

THE
MYSTIC MILLIONAIRE
SERIES

GOD *is* FIRED

ANISH
RAKHEJA



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"Some see through the veil. Others worship the shadow."

Prologue

The question landed like a fist to the solar plexus.

"When did you fire God from your employment?"

Madhav's world tilted. Eight words. Eight fucking words that tore through fifty-five years of carefully constructed belief like it was tissue paper.

Fire God?

The phrase burned in his throat. When had the Almighty become his employee? When had he started treating the Divine like hired help that was useful when needed, dismissed when inconvenient? When had prayer become a performance review and faith, a contract with termination clauses?

His chest tightened. Because the answer was right there, wasn't it? Sitting in his gut like poison. He had fired God. Quietly. Efficiently. The way you let go of someone who's no longer delivering results.

Shiva waited. Still as death itself.

And Madhav realized he couldn't remember the last time he'd meant a single prayer.

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Divine Drama at the Temple Gate

An Hour Earlier...

Madhav stood at the temple gates, his arms crossed, his patience thin. He watched the endless parade of devotees with heads bowed, hands clasped, and eyes glazed with unshaken belief.

He exhaled, slow and dangerous, like a man about to single-handedly dismantle centuries of religious doctrine.

"This whole God business is the greatest scam in human history."

He spat the words out like an accusation, as if he had personally been swindled by the divine, as if the Eternal Himself owed him a refund with interest.

Before anyone could react, Chatty let out an exaggerated, theatrical gasp, the kind that could wake the dead, summon an exorcist, and trigger a soap opera plot twist all at once.

And then.

A mayhem.

A blur of movement, a sudden dramatic collapse, and in the blink of an eye, Chatty had thrown himself onto the ground, arms outstretched, face contorted in pure, unfiltered terror.

"OH, MERCIFUL LORD!" he wailed, his voice cracking under the weight of self-preservation and top-tier pettiness. "PLEASE DO NOT PUNISH ME FOR MY FRIEND'S BLASPHEMOUS

WORDS! FORGIVE HIM, FOR HE KNOWS NOT WHAT HE IS SAYING! AND REMEMBER, I AM YOUR MOST LOYAL DEVOTEE, AND I AM INNOCENT IN THIS MATTER! I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED YOU! I HAVE NEVER DOUBTED YOU! PROTECT ME, O BENEVOLENT GOD, AND IF YOU MUST SMITE SOMEONE, KINDLY DIRECT YOUR DIVINE WRATH ELSEWHERE!"

Madhav muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. "This is absurd."

He turned to Sid and Abhi, who were now watching Chatty with the same energy one reserves for observing a cat contemplating the mysteries of the universe. Half amused, half concerned, and entirely unsure whether enlightenment or chaos is about to unfold.

"What about you two?" Madhav pressed, his frustration creeping into dangerous territory. "Do you believe all this? What's your stance on God?"

Sid let out a slow breath, shaking his head like a man arguing with gravity.

"To be honest? Madhav, I'm stuck in the middle. I've been oscillating between faith and reason like a malfunctioning pendulum, especially since moving to Singapore. My wife and I still go to the temple, but if I'm being truthful, half the time I'm praying, the other half I'm mentally fact-checking the scriptures."

He let out a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of every unanswered prayer.

"The heart craves faith and wants to believe there's a grand design, a benevolent force orchestrating the chaos. But the

mind? The mind is relentless, a hammer to every contradiction. For example, an all-powerful, all-loving God, yet suffering flows like an unsolicited subscription service - non-refundable, non-cancellable. The explanations? Either blind faith or theological gymnastics. We're told His plan is beyond us, too vast and complex for our limited minds to comprehend. How convenient. Or worse, that suffering is a sacred stepping stone to growth. Enlightenment, they say, demands fire. But perhaps awakening shouldn't come wrapped in existential wreckage."

Sid stopped and rubbed his temples, his voice dropping to something more vulnerable.

"Every justification sounds less like divine wisdom and more like a desperate lawyer scrambling to defend why an omnipotent being insists on running reality like a glitch-ridden beta version of a cosmic experiment. Yet, when I stop believing completely, something inside me empties. Not enlightenment, just emptiness, like a God-shaped hole in my heart. It seems that even when I want Him to go away, He still haunts me."

Chatty, who was now fully committed to his Oscar-worthy performance, had upped the ante. Not only had he escalated to chanting mantras, but he was now strategically placing extra prostrations, just in case the first ones had not been logged into the divine redemption system.

Abhi shot him a look, half concern, half resignation- before sighing and picking up the conversation where Sid left off.

"I was raised on prayer like some people are raised on caffeine. Morning, evening, no exceptions. Whenever we were traveling, my parents would somehow locate the nearest temple, church, gurudwara, or mosque, like human GPS for divine intervention.

Did it give me a sense of security? Absolutely. Knowing there was an all-powerful presence watching over us felt comforting."

His voice grew quieter, more honest.

"I may be clinging to something irrational, Madhav, but frankly, if it keeps the cosmic-level crisis at bay, who am I to argue? Some nights when I can't sleep, when the weight of existence feels too heavy, I still whisper those childhood prayers. Maybe it's weakness, maybe it's wisdom. I don't know anymore."

Madhav scoffed, but there was something brittle in his voice now.

"Do you seriously believe that this false sense of security is helping you, Abhi? If anything, clinging to such childish beliefs is setting you up for a rude awakening!"

He threw his hands up like a tortured prophet fed up with human ignorance, but his eyes held a flicker of something else, something that looked almost like pain.

"Let me say it again. The concept of God is a delusion, created by scheming, unscrupulous individuals who prey on the weak-minded and gullible, just like our dear Chatty over here."

"HEY!" Chatty snapped, deeply offended but still mid-prostration, refusing to break character.

Madhav ignored him completely. His voice rose, crackling with sheer indignation, the kind only achieved when one man believes himself to be the sole possessor of truth standing amidst fools.

"They're like vultures, circling above, waiting to swoop in and tear their victims apart! What's wrong with you guys? Can't you fucking see reality for what it truly is?"

Sid, who had been watching Chatty's increasingly unhinged religious displays, turned back to Madhav, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, relax. You're getting way too worked up about this."

Sid's gaze shifted, his tone laced with something just sharp enough to cut through the pretense.

"It's strange, though. I remember back in college, you were incredibly devout. You used to visit the Goddess Saraswati temple almost daily. What happened to that guy?"

Madhav froze.

The temple sounds faded. The distant chanting became white noise. For a moment, just one fleeting second, he was twenty years old again, standing before a marble deity with marigold garlands, his hands pressed together in reverence. Over the years, cracks appeared in faith... hands still folded, but first in doubt, then desperation, and finally defiance.

The frustration. The certainty. The righteous fury of every injustice.

It all flickered.

His lips parted, and for a heartbeat, vulnerability leaked through the cracks of his armor. The memory of sleepless nights spent bargaining with the divine, and despite every offering, every tear, every desperate plea, prayers lay broken,

And then.

RISING FROM THE GROUND LIKE A SAINT RETURNED FROM THE DEAD, Chatty squinted at Madhav, rubbing his

chin like a detective unraveling the final twist of a mind-blowing mystery.

"You know, Madhav, Voltaire once said

'God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh.'"

He paused, brushing dust off his clothes with theatrical dignity. Then, he leaned in, locking eyes like a man who had just checkmated his opponent in a game Madhav didn't realize he was playing.

"I have no idea if he was right, but I do know that if God is up there, watching this whole mess unfold, He's probably laughing His divine ass off at you right now. The real question is - are you laughing, or are you still crying?"

The words hung in the air like incense, heavy and lingering.

Sid chuckled, but it was gentle, understanding.

Abhi smiled, but his eyes held compassion.

And against all odds.

CHATTIUS MAXIMUS HAD WON THIS ROUND.

For the first time in a long time, Madhav hesitated. The anger was still there, but underneath it, something else stirred, something that felt dangerously close to the faith he thought he'd buried forever.

He looked at his friends, at the temple gates, at the devotees still streaming past with their unwavering belief, and for just a moment, he wondered if the joke was on him after all.

From Sages to Salesmen:

Rishikesh – A spiritual Disneyland

A few minutes of silence, and then Madhav let out a long, exasperated sigh, rubbing his forehead like a man personally burdened with the downfall of civilization.

"You want to know what's really bothering me?"

He gestured toward the valley below, his movements sharp, deliberate, almost accusatory.

"Look at it. Just look."

