



Valmiki's Uttara Kanda

THE BOOK OF ANSWERS

Translated with Commentary by
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*And again, for Sanjay
Who always had the right questions*

remainder of the day attending to matters in his court. Sita, too, would spend the early part of the day performing sacred rituals. Then, she would serve all her mothers-in-law, standing before them with her palms joined in respect. After that, Sita, beautifully clothed and adorned with many jewels, would come to Rama as Shachi would to thousand-eyed Indra in the heavens.

Rama was filled with an immense happiness when he noticed that his wife was pregnant. 'Excellent, excellent!' he said. 'Sita, you stand in front of me carrying a child. What do you wish for? Tell me! What desire of yours can I satisfy?'

Sita smiled and said to Rama, 'I wish to see the sacred groves again, Rama, to visit the great sages of holy deeds, to live under the trees on the banks of the Ganga, to eat roots and fruits. This is my greatest wish, Rama, to spend one night with the sages who live like ascetics.'

'It shall be so,' promised Rama of energetic deeds. 'Trust me, Sita. I promise that you shall go there tomorrow.'

Saying this to Sita, princess of Mithila, daughter of Janaka, Rama went into the middle chambers of the palace along with his companions.

Sarga 42: Rama Hears the Townspeople's Gossip

Many experienced men surrounded the seated king and they were telling various amusing stories. Vijaya and Madhumatta, Kashyapa, Pingala, Kusha, Suraji, Kaliya, Bhadra, Dantavakra and Samagadha happily related all kinds of funny stories in the presence of great-souled Rama.

After one of them had finished a story, Rama addressed them all. 'What do they talk about in the city, Bhadra? The

city dwellers and those that live in the country, what do they say? About me? About Sita? And Bharata and Lakshmana? What about Shatrughna and my mother Kaikeyi? For kings are criticized when they are new rulers.'

Bhadra joined his palms and said, 'The citizens speak highly of you, king. Dear sir, bull among men, both the people of the city and those of the country talk a lot about your victory over ten-headed Ravana.'

Rama said to Bhadra, 'Tell me everything as it is, without omitting anything. Tell me the good and the bad things that are being said by the citizens. There are those who want to hear only the good and not the bad. Speak to me with confidence, without fear or anxiety. Tell me exactly what the city dwellers and the country folk are saying.'

Bhadra joined his palms and with a steady mind, he said to radiant Rama, 'Listen, king, to what the citizens are saying, the good and the bad, on the streets and in the markets, in the forests and in gardens. "Rama did a difficult thing when he built the bridge over the ocean, such a thing had never been done before, not even by the gods and the danavas. He destroyed invincible Ravana along with his army and his chariots. And he brought the monkeys and bears under his control, along with the rakshasas. He killed Ravana in battle and he brought Sita back. He turned his back on anger and led her into his own house. How could he take Sita back into his heart? How could he enjoy pleasures with her when she had been snatched from him by Ravana and had even sat on his lap? Ravana had taken her to Lanka and kept her in the ashoka grove—she was at the mercy of the rakshasas. How can Rama not be repulsed? We shall have to treat our wives in the same way—for whatever a king does, his subjects must do the same." This, and various

other things, are what the citizens are saying, king, in the city and everywhere in the country.'

Rama grew agitated when he heard this. He said to his friends, 'What is this? Tell me!'

They hung their heads and bowed to him and replied, 'It is sad, but it is true!'

Sarga 43: Rama Summons His Brothers

Rama, scorcher of his enemies, dismissed them all when he heard what they had said. After he had sent his friends away, he began to worry about what he should do. He called the doorkeeper who was standing nearby and said, 'Go quickly and bring Lakshmana, the auspicious son of Sumitra, and bring mighty-armed Bharata and unvanquished Shatrughna.'

At Rama's command, the doorkeeper placed his joined palms on his head with respect. He went to Lakshmana's house and entered there without being stopped. He honoured him with his palms joined and he said, 'The king wishes to see you. You must go to him without delay!'

'Yes!' said Lakshmana when he heard Rama's words. He climbed into his chariot and went quickly to Rama's palace.

