.18

*The lesson will not be lost on Yudhishtira: he will express his desire to learn from the Rishi Brihadashva the science of dice and also the science of horses, thereby taking the initiative in the battle of life and getting rid of his fear.*

\* \* \*

### ***Damayanti***

Damayanti, “the one who subdues, or conquers”, is the name of Nala’s wife. And she does conquer; by the purity and sincerity of her love, the tremendous strength of her will-power, her deep insight into the complexities of life and knowledge of the right action, obstacles are removed; seemingly insurmountable difficulties are surmounted; evil forces are defeated. There is a special quality to all her actions, a certain golden touch as it were. At each turn of the story Damayanti solves the inextricable, straightens what is bent, snatches victory from the jaws of defeat.

Her love for Nala is no ordinary love, it is a love of the soul as symbolised in the image of the swan, the golden-winged messenger through which the two lovers communicate. The truth of this love is so deep that it even won over the gods.

What made Damayanti choose Nala over the gods? Four heavenly beings, Indra, Agni, Yama and Varuna had asked for Damayanti’s hand. They had even used Nala as their emissary, and Nala, although a suitor himself, had faithfully helped them. Yet Damayanti chose Nala, a man, over the gods. Why? What does Nala have that the gods do not have? Here, a clue to the question is hidden in the beautiful image of the four gods seated along with Nala at the swayamvar<sup>1</sup> ceremony.

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1. A ceremony during which the young girl garlands the man whom she chooses for her future husband.

The gods have all taken the appearance of Nala so that the five beings seated side by side look exactly alike. Which one is the real Nala? How is Damayanti going to recognize him and select him as her husband? Damayanti directly addresses the gods — तेन सत्येन विबुधास्तमेव प्रदिशन्तु मे — and the truth of her love is so compelling that it forces them, as it were, to help her in identifying Nala: suddenly she is able to perceive the differences between the five figures in front of her. The gods are not soiled by dust or sweat. Their garlands are unfading, their eyes unwinking. Their feet do not touch the ground. They cast no shadow. In contrast Nala's feet stand on the ground; he has a shadow; his garland is fading; one can see sweat on his forehead and dust on his body, and his eyes blink. What does this symbolic and poetic language signify? Gods are stable, immobile, always luminous, invariably harmonious. Time does not change them, struggle does not affect them. In a word, these gods belong to a static, non-evolutionary world. Nala's world, on the contrary, is the world of the earth, which his feet touch; it is an evolutionary world, not all glorious and harmonious, consisting of light and shadows, of sweat and dust, of struggle and impurity. A world where everything moves and changes, the way his garland fades with the passing of time. Yet in that imperfection, there is an urge towards a higher and more many-sided perfection. This urge, this need is the sign of the soul. Gods are not thirsty. The human soul is. It searches for truth, freedom, unmixed bliss. That thirst is



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# Nalopakhyanam

## the Science of Victory

**T**his tale whose origin is lost in the mists of time and which we find inserted in the great epic of the poet Vyasa tells us how heroism guided by wisdom allows two beings crushed under the weight of contrary circumstances to emerge victorious from a terrible ordeal.

This story that begins and ends like a fairy tale, however, is anything but a story removed from “real life”. Rather, it is presented to us by the poet himself as a story containing some of life’s deepest and most useful truths. Indeed, it is a delightful tale in which sorrows and joys are delicately traced, a tale crossed by great tenderness and immense compassion for the fragility of human beings and for their sufferings. But it is also a parable whose powerful symbols make us see that the circumstances of life are nothing, that conscience is everything...



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