The group followed his gaze, staring down at the chaotic mess sprawled across Rishikesh. Despite the early morning, they could see Neon-lit yoga studios with names like "Cosmic Chakra Palace" and "Enlightenment Express" sitting wedged between overpriced wellness retreats advertising "Digital Detox Packages" in Comic Sans font. A massive billboard for "Instant Nirvana in 7 Days or Your Money Back" loomed over a cluster of souvenir shops hawking plastic Buddha statues made in China. The whole scene looked like someone had taken ancient wisdom and run it through a blender with late-stage capitalism.

Madhav's voice was edged with something sharper than anger - contempt.

"Rishikesh, once the abode of the gods, now just another playground for greed and decay. They call these places sacred,

yet even God cannot protect His own house. The city crumbles under the weight of exploitation, the holy waters choke on waste, and the faith sold here is nothing more than currency in a marketplace of blind devotion."

His words carried the weight of betrayal, the kind reserved for idols turned to dust, for faith shattered by those who were supposed to uphold it.

"If God Himself cannot guard His own turf, then faith in such crumbling ramparts is not merely misplaced, it is pathetic - a farce. A fiction spun for the cowardly, too terrified to admit that divinity has long fled its desecrated temples, leaving behind only the echoes of prayers unanswered."

Madhav took a sharp breath, and for a moment, his voice softened with something that might have been grief.

"For centuries, yogis, mystics, sages walked these streets seeking solitude, wisdom, transcendence. The silence here? Sacred. Nature itself felt like it was guiding you toward transformation."

Then, like a gut punch hitting at full force, he added:

"But now?"

His voice dropped, laced with acid.

"Now, it's a business. A cash cow. Exploited and repackaged for gullible tourists desperate to purchase enlightenment, whether through wisdom or weed."

Abhi frowned, absorbing Madhav's frustration. "But isn't Rishikesh still considered the yoga capital of the world?"

Madhav let out a humorless laugh.

"That's a whole different ugliness."

"The global obsession with yoga has turned this place into a spiritual theme park. Yoga studios popping up like mushrooms, each promising enlightenment through overpriced courses designed for lost souls clinging to anything that sounds vaguely profound and ancient."

And then he really found his rhythm.

"And if that wasn't absurd enough, let me tell you about one of the most ridiculous things I've come across here."

Sid raised an eyebrow. "Oh, this should be good."

Madhav leaned in, as if revealing classified information about humanity's decline.

"A few months ago, I passed by one of these dubious studios and saw what looked like a restaurant menu displayed behind glass. Naturally, I stopped to read."

Chatty perked up instantly, sensing incoming material for peak sarcasm.

"Turns out, they were selling spiritual practices the same way restaurants sell food. The chef's special? A sampler platter of Buddhist meditation techniques - *Samatha*, *Vipassana*, *Anapanasati* - all carefully seasoned with mystical jargon and garnished with a premium price tag."

Sid let out a sharp laugh. "You're joking."

Madhav raised a hand. "Oh, I am not."

"Not feeling Buddhist? No problem! You could order a main course featuring everything from *Iyengar*, *Power*, *Ashtanga*, *Astral*, or *Yin yoga*, served hot with Instagram filters and a side dish of holotropic breathwork. Can't decide? Mix, match, mash it up

for a spirituality à la carte, seasoned to taste and padded by the thickness of your wallet. And when the mats wear out, don't worry, they'll certify you to open your own yoga diner."

Chatty leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

"Hold up. What about dessert?"

Sid shook his head. "Chatty, you've been whining about hunger since morning."

Abhi smirked. "Yeah, tell us. Did they offer yogic desserts?"

Madhav deadpanned.

"Oh, absolutely. The dessert? A Kundalini Awakening. Topped with a sprinkle of mysterious serpentine energy, served at an additional charge, of course."

Silence.

Then, Sid cracked first. Abhi followed. And Chatty? Chatty was now barely able to breathe from laughing too hard.

But Madhav wasn't finished.

"And for those wanting something truly special, they had a limited-edition deluxe offer."

Chatty clapped his hands together. "Hit me with it."

Madhav sighed, shaking his head like a man utterly defeated by human absurdity.

"An astrological consultation with the option to purchase G&R at a discounted price."

Abhi blinked. "G&R? Guns & Roses?"

Madhav let out a dark chuckle, scratching the back of his neck.

"No. Here in Rishikesh, G&R stands for Gems & Rudraksha."

A beat.

Then all four erupted into laughter.

Even Madhav couldn't help himself. For a moment, his anger dissolved into something lighter, though the sadness underneath remained. The sadness of a man who had once believed in the sacred and now watched it being sold by the pound.

Cosmic Contractors and Celestial Scams

Abhi turned to Madhav again, curiosity flickering in his eyes. "Speaking of astrology, do you believe in it? Is it a science or superstition?"

Madhav sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "That's... complicated. I've seen enough frauds to fill a stadium, but I've also had one experience that completely scrambled my understanding."

"Frauds first?" Chatty leaned forward, grinning. "I love a good scam story."

"Oh, you'll love this one." Madhav's voice turned bitter. "Most astrologers I've encountered are roadside mercenaries wielding fear like a weapon. Their business model is beautifully simple: the more you scare, the more you squeeze."

He gestured dramatically. "You walk in seeking guidance, and they hand you a laundry list of celestial threats. 'Saturn is destroying your career,' 'Mercury retrograde is sabotaging your relationships,' 'Jupiter demands this gemstone or you'll dissolve into cosmic dust.'"

Chatty suddenly went pale. "Wait... that sounds familiar."

Madhav paused, noticing Chatty's expression. "Why? What happened?"

"Well..." Chatty shifted uncomfortably. "I may have visited an astrologer in Mumbai recently who told me my Saturn period is running, and that's why everything in my life is collapsing. All my planets are stuck on one side of some dreaded axis, creating cosmic imbalance."

The group stared at him.

"Let me guess," Madhav said slowly, "he first examined your chart and immediately shook his head like a builder surveying the foundations of a house that's about to collapse?"

"YES! How did you..."

"Then listed a series of impending disasters, making sure you understood how terrible your fate was unless you took urgent corrective measures?"

"Exactly! Are you psychic?"

"And finally offered expensive solutions to transform your horrible destiny into a wonderful one?"

Chatty's eyes widened. "He recommended a one-faced Rudraksha set in gold! Incredibly rare, but he knew someone in Nepal who could get one for just..." He took a dramatic breath. "Four thousand two hundred dollars!"

The silence that followed was deafening.

Sid stared at him. "You're a builder, Chatty."

"So?"

"You literally construct buildings. You understand foundations, structural integrity, load-bearing capacity..." Sid gestured helplessly. "And you just paid four grand to fix the foundation of your birth chart?"

"My planetary alignment is unstable!" Chatty protested. "I had no choice!"

Abhi couldn't resist. "Tell me, when you design a building, do you consult the planets about where to place the support beams?"

"That's different!"

"Is it though?" Abhi grinned. "Because right now, your financial foundation is looking pretty shaky."

Madhav shook his head, his earlier anger now replaced by amused disbelief. "Chatty, you literally spent yesterday lecturing me about getting three quotes before hiring any contractor. Yet you handed over four thousand dollars to the first cosmic contractor you met?"

"The planets don't wait for quotes, Madhav!"

"Neither do con artists," Sid muttered.

Chatty looked around desperately. "You guys don't understand! My next construction project could be cursed! Every building I work on might crumble under planetary wrath! It'll be demolition before construction!"

"Chatty," Madhav said gently, "if your buildings crumble, it won't be because of Saturn. It'll be because you're too busy staring at the stars to check if your concrete mix is proper."

The group erupted in laughter, even Chatty eventually joining in despite himself.

"Alright, alright," Chatty conceded, throwing his hands up. "Maybe I got a little carried away. But seriously, Madhav, you said you had a different experience?"

Sid's eyes narrowed, his tone turning serious. "Hold on. You're willing to dismantle divine intelligence behind the universe, but you put faith in planetary alignments determining personal destiny? You can't tear down temples with one hand and draw star charts with the other. What's the real difference between blind belief in a bearded god and blind belief in a birth chart?"

Madhav paused, acknowledging the contradiction. "Fair point. I reject blind faith because I've witnessed the futility of lip-service prayers. But this astrologer in Delhi..." He struggled for words. "He challenged everything I thought I knew about the field."

"Tell us more," Chatty said, his usual joking tone replaced by genuine curiosity. "What made him different from my Mumbai guy?"

"His approach was purely analytical. No vague predictions, no theatrical warnings, no gemstone sales pitches. Just cold, rigorous reasoning." Madhav's voice carried a note of wonder. "He explained astrology not as mystical fortune-telling, but as a framework for understanding natural tendencies, patterns in human behavior influenced by cosmic energies."