Knowing that Lakshmana was on his way, the doorkeeper went into Bharata's presence and honouring him, he said, 'The king wishes to see you.' When Bharata heard Rama's order from the doorkeeper, he left his seat and rushed away on foot.

With his palms joined in respect, the doorkeeper watched Bharata's hurried departure and he went to Shatrughna's palace and said, 'Come, best of the Raghus. The king wishes to see you. Lakshmana has already gone there as has illustrious Bharata.'

Shatrughna touched his forehead to the ground when he heard this command and went to Rama.

Rama, agitated and anxious, heard that the princes had arrived. His head hanging low, he said sadly to the doorkeeper, 'Allow the princes to enter and let them come to me quickly. This is about my life and they are more to me than my life!' The princes were dressed in white, their minds were calm. They joined their palms and entered with the king's permission. They saw that his face was like an eclipsed moon, like a setting sun that had lost its light, that wise Rama's eyes were filled with tears and that his lotus face had lost its glory. Quickly, they greeted him and touched his feet with their heads. They stood there calmly as Rama wept.

Mighty Rama raised them up and embraced them with both arms. He asked them to sit down and then he said, 'You are everything to me, you are my life. I rule this kingdom because of your deeds! You are learned in the great books, you are intelligent and you are accomplished. Great kings, I present you with a matter to consider.'

Sarga 44: Rama Decides to Banish Sita

They sat with heavy hearts and then Rama said to them, his face thin and drawn, 'Listen, all of you, my dear ones, and do not go against what I want. I will tell you the kinds of things the citizens have been saying about Sita. And about me. Prominent citizens as well as common people speak ill of me. They loathe me and this cuts at my vitals. I have been born in the line of the great-souled Ikshvakus. How can they speak like this about Sita's misdeeds in the past? You know, my dear ones, how Sita was alone in the

deserted Dandaka forest and how she was abducted by Ravana and how I destroyed him. In front of you, Lakshmana, Agni, the carrier of oblations, and Vayu, the sky-traveller, declared Sita sinless before the gods. The moon, the sun, the gods and the sages, all of them, attested that Janaka's daughter was without sin. On the island of Lanka and in the presence of the gods and the gandharvas, Indra himself placed her, innocent and virtuous, in my arms. In my heart, I knew that illustrious Sita had conducted herself appropriately. So I accepted her and brought her back to Ayodhya.

'But the terrible things that people are saying break my heart. Those who are infamous in this world descend to the realms of ghosts and stay there as long as their infamy is discussed. The gods do not like people of ill repute, they admire those who are famous. All great-souled people are motivated by compliments. Bulls among men, I would give up my life and you from fear of a scandal. How can I do less in the case of Janaka's daughter? It is because of this that you see me drowning in an ocean of sorrow. I have never experienced a sorrow greater than this.

'Tomorrow morning, Lakshmana, let Sumantra have the chariot ready. Climb into it with Sita and leave her on the borders of the kingdom. The hermitage of the great-souled sage Valmiki, which is like heaven, lies on the far shore of the Ganga. Leave her in that desolate place, joy of the Raghus, and come back quickly. Do as I say, Lakshmana! Do not speak to me ever again about the matter of Sita. I will be greatly displeased if you try to obstruct me. I swear by my arms and by my life that I will not abide anyone speaking against my wishes. If you have any respect for me and are obedient to my commands, do as I say and take Sita away from here at once. Sita has already told me that she wishes to visit the sages' dwellings on the banks of the Ganga. Her wishes will now be fulfilled!'

Having said this, Rama, the soul of dharma, his eyes filled with tears, departed, surrounded by his brothers.

Sarga 45: Lakshmana Takes Sita to the Forest

When the night had ended and the dawn came, a dispirited Lakshmana, his mouth dry, said to Sumantra, 'Charioteer, quickly harness horses to the best of chariots. And bring a fine seat for Sita from the palace. I will take Sita from here to the hermitage of great sages, those men who practise acts of piety. Bring the chariot quickly.'