Sid raised an eyebrow. "Cosmic energies still sounds like a spiritual sales pitch."

"I thought so too, until he broke it down." Madhav leaned forward. "Science today measures cosmic radiation, electromagnetic fields, solar energies. Our bodies are energy systems at the cellular level. When two energy systems interact, there's always an effect. He argued that ancient sages understood this, documenting how planetary alignments influence human nature, not by deciding our fate, but by shaping tendencies."

"Tendencies?" Abhi asked.

"Think about it. If you knew your inherent patterns, you could make better decisions. Choose careers aligned with your strengths, select partners whose energy complements yours, and address health risks proactively. This astrologer had spent decades testing the repeatability of such insights."

Chatty tilted his head thoughtfully. "If I understand what you're saying, astrology isn't about what will happen to me, but about... understanding myself?"

Madhav looked at him with new respect. "Exactly. That's precisely what he argued. It's not about predicting the future, it's about understanding who you are and how you naturally respond to situations."

"Unlike your Mumbai guy who just wanted to sell you cosmic insurance," Sid added with a smirk.

"Hey!" Chatty protested. "At least I'm cosmically insured now!"

"Against what? Bad construction reviews?" Abhi grinned.

Sid remained skeptical but thoughtful. "Even if I accept the energy interaction premise, how do we separate genuine insight from confirmation bias? How do we test it?"

"That's what fascinated me," Madhav replied. "This astrologer kept detailed records. He'd make specific behavioral predictions based on charts, then follow up years later to verify accuracy. His hit rate was unsettling in the best possible way."

"Unlike my guy who just hit my bank account," Chatty muttered.

The conversation settled into contemplative silence until Chatty suddenly looked around with rising panic. "Speaking of cosmic guidance, where is Shiva? First, he drags us out of bed at the

crack of dawn with promises of spiritual awakening, and now he's mysteriously vanished, leaving us stranded on the verge of starvation!"

Sid glanced at Chatty's well-rounded physique and smirked. "Chatty, I can see your body deposits expanding at the same healthy pace as your bank deposits. I think you'll survive."

"HEY!" Chatty shot back. "I'm not fat! I'm just... cosmically influenced to retain energy!"

"Is that what your astrologer told you?" Abhi grinned.

"No, but it sounds better than admitting I stress-eat whenever Saturn glares at me!"

Before the roasting could continue, Sid pointed across the street. "There! Shiva's waving at us from that roadside stall."

"This brings me back to your original question about authenticity," Madhav said as they prepared to cross the street. "Rishikesh is supposed to be the yoga capital of the world, but I wonder what we'll actually find there."

"My Singapore friends have traveled there for an authentic experience," Sid added. "Please tell me it's not all just elaborate scams like Chatty's Mumbai astrologer."

Madhav's expression grew thoughtful. "That's the fascinating paradox. Despite the invasion of commercialization, fake gurus advertising enlightenment like discount electronics, spiritual tourism circus, litter choking sacred ghats, Rishikesh still harbors genuine treasures."

He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Real teachers exist, tucked away from the marketplace spirituality. They don't advertise, don't promise instant enlightenment, don't sell

overpriced prayer beads. They just... teach. The way it's been done for centuries."

"And Shiva found one of these rare masters?" Abhi asked.

"Apparently. I'm genuinely excited to meet him. After years of encountering spiritual fraudsters, finding authenticity would be refreshing."

"Like finding a contractor who actually finishes on time and under budget?" Chatty offered.

"Exactly like that," Madhav laughed. "Mythical, but theoretically possible."

As they crossed the street toward Shiva and the promise of early morning tea, Chatty muttered, "Easy for you to say. You didn't spend four thousand dollars learning that your cosmic blueprint is defective."

"No," Madhav replied, "but I'm about to spend the next few days learning what authentic spiritual guidance actually looks like. Should be interesting."

The anticipation of meeting a genuine teacher, after discussing so many frauds, hung in the air, promising, mysterious, and infinitely more valuable than any overpriced gemstone.

"I suppose," Abhi said finally, "the real question isn't whether astrology or spirituality is true or false, but whether we can separate the wheat from the chaff."

"And maybe," Chatty added with uncharacteristic wisdom, "the best predictions aren't about what's coming, but about what's already inside us. Even if it costs four thousand dollars to figure that out."

The Silver Jubilee Reunion that Sparked a Quest

Madhav, Sid, Abhi, and Chatty, four men bound by memories of youth, ambition, and the unforgiving march of time, had once walked the halls of IIT Roorkee, one of India's most prestigious engineering institutions. It is located in Uttarakhand, a northern Indian state known for its breathtaking Himalayan landscapes, sacred pilgrimage sites, and an ancient spiritual heritage.

Since graduation, the four had carved out enviable success stories — bureaucracy, financial markets, construction empires, and the world of technology. On paper, they had won. And yet...

Success had proven to be nothing more than an illusion, a finish line that kept moving further ahead, never truly reached. No matter how fast they ran, the fear remained. Fear of falling behind, of being forgotten, of discovering too late that the victory meant nothing. They had outrun competitors, conquered milestones, and amassed wealth, yet the hollowness remained, clawing at them like an unseen predator. Their calendars were full, but their hearts were empty.

And Chatty, with his unrelenting wit, never let them forget the bitter truth:

"We might win the rat race, but at the end of the day, we're still rats."

It was the silent terror buried beneath promotions and paychecks. The whisper that asked, "What now?" What's next? Will any of this ever mean something?

Sid had learned this lesson the hard way. Six months ago, he'd been riding high as a Singapore-based investment banker until his company's merger with a US conglomerate left him jobless at fifty-two. But the real gut punch came three weeks later, when his fifteen-year-old son Angad answered his call with four words: "Dad, I'm busy, bye." The line went dead. Sid stared at his phone, realizing he'd become a stranger to his own child, a casualty of climbing ladders that led nowhere meaningful.

Chatty's crisis had arrived in the form of a WhatsApp message from Bali. His twenty-something trophy wife, Mansi, posing with a group of airline friends, captioned: "New Year, New Life, New Me!" The comments below were filled with hearts and fire emojis from men whose names Chatty didn't recognize. He'd built an empire of concrete and steel, but somehow couldn't build a connection with the woman who shared his bed.

Abhi, steady and grounded, worked in an IT firm and had married Joy, his college sweetheart. On the surface, everything looked perfect. But perfection, he'd discovered, was its own prison. Somewhere along the way, the fire had died. The passion that once burned between him and Joy had been reduced to polite conversations over morning tea and mechanical routines that felt more like cohabitation than love. Life had become a bland, lifeless affair - predictable, safe, and utterly devoid of the spark that once made him feel alive.

Desperate for answers, he'd sought out a guru in Haridwar, hoping to find meaning in the spiritual traditions his

grandmother had cherished. The guru, draped in saffron and wisdom, had diagnosed his problem with startling clarity: "*Beta*, you are at the crossroads of life. It is time to transition from sex to spirituality. These carnal desires, these earthly pleasures, are hindrances to spiritual progress. Suppress these energies, channel them upward, and give up the pleasures of life. Only then will you find true peace."

The advice had made sense in the moment. But months later, sitting across from Joy at their anniversary dinner, he'd realized that suppressing desire hadn't brought him closer to God; it had only made him more distant from everything that made life worth living. Success and stability had failed to soothe this itch, this gnawing sense that he was sleepwalking through existence.

Madhav's wake-up call had come courtesy of the new minister, who'd bypassed him to promote a junior officer, a man who'd spent more time on WhatsApp forwards than policy papers. Twenty-three years of dedicated service, and for what? To watch incompetence, get rewarded while merit gets sidelined? That night, he'd stood on his balcony in Dehradun, looking out at the lights of the city, wondering if his life's work had been nothing more than bureaucratic theater.

It was at their silver jubilee reunion that the question finally surfaced. They'd been sitting in the campus café, nursing their third round of drinks, when the conversation had inevitably drifted to their various crises. The usual bravado had worn thin after twenty-five years, and for once, they weren't performing success; they were admitting failure.

"You know what the problem is?" Madhav had said, swirling his whiskey. "We've been chasing the wrong things our entire lives."

"So, what are the right things?" Sid had asked.

The question hung in the air. And then, almost as if the universe had been waiting for this moment, someone had whispered:

"Does God exist?"

None of them could remember who'd said it first. But suddenly, it was the only question that mattered.

The reunion had also brought them back into contact with Shiva, their batchmate, whom they had nicknamed *"The Mystic Millionaire."* The moment they saw him, all four were struck by something indefinable. A radiance, a shine that seemed to emanate from within. Gone was the driven, stressed entrepreneur they remembered. In his place stood a man who looked like he'd found something the rest of them were still searching for.

Shiva had exited the business world completely, hospitality and real estate empires that had once consumed his every waking moment. When pressed about his past, he would simply smile and offer his trademark response: *"Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future. The question isn't where you've been, but where you're going. Yesterday is a canceled check, tomorrow is a promissory note, but today? Today is cash in hand."*

He never talked about what had driven him away from the corporate world, never explained the transformation that had left him glowing with an inner peace that seemed almost otherworldly. Instead, he'd redirect conversations toward the present moment, toward possibilities rather than regrets.

Now he runs a center near Delhi dedicated to measuring and improving Integrated Health Quotient (IHQ), a framework

blending ancient Indic wisdom and cutting-edge science, pushing the boundaries of spiritual traditions to assess human well-being across five parameters: physical, social, mental, intellectual, and spiritual.

His work was not blind faith. It was research, analysis, and refinement. And in him, Madhav saw an approach to spirituality that didn't demand suspending reasoning but invited exploration. Though he couldn't shake the feeling that behind Shiva's luminous present lay a past that had burned away everything unnecessary, leaving only this distilled essence of a man who had found his answer.

And so, over that reunion dinner, the idea of a God-finding adventure was born.

"Look," Shiva had said, his eyes carrying the weight of his own journey, "I can't promise you'll find God. But I can promise you'll find something. Maybe that's enough."

Madhav had arranged their journey to Uttarakhand, the fabled abode of the gods, and Shiva suggested an ashram outside Rishikesh as their destination. The group had stopped near a temple for tea and snacks, stretching their legs after the winding Himalayan roads. Shiva ventured off to explore the food stalls, while Chatty, true to form, had dragged the others toward the temple.

The temple structure stood stoically on the roadside, a gateway leading to one of the four sacred pilgrimage sites - *Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri*. Etymologically, the word '*dham*' meant an abode. A dwelling place for the divine. Har (Shiva) presided over Kedarnath, while Hari (Vishnu) ruled Badrinath. The mighty rivers, Ganga and Yamuna, were

worshipped in Gangotri and Yamunotri, their waters believed to cleanse past sins, offering redemption in ways the modern world never could.

The group moved away from the temple towards Shiva. Below them, the valley stretched endlessly, the Himalayas rising in solemn majesty. If there were ever a place where one might hear the voice of God, it was here.

But did He speak at all?

Or was the search itself the answer?

As they prepared to continue their journey, each man carried his own baggage, not just the physical kind, but the emotional weight of lives half-lived, dreams deferred, and questions that demanded answers.

The adventure was just beginning, but already, they sensed that whatever they found in the mountains would change them forever.

Whether that change would be salvation or simply another beautiful illusion remained to be seen.

The Silence of the Himalayas and The Noise Within

All four friends approached the small eatery, the rhythmic sound of clanging utensils and bubbling tea filling the morning stillness.

Shiva stood by a makeshift table tucked against a rusted railing, waving them over with an easy familiarity. He wore a faded navy sweater layered over a simple cotton shirt, the sleeves slightly creased, as though he'd rolled them up earlier and forgotten to smooth them down. His hair, thick and slightly tousled, looked like it had been combed by hand - good enough for him, if not for a mirror. There was no performance in his presence. He carried himself with an unassuming assurance, like someone who had no desire to prove anything and nothing to defend. His smile wasn't wide, but it stayed, resting at the edge of his mouth, as if he already knew the punchline to a joke they hadn't heard yet.

"I found a good spot," Shiva said, as he gestured toward steaming cups of chai. "Strong, *masala-infused* and just the way it should be."

Chatty wasted no time, grabbing a cup and taking a long sip, his entire body responding as if he'd just been brought back from the brink of starvation. "Ah..., this is what I needed," he sighed, his eyes closing in utter satisfaction.

Madhav chuckled. "I swear, Chatty, food and drink are your true religion."

"Guilty as charged!" Chatty grinned, holding his cup up like an offering. "This is enlightenment, my friends. *Masala Chai* is the one eternal truth that never disappoints."

As they settled in, the conversation drifted back to their journey.

"There's something about these mountains," Abhi murmured, rubbing his hands together for warmth. "They feel ancient, like silent witnesses to countless seekers who've passed through here before us."

His voice held a quiet ache, as if he, too, was hoping the mountains might remember something he'd forgotten—something once tender, now distant.

Sid exhaled, watching his breath turn to mist in the cool air, his voice barely above a whisper. "It's as if the Himalayas hold secrets just beyond our understanding, waiting to be heard."

He said it like a man who'd been asking questions for years, but only now realized he hadn't been listening to the answers, especially the ones spoken in his son's silence.

Madhav glanced at the sun-kissed peaks, the light shifting like a celestial brushstroke over the rugged terrain. "Maybe it's not the mountains keeping the secrets," he mused. "Maybe it's us, too distracted, too restless to listen."

His words lingered, like a confession wrapped in metaphor. The kind spoken by someone who'd spent years chasing purpose in policy, only to find his soul tugging at a different kind of service.

None of them responded. They didn't need to.

The mountains had already heard them.

After a few minutes of silence, Abhi looked at Shiva. "It's fascinating how people keep returning to these places generation after generation," Abhi mused, wrapping his hands around his cup for warmth. "Seeking guidance, peace, or just something they can't find elsewhere."

"That's because faith and hope are powerful motivators," Shiva remarked. "Even sceptics find themselves drawn to something greater than themselves. Call it energy, divinity, or simply human longing, it's all part of the same search."

Sid, who had been gazing at the sunlight cascading over the peaks, finally spoke, his voice carrying the weight of something unspoken. "So, do you think we'll find what we're looking for?"

Shiva, tracing slow circles along the rim of his cup, smiled. "That depends. Are we searching for answers, or are we simply seeking validation of what we already believe?"

He spoke, not to answer, but to invite. "You know," he said softly, "Rilke once wrote something that's stayed with me -

'Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart... and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a very foreign tongue.'"

Shiva paused, letting the silence breathe. "We keep chasing answers like they're prizes. But maybe they're not meant to be hunted. Maybe they're meant to arrive only when we're ready, when we've stopped grasping."

He looked at each of them, his voice low and steady. "Questions aren't obstacles. They're invitations. If we hold them gently, like

lovers asking for truth, maybe the answers don't need to be found. Maybe they just... unfold."

The group fell quiet. Not because they had nothing to say, but because something had just been said that needed space to echo.

The sun climbed higher, casting golden light across the slopes. And in that warmth, the questions didn't feel heavy anymore.

They felt sacred.

And then, Shiva spoke again, weaving a story into the stillness.

"Once, a young monk went to his master, troubled. 'Master,' he said, 'I have been meditating for years, yet I do not understand the nature of existence. I need answers.'"

"The master nodded and handed the young monk a seed. 'Plant this,' he said, 'and come back when you understand.'"

"Confused but obedient, the monk planted the seed. Days passed, then weeks, then months. He watered it, cared for it, watched it grow, but he saw no answer in its unfolding."

"One day, frustrated beyond measure, he returned to the master. 'Master, the seed has grown into a tree, but I still do not understand. You said this would show me!'"

"The master smiled. 'And what did you see?'"

"The monk sighed. 'It changed slowly. It needed water, sunlight, and care. It did not force itself to grow; it simply unfolded, moment by moment.'"

"The master nodded. 'And now, tell me, did the tree struggle for an answer? Or did it simply become what it was meant to be?'"

"The monk froze."

"In that instant, he understood. The search itself had been an obstruction. Instead of allowing himself to grow, he had demanded answers, forgetting that realization unfolds on its own, just like the seed becoming a tree."

Shiva's voice was a whisper against the vast silence. "The more we chase answers, the faster they vanish. But when we sit with the mystery, clarity arrives - not as something captured, but as something given."

Sid exhaled, his gaze sinking into his cup, searching for reflections of thoughts too restless to hold. "So... the search itself is the trap?"

Shiva watched the sunlight stretch across the mountains. "I think the problem is not the search but the grasping. A flower does not bloom because we pull apart its petals. It opens when it is ready."

Madhav, his voice as soft as dusk settling over the hills, murmured, "Maybe... instead of searching for answers, we learn to *stay with the question*."

Silence followed. They had spent their lives chasing conclusions, clawing at certainty, mistaking answers for something to be seized. But here, beneath the vast and untamed sky, they found themselves resting, not in knowledge, but in wonder.

God is Fired

The morning should have been perfect. Himalayan peaks pierced the sky like broken glass, the Ganges carved through the valley below, and temple bells rang out across the town. Everything in its place. Everything eternal.