'It shall be done,' said Sumantra and he yoked the best of horses to the chariot with a seat covered with a bright and cheerful cloth. 'The chariot is ready,' he said happily to Lakshmana, his friend. 'You can now carry out your assigned task.'

Lakshmana entered the palace and stood before Sita. The bull among men said, 'By the king's command, good lady, I have come to take you immediately to the banks of the Ganga, to the auspicious settlements of the great sages in the forest.'

Sita was filled with immense joy and she made preparations to leave. She quickly picked up all kinds of clothes and ornaments and jewels and was ready to depart. 'I will give these ornaments to the sages' wives,' she said as Lakshmana helped her climb into the chariot. Remembering Rama's instructions, he drove away quickly.

Sita said to Lakshmana, the increaser of prosperity, 'Joy of the Raghus, I see a number of bad omens today. My right eye twitches and my limbs tremble. Son of Sumitra, even my heart seems ill at ease. I feel a great anxiety and an immense unsteadiness. I see a vast emptiness in the world, large-eyed one.'

I hope all is well with your brother and with his brothers, and I hope all is well especially with my mothers-in-law, hero, and with all living beings in the city as well as in the countryside.' Thus, she entreated the gods with her palms placed together.

Lakshmana bowed his head when he heard Sita's prayer. 'Everything is well,' he said, though his heart contracted.

They reached the banks of the river Gomati and stayed in a hermitage there. In the morning, Lakshmana rose and said to the charioteer, 'Harness the chariot quickly. Today, I will touch the waters of the Ganga with my head, as did Shiva, the pervader of the three worlds!' Sumantra yoked the horses swift as thought to the chariot and said to Sita with his palms joined, 'Alight, madam!' At his words, Sita mounted the chariot along with Lakshmana and the wise Sumantra. At midday, they reached the waters of the Bhagirathi and Lakshmana, who was in poor spirits, began to cry audibly when he saw them.

Sita, who knew dharma, saw Lakshmana's great distress and asked cautiously, 'Why are you crying? We have reached the banks of the Ganga, my long-standing wish has been fulfilled. This is a time of happiness, why do you grieve, Lakshmana? Bull among men, you are always in Rama's presence. Why are you overcome with unhappiness after only two days away from him? Rama is dear to me, too, dear as my own life. But I am not grieving like you. Don't be a child. Take me across the Ganga so that I can see the sages. I will give them these clothes and ornaments and jewels. I will honour those great sages as they deserve. We shall spend one night here and then return to the city.'

Lakshmana listened to Sita. He wiped his beautiful eyes, called for the boats and crossed the river.

Sarga 46: Lakshmana Abandons Sita

The boat had been made comfortable by the Nishadas and Lakshmana, Rama's younger brother, stepped into it after he had helped the princess of Mithila aboard. 'Wait here with the chariot,' Lakshmana said to Sumantra and then, burning with grief, he told the boatman to set forth. When they reached the far shore of the Ganga, Lakshmana joined his palms and spoke to Sita, his voice thick with tears. 'A massive spear has pierced my heart, Sita, for the wise and noble Rama has asked me to do something that will make me notorious in the worlds for all time! It would be better to be dead. Death would be far better than the act that I must perform today, an act that will never be forgiven by the world. Forgive me, virtuous lady. Do not be angry with me!' Joining his palms, Lakshmana fell to the ground.

Seeing Lakshmana thus, with his palms joined and crying and asking for his own death, Sita was very disturbed. She said to him, 'What is this? I don't understand. Speak to me, Lakshmana! I see that you are not at ease. Is the king well? I asked the king to grant me a wish and that has made you so unhappy. Look me in the eye and speak to me. You are under an oath!' Prodded by Sita, Lakshmana, his heart heavy, turned his face away. In a choked voice, he said, 'Daughter of Janaka, the council heard cruel and insulting things about you that were being spoken in the city and in the countryside. The king has taken those words spoken behind your back seriously and they have caused him great distress. I cannot say those words in front of you, my lady. Although you were proved innocent in my presence, the king has rejected you from fear of common people's gossip. You have to accept this, my lady, there is no other way. I must leave you in this hermitage, albeit with a heavy heart, in keeping with the

king's orders. The sacred and pleasant meditation groves of the brahmin ascetics lie here, on the banks of the Ganga. Do not grieve, lovely one. The best of brahmins, the illustrious Valmiki, bull among sages, is a friend of my father, king Dasharatha. Approach the pleasant shade of the great sage's feet, daughter of Janaka, and live there simply with your mind focused. Keep Rama in your heart at all times, adopt the vows of a wife. There is much benefit for you in this, my lady!