The crisp morning air carried the scent of damp earth and dewy grass, curling around their ankles like a whisper. The golden rays of the rising sun painted the Himalayan peaks in hues of amber and rose, while the valleys below remained wrapped in a delicate mist, slowly unraveling as daylight took hold. There was an undeniable stillness here. A silence that spoke more than words ever could.

Then the SUV ripped through it all.

Music blasting. Engine screaming. Teenagers, drunk on their own noise.

"Fucking idiots," Chatty muttered, knuckles white around his teacup.

Sid laughed. "Just kids being kids."

Then he turned to Madhav. "But I've been wondering. What happened to your faith? You used to pray every day in college."

Chatty's face went pale. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Can we NOT anger the Big Guy upstairs while I'm sitting here? I've got enough problems without lightning bolts, thank you very much!"

Madhav smiled as if remembering something long buried. "Don't worry. I'm not going to say anything that'll get you in trouble upstairs. This is just about me and my... situation."

He turned to Sid, his expression carefully controlled, as if the words were too sharp to be thrown casually.

"You're right. I used to be deeply religious. I prayed at the college temple every single day. I truly believed it was God's blessings that got me through the civil service exams, which shaped my success. I felt His presence guiding every step I took until the day He abandoned me."

The air shifted, not violently, but with the intensity of an axe raised before the fall.

Shiva, who had been watching him closely, finally spoke. His voice was precise and unshaken. "I can imagine that must have been painful. But if you're comfortable, may I ask what made you conclude that God abandoned you?"

Madhav hesitated, then...

He spoke.

Of loss.

Of betrayal.

Of prayers whispered into the void, never answered.

Of nights spent begging for a sign. ANYTHING. But receiving only silence.

He had felt the first betrayal when his mother fell ill. The sickness crept into her bones, robbing her of her laughter, her strength, her presence. Doctors could not name it. Could not fix it. An unknown illness, they said. Words that meant nothing, explanations that answered nothing.

She had been devout. A woman of faith, a woman who had whispered prayers at dawn, fasted during holy days, and lit lamps with unwavering belief.

And yet. Where was her God?

Nowhere.

Then, weeks later, his father died. Grief-stricken, hollowed out by loss, he took the road one evening, seeking solace in movement. He never made it home. A crash. A call. A body covered in white.

Two deaths. Back-to-back.

God could have intervened, could have saved one of them. Both of them.

But He didn't.

Still, Madhav clung to faith.

He tried.

He poured himself into prayer, rituals, and hollow words of religious texts that promised hope.

But hope never came.

Then, his career. The civil service job he had bled for, sacrificed sleep for, and poured his very soul into. A promotion rightfully his, earned through years of sweat and sacrifice, was given to someone else. His minister overlooked him. Ignored him.

Again, Madhav turned to prayer.

Once more, silence greeted him. Not even an answer. Not even a sign. There was only the unbearable, deafening VOID.

That was the final blow. The breakpoint.

Madhav's voice had quieted, the weight of his disbelief laid bare before them. He didn't speak with anger anymore, just exhaustion. Years of unanswered prayers, of watching suffering go unaddressed, had hollowed out his faith until only silence remained.

Shiva had listened without interruption, his gaze steady, his presence unmoving. The others waited, unsure whether comfort or confrontation would follow.

Then, after a long pause, because sometimes, the sharpest truths arrive only after the softest silences, Shiva spoke - his voice calm, precise, and sharp enough to cut bone.

"Madhav, I am not surprised you fired God."

Madhav blinked, momentarily thrown off.

Shiva continued, his tone clinical. Brutal.

"You warned Him. Gave Him chances. Not once, multiple times. Yet, He failed to perform basic job functions. Termination was the only logical response.

Good. That you fired Him."

Madhav didn't respond. His gaze dropped. Just a quiet descent. Like dusk folding into itself.

The rest of the friends stared at Madhav and Shiva, stunned into silence as the words continued to pour and hit like a physical blow.

"You created an employee in your head. Someone you never actually hired. Gave Him tasks He never accepted. Set deadlines He never acknowledged. Then got angry when He didn't show up for a job He never applied for."

Madhav's hands started trembling, ears pounding.

"The question isn't whether God failed you, Madhav. The question is whether you ever actually knew who you were dealing with in the first place."

The final words landed like a hammer demolishing the mirror of assumptions.

Madhav sat frozen, the color draining from his face as if Shiva's voice had pulled the blood from his veins. His hands continued to tremble, resting on his knees. The silence that followed wasn't empty; it was charged, like the air before lightning splits the sky.

Sid's eyes widened, his breath caught mid-inhale. He looked from Shiva to Madhav, then back again, as if trying to confirm that what he'd just heard wasn't some elaborate metaphor. "Holy hell..." he whispered, barely audible.

Abhi leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, his fingers interlocked so tightly his knuckles turned white. He didn't speak. He couldn't. The words had pierced something in him, too, something he hadn't realized was vulnerable.

Chatty's mouth hung slightly open, eyes locked on Madhav with a mix of disbelief and something softer, concern, maybe. Or awe.

Shiva didn't move. He didn't need to. His words had already done the work. They had stripped away the scaffolding of Madhav's certainty, exposing the raw, aching truth beneath.

He looked at Madhav, not mocking, not cruel, but knowing that Madhav was now compelled to confront the reality of his actions. And whether or not he was ready? That was another matter entirely.

At that moment, the young waiter arrived, setting down fresh cups of tea with the scent of *spiced chai* rising into the morning air. The rhythmic clinking of porcelain against wood felt oddly intrusive, shattering the moment without mercy.

Madhav flinched slightly, as if the sound had jolted him from somewhere deep. Sid blinked, his fingers twitching toward the cup but stopping short. Chatty stared at the rising steam, as if it carried the echoes of Shiva's words. Abhi reached for his tea, but didn't sip. He just held it, letting the warmth seep into his palms like a grounding force.

The waiter, unaware of the emotional wreckage he'd walked into, offered a polite nod and disappeared into the background. But the tea remained, its aroma mingling with the tension, its heat daring them to return to the present.

The Transactional Devotee vs. The Abandoned Believer

At last, Madhav uttered his words in a barely audible whisper. He wasn't looking at anyone, just staring at his untouched tea, as if somehow, somewhere in the swirling steam, his answers had been hiding all along.

"My God, Shiva... I never thought about it that way."

His fingers tightened around the cup, but he didn't lift it.

"Obviously, I didn't hire God, then how could I blame Him for everything that's happened to me?"

He exhaled slowly, the weight of his own words settling on his chest.

"It seems... I really did fire Him. Have I been so consumed by my own expectations that I pushed Him away?"

The silence thickened, stretching between them, pressing into the crisp mountain air.

Shiva watched Madhav carefully, his expression unreadable, as Sid and Abhi sat in mindful reflection.

Something had shifted. This conversation wasn't just philosophy anymore.

Before the moment could linger too long, another voice broke the tension like a bell in a monastery at dawn.

"Oh, and Madhav," Chatty cut in with delighted mischief, "since we're firing God now, do we also revoke His pension? Should we give Him a severance package, or does the divine get sacked without compensation? "

Sid nearly spilled his tea laughing. Even Abhi chuckled, shaking his head.

Madhav let his forehead drop into his palm, groaning. "I hate you, Chatty."

Chatty beamed. "I'm here to help! Among all of us, I'm God's biggest devotee! I never miss an opportunity to pray or visit the temple!"

Shiva chuckled. "Are you?"

Chatty faltered slightly, sensing something was coming.

Shiva took a slow sip of his tea, his gaze steady. Then, with the knowing smile of a man about to dismantle someone's worldview, he turned to Chatty.

"Tell me, Chatty. What does it truly mean to be a devotee?"

Chatty blinked. "Uh... praying? Bowing daily? What kind of trick question is this?"

"When you stepped into the temple this morning, be honest. What was really on your mind? Were you longing for the divine, or were you submitting a petition?"

Chatty hesitated.

"Were your prayers heartfelt with tears, or bargaining under the guise of devotion?"

Chatty sighed, slumping. "Fine. I asked God to help me overcome my financial mess. I promised a big prayer ceremony with eleven priests. Maybe... I also vowed to increase that to twenty-one if things got settled before Mumbai."

Abhi's eyes widened. "You actually BRIBED God? You literally negotiated your way out of debt with temple deals?"

"You turned worship into a business transaction," Madhav grinned. "You ran an entire corporate negotiation with pledges, incentives, and a time-sensitive deal structure!"

Chatty pointed aggressively at Madhav. "If I bribed Him, you literally fired Him! At least I kept God employed!"

Madhav groaned, sinking lower into his seat.

Shiva leaned back, his presence vibrating with quiet authority. When he spoke, his voice carried weight that left things severed.

"Are our worship and devotion true expressions of love for the divine, or are they business transactions, disguised as surrender?"

The question wasn't designed for comfort. It was meant to unsettle.

"Is God a mere convenience, like a washing machine to cleanse away our sins? A dumping ground for our complaints?"

Sid shifted, exhaling sharply. "That's disturbing."

Madhav leaned forward. "So, what are you saying? Worship is pointless?"

Shiva's laugh was low and patient. "Not pointless. But often hollow."

He set his cup down, his gaze unwavering.

"True devotion does not bargain. It does not ask for blessings or plead for favors. It simply is, like love, without condition or demand."

Chatty stretched dramatically. "Fine, I admit it. I ran a temple business plan."

Shiva smiled. Some truths don't arrive quietly. They arrive like hurricanes.

"There's an old Zen story," he said, his voice carrying something ancient.

"A disciple asked his master, 'I have prayed for years, yet feel no closeness to God. Why?' The master pointed at a tree. 'Does it ask the sun for light? Or does it simply stand, allowing light to arrive?' The disciple stayed silent. 'Your prayers are transactions. Drop them. Stand like the tree, and you'll see God was never far.'"

The silence felt dense, powerful.

"Madhav, God isn't nowhere. He's now here. The only difference between 'nowhere' and 'now here' is the space in between, the space of awareness. He's never been absent, only unnoticed."

"Then why don't we pray like that?" Sid asked.

Shiva's gaze darkened with understanding. "Because fear rules them. Not faith, fear. Fear of punishment, abandonment, chaos. People don't pray to connect; they pray to feel safe. And what is safety but the illusion of control?"

Madhav frowned. "But isn't fear necessary? Doesn't it keep people from doing wrong?"

"No, Madhav. Fear does not prevent evil; it sustains it. A man who avoids crime because he fears hell is not moral; he's merely afraid of consequences. True wisdom arises from awareness, not fear."

He paused, the mountain air carrying his words.

"A fierce warlord once stormed into a Zen temple, sword drawn. 'Do you not know who I am?' he thundered at the meditating master. 'I can run you through without blinking!' The master opened his eyes calmly. 'And do you not know who I am? I am one who can be run through without blinking.' The warlord stared, shaken, and left without another word."

Sid exhaled. "That's beautiful. The real prison isn't punishment or death... It's fear itself."

"What's the alternative?" Abhi asked.

Shiva smiled. "Love. Unconditioned, unchained, unafraid. Love is a state of being. In that state, fear dissolves, freedom expands, and the soul breathes. *The breathing of the soul is the purest offering to our beloved, to our God.* As one saint said,

'Love people unconditionally, for the sheer joy of loving.'

Love is the ladder between fear and freedom. But love cannot be pursued, only persuaded."

Chatty raised an eyebrow. "Can't be pursued? I've been pursuing it for years, college, cafés, dating apps. It takes the form of blondes, brunettes, lately I'm partial to Asians."

Everyone erupted in laughter.

"And has your grand pursuit ever resulted in real love?" Shiva asked.

Chatty squinted. "Okay, rude. But fair."

"The moment you chase love, it eludes you. Chasing transforms it into expectation, demand, control. *Love isn't a prize to be won; it's a presence to be allowed.*"

Abhi's brow furrowed. "What about commitment in relationships?"

Shiva's gaze carried only clarity. "Commitment sounds like foundation, but often it's containment. It reeks of expectation. Love isn't a contract; it's like water, fluid, and alive. Try to grasp it too tightly, and it slips. Try to bind it, and it goes stale."

He paused, letting the words settle.

"The moment we shift from 'relationship' to 'relating,' love arrives. Not because it was missing, but because we stopped trying to leash it."

Chatty collapsed backward dramatically. "Great. I've spent years trying to kidnap love. All I had to do was leave the door unlocked?"

Shiva's grin carried the softness of thunder before it breaks.

Abhi sat pensively. "What I am hearing is that love isn't something outside us, waiting to be earned. It's already here - patient, wild, and aware. This means we've just been choking it with our conditions."

Shiva nodded. He then turned to Chatty. "Instead of praying to God, have you ever considered praying for God?"

Chatty narrowed his eyes. "What kind of philosophical trap is this?"

"Just like Arjuna requested, Krishna to be on his side in the epic *Mahabharata*. When you have God on your side, what else is left to desire?"

With that, Shiva stood and moved toward the counter to settle the bill, leaving his friends suspended in the mountain silence, each lost in their own revelation.

Faith Without Bargains:

The True Nature of Worship

As Shiva walked away, the remaining four friends sat in deep contemplation. The earlier laughter had faded, replaced by something far heavier. An intangible shift, like a mountain shifting beneath their feet.

Madhav ran his fingers through his hair, exhaling sharply. It wasn't just a realization. It was an unraveling. His entire approach to faith had cracked open before him, revealing something uncomfortable yet undeniable.

Sid gazed silently at the endless expanse of mountains, their towering presence suddenly feeling more knowing, as if they had seen this reckoning happen a thousand times before.

Chatty, absently tracing patterns on the table with his finger. Even his usual bravado had softened, replaced by thoughtful discomfort. Was Shiva, right? Had his devotion merely been bargaining in disguise?

Abhi tapped his fingers against his cup, lost in thought. Words formed and dissolved in his mind, but nothing seemed adequate for the moment.

It was Sid who finally broke the silence, his voice slower, heavier. "Shiva is right. You know... when we go to the temple, we always ask for something - health, wealth, success, or relief from

suffering. But has anyone ever asked, 'God, what can I do for You?'"

Shiva, having just returned, heard the words and smiled knowingly. He pulled out his chair but didn't sit immediately. He let the thought breathe; let it sink deeper into the moment.

"That, Sid," he said, finally settling into his seat, "is the essence of true surrender. Offering ourselves in service rather than constantly demanding favours."

Madhav's throat tightened. "Then what have I been doing all these years?"

"What most people do," Shiva answered gently. "We approach God like beggars. Always asking, never offering. We prostrate and plead for our desires, forgetting that devotion is not a transaction. True faith isn't bartering or begging, it is surrender."

He paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle. Then, leaning forward, he spoke with intensity.

"Perhaps the real prayer should be:

'God, how can I serve You? I am here for You to use me as You deem suitable.'

A true devotee does not demand. He becomes a vessel, allowing grace to move through him without condition."

Madhav closed his eyes for a moment, inhaling deeply. The realization was both freeing and humbling. Had he been wrong all along?

Abhi shifted in his seat, rubbing his chin. "*Fuck...* all this time, we've just been treating faith like a business deal?"

Sid shook his head in agreement. "Make offerings, expect rewards... Perform rituals, seek solutions. It's so deeply ingrained, we don't even question it."

Chatty sighed, slumping back into his chair, his bravado fully abandoned. "Damn it. I even negotiated a priest count in my last prayer!"

The entire group chuckled, though the weight of the conversation still held firm, especially about surrender.

Sid recited softly from memory:

"Be like a river, my friends. Flowing without resistance. Try not to resist the waves of your destiny. Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you truly love. It will not lead you astray."

He continued, "Pure, unconditioned surrender. The breath of the soul. The deepest trust. Maybe, that's the secret behind all true prayers."

Shiva nodded, "This talk of surrender reminds me of a story I read recently."

"A young monk named Ryokan had spent years studying under a great Zen master. He had learned the scriptures, practiced meditation, and disciplined his mind. Yet, something was missing. He still felt restless, as if he were grasping for something beyond his reach.

One day, his master told him, "Go to the river and surrender."

Ryokan was confused. "Surrender to what?"

The master smiled. "To everything."

Determined to understand, Ryokan walked to the river and sat by its edge. He watched the water flow. The water flowed endlessly, effortlessly, without any resistance.

Hours passed. Then, suddenly, a storm rolled in. The river swelled, its currents raging. Ryokan panicked. He tried to hold onto a rock, but the force of the water pulled him in.

As he struggled, he remembered his master's words: "Surrender."

With a deep breath, he let go.

Instead of fighting, he allowed the river to carry him. He stopped resisting, stopped fearing. And to his amazement, the water did not drown him. It guided him gently to the shore.

When he returned to his master, drenched but enlightened, he bowed deeply. "I understand now. Surrender is not defeat. It is trust."

The master nodded. "Exactly. When you stop resisting life, it carries you exactly where you need to go.

Total surrender is never a weakness, but an absolute trust in the flow of existence."