Sarga 47: Lakshmana Turns Away

Sita, Janaka's daughter, was overcome with intense sorrow and fell to the ground when she heard Lakshmana's harsh words. She lost consciousness for a moment and then, her agitated eyes filled with tears, she said pathetically to Lakshmana, 'This body of mine must have been created for suffering, Lakshmana, for today, without a doubt I am the very embodiment of sorrow. What sin did I commit in the past, what woman did I abandon that now I, who am pure and virtuous, am rejected by the king? In the past, when I followed Rama's footsteps, I lived in a hermitage under adverse circumstances. Then, I was soothed in my sorrow. How will I live in a hermitage in solitude, dear one? Whom will I talk to about my suffering when I am overcome with despair? What will I say when the sages ask me about my transgression, why great-souled Rama rejected me? I should throw my life into the waters of the Ganga this very day. But then, my husband's royal lineage will be mocked. Do as you have been ordered, son of Sumitra, and leave me, unfortunate as I am, here. Carry out your instructions with steadfastness. But listen to my words.

‘Specifically to my mothers-in-law, I bow my head at their feet and honour them with my palms joined. Say to the king that I ask about his welfare. Say to him, “Your majesty, you are as concerned about your citizens as you are about your brothers. This is your highest duty and it will bring you unparalleled fame. And that, your majesty, can only be obtained by doing your duty towards your citizens. Bull among men, I am not lamenting my own situation. Do what you must to counteract the malicious words of your citizens.”’

Lakshmana grew even more disheartened as he listened to Sita. He laid his head on the ground, unable to speak. He circumambulated her, sobbing aloud, and then he boarded the boat again, urging the boatman on. When he got to the far shore, he was overwhelmed by the burden of his grief. He quickly mounted the chariot, almost senseless with sorrow. Lakshmana went onwards, turning again and again to look at Sita who had been abandoned on that far shore, weeping in despair. Sita gazed after Lakshmana as he drew away into the distance and when she could no longer see him, she fell to the ground, overpowered by grief. Weighed down by her sorrow, that glorious woman, chaste and pious, could see no protector. Enveloped in sadness, the good woman cried out like a peacock in the forest.

Sarga 48: Valmiki Rescues Sita

The young boys from the sage’s hermitage saw Sita crying and they went running to the blessed Valmiki, he of incisive intelligence. The boys honoured him by touching his feet and then together, they told him about the crying woman. ‘Blessed one, there is a woman here whom we have never seen before. She

Rama embraced Shatrughna and said, 'Do not grieve, hero. This does not become a warrior. It is not a matter of sadness for a king to live away. He needs to protect his people according to the dharma of the kshatriyas. You can come and visit me in Ayodhya now and then, best of men. But you must return to your own city. There is no doubt that you are as dear to me as life itself. But a king must protect his kingdom. Stay with me for five nights, Shatrughna. After that, you can return to your own city with your retainers, your soldiers and your vehicles.' Rama's words were righteous and appealed to reason. Shatrughna said in a sad voice, 'It shall be so!' As commanded, he stayed five nights with Rama and then made preparations to leave. He bade farewell to mighty Rama and Lakshmana and Bharata and mounted a large chariot. Lakshmana and Bharata followed him for a good distance and then he went onwards to his own city.

Sarga 64: The Death of the Brahmin's Son

Rama ruled the kingdom with his brothers and experienced happiness and felicity. One day, an elderly brahmin from the countryside came to the king's door, carrying his son's corpse. Overwhelmed by an immeasurable grief, he babbled as he wailed. 'My son, my son!' he cried and then he said, 'What misdeeds did I commit in my previous life that I now have to see my only son dead! Little boy, you were only five years old, you did not even become a young man. Your untimely death leaves me bereft. Grieving for you, there is no doubt that your mother and I shall soon die as well! I don't remember ever having spoken unlawfully, nor do I remember causing any harm. For what

misdeed, little one, did you, my own son, go to Yama's realm today, even before performing the funeral rites for your father? Never before in Rama's realm have I heard or seen anything as awful as this, this untimely death! There can be no doubt that Rama himself has done something terribly wrong.

'You, king, you are the reason for the death of this living creature. You, along with your brothers, shall have a long life, king. Mighty one, we have lived happily in your kingdom. But now, the realm of the great-souled Ikshvakus is without a protector. Rama has become responsible for his people and children are dying. In this perverted reign, the king's faults bring misfortune to his subjects. Common people suffer untimely deaths when it is the king who acts wrongly. When city dwellers and country dwellers are not controlled and are not corrected, the fear of death abounds. Without a doubt, this child has died because of the king's failures, whether in the city or in the country.'

And so the brahmin continued to criticize the king in different ways. Burning with grief, he embraced the body of his son.

Sarga 65: Narada's Counsel

Rama heard the brahmin's piteous wailing and he and others were overcome with sadness. Scorched by this sadness, he sent for his brothers and his ministers and the citizens. Eight brahmins—Markandeya and Maudgalya, Vamadeva and Kashyapa, Katyayana and Jabali, Gautama and Narada—entered along with Vasishtha, saying 'May you prosper!' to the king who was like a god. All of them, bulls among brahmin

sages, took their seats and the ministers and the citizens were greeted according to custom. When those men who blazed with effulgence were all seated, Rama said to them, 'A brahmin is crying.'

Hearing the disconsolate king, Narada said these auspicious words to him in the presence of all the brahmins. 'Listen to the reason for this boy's untimely death, king! Joy of the Raghus, do your duty when you have heard this! In the Krita Yuga, Rama, only brahmins became ascetics. Your majesty, non-brahmins never became ascetics under any circumstances. In that yuga, the shining brahmins were dominant, they were immortal and they could see the future. Then came the Treta Yuga, where the men of glory were kshatriyas, and they ruled as the brahmins had done before. The great-souled men of this age were not superior in their heroism and practise of austerities to those in the previous yuga. Brahmins had been superior to the kshatriyas, but in this yuga, both were equal in power. Because there was no perceptible difference between the brahmins and the kshatriyas, the system of the four castes was established everywhere. Adharma stood on one foot on the surface of the earth and the twice-born became apathetic because of their attachment to adharma. Lifespans diminished. Only those who were dedicated to truth and righteousness performed auspicious activities.

'In the Treta Yuga, both brahmins and kshatriyas performed austerities and all the other people served them—this was the highest dharma for vaishyas and shudras. Shudras, especially, had to worship everyone. Then, the second foot of adharma descends and so that becomes known as the Dwapara Yuga, the Age of the Second. In this Dwapara Yuga, decay will prevail and, bull among men, adharma and lawlessness will increase. In the Dwapara Yuga, vaishyas will take to ascetic practices. But, bull

among men, shudras cannot access this, the dharma of fierce asceticism. In the future, in the Kali Yuga, best of kings, men without caste shall take on great austerities and those born of shudra wombs will also perform penances. But it is the greatest unrighteousness, Rama, for a shudra to appropriate this in the Dwapara Yuga.

'Somewhere in your realm, your majesty, a shudra of corrupted intelligence has undertaken terrific ascetic practices and that is why this boy is dead. Tiger among kings, there is no doubt that it is the king who goes to hell if someone of perverted intelligence performs unrighteous deeds within the kingdom or in the city. You, yourself should, therefore, seek out where in your kingdom unrighteousness is being practised, tiger among men. And when you see it, you should correct it. Then dharma shall prosper and men will live longer. And, best of men, this boy will come back to life.'