All four friends were in deep silence.

For years, they had unknowingly fought the current, clenching their fists, demanding control over their fates. But perhaps Shiva was right. Perhaps surrender was not weakness. It was true love.

A Sad Monk is a Bad Monk

The morning sun cast long shadows across the winding path as Shiva and his friends arrived at their destination. Their car came to a slow halt in front of a sturdy wooden gate, an entrance to a secluded compound hidden amidst the rolling hills. They had driven off the main highway some kilometers ago, following trails that led them deeper into the untouched wilderness surrounding one of the many sacred tributaries of the river Ganges.

As they stepped out, the crisp mountain air welcomed them, carrying the scent of damp earth, wildflowers, and the faint aroma of burning incense. The silence wasn't empty; it pulsed with life, rich with the whispers of rustling leaves, distant bird calls, and the soft babble of the river weaving through ancient stones. It was a silence that didn't demand contemplation; it simply existed, wrapping around them like an unseen presence.

Shiva pushed open the gate with effortless familiarity, and the group followed, their steps unconsciously slowing as they absorbed the tranquility ahead.

The moment they crossed the threshold, something shifted.

The world outside seemed to melt away, replaced by an entirely different rhythm, untainted by the chaos of modern existence. The ashram sprawled across several acres, yet it wasn't marked by grand structures or rigid symmetry. Unlike the imposing concrete monstrosities they had encountered before, the

dwellings here seemed to have grown organically from the earth itself.

Mud-brick walls breathed in sync with the land, their textured surfaces glowing under filtered sunlight. Thatched roofs swayed gently in the breeze, their golden grass catching light like whispered secrets. There were no manicured lawns or artificial walkways lined with neon lighting. Only untamed grass, blooming bushes, and towering trees that stood as silent witnesses to everything.

It was not a place built for spectacle, nor for the restless searching of those hungry for answers. It was a place meant for silence. For surrender. For seeing.

A footpath meandered through the heart of the compound, its edges softened by moss and scattered petals from overhanging bougainvillea vines. The sound of worship bells chimed faintly in the distance - neither intrusive nor demanding, but part of the natural orchestra that filled the space. Somewhere nearby, the rhythmic tapping of wood against stone indicated preparations for the afternoon meal, and the aroma of spiced lentils and freshly baked flatbread drifted through the air.

Chatty's stomach growled audibly. "Finally! A place that smells like food instead of philosophy," he muttered, earning a laugh from the group.

As they approached a cluster of huts, the sound of laughter and music drifted toward them on the breeze. Shiva's eyes twinkled with anticipation as he guided them forward, reading their expressions with satisfaction.

A group of monks stood watching their arrival with curious smiles, and then, to their complete astonishment, burst into an impromptu dance.

Their movements were effortless, unrestrained, and brimming with joy, like waves rolling over the shore, like birds soaring without care. Shiva didn't hesitate; he leaped into their rhythm, his laughter blending with theirs, feet kicking up dust from the well-trodden earth.

The four friends stood motionless at first, their minds struggling to reconcile the image before them. They had anticipated sedate greetings, folded hands, solemn nods, perhaps even an air of detached wisdom. Instead, they found themselves swept into a storm of movement, spun around by mirthful monks who welcomed them not as visitors, but as long-lost brothers returning home.

Chatty found himself lifted off his feet by a beaming monk who couldn't have been older than twenty-five. Sid was pulled into a circle dance, his usual reserve cracking into surprised laughter. Abhi, ever the engineer, tried to analyze the rhythm before surrendering to the infectious joy. Madhav, who had spent years perfecting his serious artist persona, stood frozen for a moment longer before a beautiful woman took his hands and guided him into the movement.

What followed was a blur of cheerful chaos: spontaneous hugs, hearty laughter, and affectionate pats on the back. They weren't being received with reverence; they were being embraced with love.

The dance was not a performance. No choreography. No caution. Just movement. Just joy.

When it ended, the monks bowed-not to each other, but to the silence that followed-and dispersed gradually, some returning to their tasks, others lingering to share a few more words and smiles. One of them, a woman with silver threads in her hair and mischief in her eyes, stepped forward and offered them tea. No words. Just a gesture. A clay cup, warm and fragrant, passed from hand to hand.

As they settled onto woven mats in the dappled shade of a mango tree, the friends sat in companionable silence, still processing what had just occurred. Their breathing gradually slowed, but an electric charge still lingered in the air between them.

"What the hell just happened?" Chatty finally managed, breathless and slightly disheveled. "I thought we were supposed to behave seriously, but that was pure madness, and it felt amazing!"

Sid wiped sweat from his brow, shaking his head in disbelief. "I've never experienced anything like that. It was like they were celebrating our existence itself."

Abhi, still catching his breath, touched his chest where the warmth of unexpected joy lingered. "I kept trying to calculate the steps, understand the pattern, but my brain just... stopped. And that felt okay somehow."

Madhav ran his fingers through his disheveled hair, a bemused smile playing on his lips. "I spend half my life trying to create moments of authentic beauty, and these people just... live it. Like breathing."

As they sipped the fragrant tea, their eyes wandered across the compound, and what they saw next challenged every assumption they'd carried about monastic life.

Here was no austere monastery of hushed whispers and downcast eyes. The morning light revealed a community that defied categorization. Monks lounged freely on colorful mats, some deep in animated conversation with women who moved among them with easy familiarity.

One young monk sat sketching while a woman posed nearby, her laughter ringing out as she teased him about his artistic pretensions. "My nose isn't that big!" she protested, reaching over to tickle his ribs. He grinned and dodged, never losing the flow of his charcoal strokes.

An older monk with passionate intensity debated poetry with a woman whose eyes flashed with intelligence, their voices rising and falling like lovers in an argument about beauty itself. His hand rested casually on her shoulder as he made a point about metaphor, and she leaned into the touch as naturally as a plant turns toward light.

Near a small garden, a third monk massaged an elder's weathered feet while humming a folk tune, the old man's eyes closed in blissful contentment. The boundaries between sacred and secular, between celibate and sensual, seemed to dissolve in the warm morning air.

Abhi blinked slowly, his analytical mind spinning. "Are these... actually monks?"

Sid leaned closer, his voice dropping to a confused whisper. "I mean, I thought monks took vows of celibacy and spent their time in meditation, not... this."

Madhav gestured broadly at the scene before them, his eyes taking in details. "If these guys have taken a vow of anything, it's a vow to enjoy life. Look at them. They're more comfortable with intimacy than most married couples I know. There's no awkwardness, no suppression. Just... ease."

Chatty observed the scene with his characteristic irreverence, but his voice carried a note of wonder. "You know what's funny? I think we've been sold an expensive lie - that getting closer to God means getting further from humanity, that holiness requires misery. But look at these people. They seem to have figured out that maybe the Divine isn't allergic to pleasure. Who knew the path to enlightenment didn't require a permanent scowl?"

The friends burst out laughing, but the laughter carried an edge of bewilderment. Everything they thought they knew about spiritual life was being turned upside down.

Shiva had remained silent throughout their observations, smiling as he watched his friends grapple with their shifting perceptions. The late morning light caught the gold in his eyes as Madhav finally turned toward him.

"But seriously, Shiva," Madhav said, his smile fading into genuine curiosity. "I'm completely confused. I thought being a monk meant renouncing worldly pleasures, especially... well, especially women. But I see life-affirming people who seem more comfortable with human intimacy than most people I know. What am I missing?"

Shiva set down his tea cup and regarded his friend with knowing eyes. "That depends, Madhav. Who do you think a monk really is?"

He paused, watching the easy intimacy between the monks around them. "A monk isn't defined by orange robes or a shaved head or sexual abstinence. A monk is someone who can share passionate intimacy with a lover, laugh with friends, weep with strangers, enjoy the pleasures of the body, and still carry unshakeable peace within their heart."

He gestured toward the compound around them, where life continued its unhurried dance of connection and solitude. "A monk isn't someone who runs from life or hides from their own nature. A monk is someone who understands the difference between being alone and being lonely. The word 'monk' itself derives from the root word meaning 'alone.' And alone - true aloneness - means recognizing the oneness of all existence. It's not isolation; it's the deepest form of intimacy possible."

Sid stirred, his mind seeking clarity. "I'm still not clear, Shiva. What's the real difference between alone and lonely? They sound the same when you're sitting by yourself on a Saturday night."

Chatty leaned back, a wry smile crossing his face. "Ah, the classic confusion. Like mistaking a tiger for a house cat just because they both have whiskers."

Madhav nodded thoughtfully. "Lonely sounds... desperate. Alone sounds... complete?"