Sarga 66: Rama Addresses the Problem

Hearing Narada's words, which were like nectar, Rama was flooded with great happiness and he said to Lakshmana, 'Go, my dear Lakshmana, and console that best of brahmins. Place the boy's body in a vat of oil. Let it be perfumed with the best of fragrant oils so that the body does not decay in any way. Act such that the boy's body is preserved, that it is not disturbed and suffers neither injury nor destruction.' Having instructed Lakshmana of the auspicious marks thus, Rama thought of Pushpaka and called it to himself. Divining Rama's intentions, gold-decorated Pushpaka arrived in his presence in an instant. Bowing, it said, 'I am here, best of kings. Strong-armed one,

your obedient servant is present!' Hearing Pushpaka's sweet words, the best of kings honoured the great sages and climbed into the vehicle. Taking his bow and quiver and a gleaming sword, he left the city in the care of Bharata and Lakshmana.

Rama searched here and there and then set off towards the west. Then, he went to the northern regions which are enclosed by the Himalayas. Not seeing even the smallest misdemeanour there, he went east and the best of men looked everywhere in that region. Rama, joy of the royal sages, then headed south and on the northern slopes of Mount Shaivala, he saw a huge lake. At the lake, glorious Rama saw a great ascetic, with his head hanging down, practising the most difficult austerities. Approaching the man who was performing the best of penances, Rama said to him, 'You are blessed, man of good vows! Man of great resolve, may your austerities increase. What womb are you from? I am Rama, son of Dasharatha and I ask out of curiosity. Great ascetic, do you wish to go to heaven or is it something else that you desire? I want to hear the purpose of your ascetic practice. If you are a brahmin, it is fortunate, if you are a kshatriya, you are hard to defeat. But you must tell me truthfully if you are a vaishya or a shudra!'

Sarga 67: Rama Kills Shambuka

When he heard the spirited Rama's words, the ascetic lifted his head and said, 'I, who stand here in fierce asceticism, am born of a shudra womb. I want to be like a god, Rama, and earn great fame by going to heaven in this very body. I am not lying, king, I desire heaven. Know me to be a shudra, Rama! My name is

Shambuka.' Even as the shudra was speaking, Rama drew his beautiful gleaming sword from its sheath and cut off his head. At that very moment, the boy came back to life.

Then lotus-eyed Rama went to the hermitage of Agastya. He bowed to him with humility and was filled with happiness. He honoured the great sage who blazed with his own effulgence and the great king, having accepted the appropriate rituals of hospitality, sat down. Then, that great ascetic, Kumbhayoni Agastya, supremely effulgent, said to him, 'Welcome, best of kings. It is my good fortune that you are here, Raghava. I have great regard for you, Rama, because of your many excellent virtues. As a guest, you are worthy of my worship and you are always in my heart. The gods told me you were coming here after killing the shudra. And that a brahmin's son had been brought back to life by your righteous actions. Stay the night here with me, Rama, and in the morning, you can return to your own city in Pushpaka.

'This ornament, my dear, has been fashioned by Vishvakarma. It is extraordinarily beautiful and it shines with its own lustre. Take it, Rama, and make me happy. It is said that one who gives away what has been gifted to him gains an even greater result. Therefore, I give you this with due ceremony, best of men. Please accept it.'

Rama took the ornament, which was unique and beautiful and shone like the sun, from the great-souled sage and asked about its divine origins. 'Where or how did you get this wondrous ornament, so beautifully wrought, brahmin? I ask out of curiosity because you are the repository of many marvellous things.'

The sage replied, 'Listen, Rama, to all that happened in the Treta Yuga.'

Sarga 68: The Story of the Corpse Eater

'In the past, in the Treta Yuga, there was a vast forest. It covered an entire one hundred yojanas in all directions and had no birds or animals. I went to that uninhabited forest, my dear, in order to practise the highest of austerities. I am not able to describe the beauty of that forest, with its pleasant and delicious roots and fruits and its many trees. There was a lake in the middle of the forest which was one yojana long. It was filled with blooming lotuses and it was free of moss. Its waters were delicious. It was always clean and calm and it was frequented by flocks of birds. There was a truly wondrous hermitage on its banks. Old and sacred, it had been abandoned by the ascetics. One night, during the summer, I stayed there, bull among men. In the morning, I went to the lake to perform rituals and bathe. I saw a corpse that seemed in good condition and had not spoiled in any way. Resplendent, it lay by the shores of the lake. I stood there, Rama, and thought for a while, wondering, "What could this be?"

'Soon, I saw a marvellous celestial vehicle. It was huge and yoked with swans and it moved as quickly as thought. Joy of the Raghus, a heavenly creature was in that vehicle. He was covered in divine ornaments and he was surrounded by apsaras who were singing and dancing and playing sweet musical instruments. Even as I watched, Rama, the divine being dismounted from the vehicle and devoured the corpse. After he had eaten his fill of meat and fat, he went down to the lake and began to wash himself. When he had cleansed himself in the prescribed way, he climbed back into the celestial vehicle. Best of men, I saw that man who seemed like a god, ascending and I said to him, "Who are you, sir? You resemble the gods, but your food is disgusting. Tell me, why did you eat this dead body? It is amazing that you

look like the gods but you eat this forbidden food. I want to hear more about this.”

Sarga 69: Shveta's Hunger

‘Appreciating my eloquence, the heavenly being joined his palms and said to me, “Because you asked, brahmin, listen to what happened—to that transgressive incident which caused both joy and sorrow. Long ago, the king of Vidarbha was my illustrious father. His name was Sudeva and that heroic man was renowned in the three worlds. He engendered two sons on his two wives, brahmin. I am known as Shveta and my younger brother is called Suratha. When my father died, the people crowned me king and I ruled in accordance with dharma. In this way, man of good vows, a full thousand years passed. I ruled and I protected my people according to dharma. And then, in the course of things, I learned something about my life. In my heart, I saw the time of my death and so I came to this dense forest, devoid of animals and birds. I anointed my brother king and embarked on the practise of austerities on the shores of this beautiful lake.

“For three thousand years, great sage, I engaged in this practise and then, I was able to reach Brahma's realm, which is the best of them all and hard to attain. But when I got to heaven, twice-born one, I was overcome with extreme hunger and thirst, so much that all my senses were greatly agitated. I went to Grandfather Brahma, lord of the three worlds, and I said to him, ‘Lord, your realm is free of hunger and thirst. I am still overcome by both. Of what acts is this a consequence? What is my food, Brahma, you need to tell me.’ The Grandfather said to me, ‘Son of Sudeva, your food will forever be your own sweet-tasting

flesh. When you were performing those exemplary austerities, you nourished only your own body. Wise Shveta, nothing rises from a seed that has not been sown. You attained heaven, but you gave nothing to the denizens of the forest. Child, of course you will be plagued by hunger and thirst. You will be sated when you eat the elixir of immortality that is your body, which was sustained by wholesome foods. When the great sage Agastya comes to the forest, you will be able to liberate yourself from this difficulty, Shveta. Dear one, he has the strength to save even troops of gods. Your hunger and thirst, mighty-armed one, will be as nothing to him.'

"Best of the twice-born, when I heard the words of that god of gods, I decided to eat my own body, however repulsive. For many years, brahmin, I have been eating this body. It never diminishes and I am satisfied. None but Agastya could have come to this forest, so release me from these troubles, twice-born one! Accept this ornament for saving me. Sage among brahmins, please be gracious to me."

'When I heard that sorry tale from the heavenly being, I accepted this best of ornaments from him as recompense for saving him. The moment I took the beautiful ornament, the previous human body was destroyed and the king was overjoyed. Satisfied and happy, he returned to heaven. This is the reason, Rama, that this ornament of wondrous beauty was given to me by that king who was Indra's equal.'

Sarga 70: Rama's Ancestor

Rama was filled with amazement when he heard that wondrous tale from Agastya and he continued to question the sage.