Shiva's smile deepened. "Exactly. 'Lonely' is a disease of the mind, a craving for someone else to fill the silence. It's dependency dressed as emptiness. But 'alone' is godliness. It's not the absence of others; it's the presence of the Self."

Chatty grinned and clapped his hands. "Let me translate this for you, my NRI friend. Lonely is like being stuck in a WhatsApp

group where no one replies to your jokes. Alone is like deleting the app and dancing in your underwear to your favorite song."

Everyone laughed, and the tension of confusion began to dissolve.

Shiva's voice grew warmer, more intimate, as the sunlight began to slant through the trees. "Look around. These monks don't reject the world; they see through the illusions that make others suffer. They don't suppress desire; they understand its true nature. They don't fear touch, passion, or even sexual energy; they recognize these as sacred expressions of the same divine force that moves through everything."

He pointed toward the monk who was now tenderly braiding flowers into a woman's hair while she closed her eyes in contentment. "Watch them. They engage fully with life's pleasures, but without desperate clinging. They touch without possessing. They love without the fear of loss. They can laugh with a woman, make love with reverence, cry with strangers, and still carry perfect silence within themselves."

The woman opened her eyes and smiled at the monk, her hand briefly touching his cheek before she rose and walked away. The monk watched her go with appreciation but no longing, then returned to his flowers with the same tender attention.

"There's a saying here," Shiva continued, "

Joy isn't the enemy of enlightenment; joylessness is."

The friends absorbed this, their preconceptions crumbling like old walls.

Sid's expression grew more serious, but his eyes sparkled with understanding. "What you're saying, Shiva, is that a true monk

- whether they wear robes or business suits - isn't someone who escapes from the world in fear. A monk is someone who walks through life completely present, untouched by drama, unafraid of pleasure or pain, fully alive to every moment."

Abhi spoke quietly, appreciating the elegant simplicity. "This means the goal isn't to escape from people or relationships. It's to escape from the illusion that we need them to feel complete."

"Precisely," Shiva nodded. "And when you make that shift, something miraculous happens. You discover that you can love more deeply than ever before. Because you're not loving to fill a desperate void inside yourself. You're loving from overflow, from fullness, from choice rather than compulsion."

As the sun continued its travel, painting the ashram in golden hues, Shiva stood gracefully. His story had found its natural moment.

"In ancient Tamil Nadu," he began, his voice taking on the rhythm of an age-old tale, "there lived a wandering monk who was invited to witness a courtesan's dance. She moved with such grace and fierce beauty that the entire audience was mesmerized—merchants forgot their ledgers, priests forgot their prayers, kings forgot their kingdoms."

The friends leaned forward, drawn into the story.

"Afterward, feeling suddenly ashamed, the courtesan approached the monk. 'Did my sensual dance disturb your meditation, holy one?' she asked.

*"The monk smiled with genuine warmth. 'Disturb it? Your dance *was* my meditation.'*

"Confused, she laughed nervously. 'But I thought monks weren't supposed to look upon women with desire.'

"His eyes twinkled with mischief and wisdom. 'I didn't see a woman to desire or reject. I saw the Divine expressing herself through form, movement, and beauty. How could the Divine disturb herself?'"

As if responding to some invisible cue, the friends rose from their mats, the story settling into their consciousness like seeds in fertile soil. The words lingered in the warm air as they walked deeper into the heart of the ashram, each carrying questions that had no easy answers and revelations that challenged everything they thought they knew about spirituality, sexuality, and the nature of true freedom.

Chatty fell into step beside Madhav. "You know what's wild? I came here expecting to find people who had given up on life, and instead I found people who seem more alive than anyone I know."

Madhav nodded, his mind already reimagining everything. "It's like they've figured out how to be fully human and fully divine at the same time. No split, no conflict."

Abhi walked with Shiva engrossed in an animated conversation, and Sid, quiet and alert, found himself wondering what other assumptions about life might be equally wrong.

The day would bring new conversations, unexpected encounters, and further dismantling of their careful assumptions about the sacred and profane. But for now, they carried with them the image of monks who greeted strangers with ecstatic dancing, who treated joy as the highest worship, and who had shown them that perhaps the path to the divine was not about renunciation, but about embracing life so completely that the boundaries between transactional and transcendental simply dissolved.

Where Stillness Speaks and The Soul Remembers

The huts assigned to the group, though modest, radiated an undeniable charm, simple yet perfectly in sync with their natural surroundings. Each space carried an air of solitude, designed not for indulgence but for reflection. Through the windows, the front lawns stretched gracefully, framed by wild herbs and vibrant flowering shrubs. In the air, the rich, earthy aroma of damp soil blended with the scent of lavender and basil. The trees, standing tall in protective clusters, whispered in the breeze, their rustling leaves adding to the symphony of nature. Beyond them, the Himalayas loomed like ancient sentinels, their peaks still veiled in the lingering embrace of winter fog.

A faint, melodic gurgle of running water drifted from a nearby stream, its presence both calming and rhythmic, weaving seamlessly into the fabric of the surroundings. The pathways, hardened by years of footfalls, invited exploration, winding through the ashram's natural gardens, where life thrived in sensitive harmony.

As they settled into their simple but comfortable quarters, the midday light filtering through bamboo windows, each man found himself quietly reflecting on the morning's surprise. The welcome had shattered their preconceptions, leaving them more open and curious than they had felt in years.

Chatty lay on his cot, staring at the ceiling, a smile playing at his lips. "You know what's strange? I haven't felt this peaceful in months, and it started with the most chaotic welcome imaginable."

For some time, they all remained inside, observing the landscape as spectators. But then, something instinctive pulled them forward. They felt compelled to cross the boundary and step out to immerse themselves in it. The brisk air pierced their skin, the far-off chimes, and the gentle crunch of the ground underfoot.

And then, something subtle, yet undeniable, happened.

Conversation fell away.

There was no need for words. Only presence.

They were no longer visitors looking at this place. They were in it, part of it, moving through it like rivers flowing to the sea.

Shiva, sensing the shift, paused near the stream. He ran his fingers through the cold, clear water and spoke, almost in a whisper.

"Do you feel it?"

The others didn't answer. Not with words, at least.

Sid closed his eyes, breathing in the mountain air. Chatty, for once, remained still, his usual chatter replaced by something deeper. Something more listening than speaking. Madhav reached out, fingertips grazing the rough bark of an ancient tree close by, as if greeting something far older than himself.

Shiva turned to them, his voice carrying the weight of something timeless.

"Lao Tzu once said,

'Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.'

Do you see now? We spend our lives rushing, chasing, demanding... Yet here, in this stillness, everything continues. Without force, without resistance. Without control."

Madhav exhaled, the tension within him unraveling like threads pulled loose.

Abhi murmured, almost to himself, "Maybe we were never meant to be controlled or to control it all. Maybe we were meant to belong to it instead."

Sid smiled. "I am reminded of Tagore.

'When the heart is hard and parched, come upon me with a shower of mercy. When grace is lost from life, come with a burst of song.'

Perhaps we have not lost anything. We simply forgot how to listen."

The words settled deep within them, not as instructions, but as reminders. It was not just a place to stay. It was a space to be. A space to listen. To surrender. To finally understand.

As the group continued to wander through the ashram, the atmosphere wrapped around them like a comforting presence. The air carried the mingling scents of fresh earth, adding a layer to the mysticism already permeating the surroundings.

Madhav inhaled deeply, taking in the crisp mountain air, and glanced at Abhi. "This is so different from the temple complex where we stayed last night, isn't it?"

Abhi's eyes scanned the landscape. "Absolutely. There's something about this place. It's as if the silence itself has a voice. What's strange is that, despite the joyful chaos we experienced

earlier, it doesn't disturb this peace. It enhances it. It feels like a celebration with the divine. But yesterday, even with all the chanting, singing, and ringing of bells, the noise felt like a disturbance rather than devotion."

"I agree," Sid added thoughtfully. "I once read a Zen koan about the sound of one hand clapping.

A student once asked a master, 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' The master simply raised one hand in silence. In that moment, the student understood. The answer is not in words, but in presence.

I could never grasp what it meant. But today, I think I get it. That's what this place feels like. It's as if nature itself is humming. Maybe what we're experiencing is the primordial sound. The saints and the scriptures describe it as the vibration of existence, the resonance of *Aum*, *Amin*, or *Amen*. What do you think, Chatty?"

Chatty had been unusually silent since stepping out of his hut. He hadn't cracked a joke or thrown a sarcastic remark, and now he seemed lost in thought. Sid's question lingered for a moment, unanswered.

Then, as if something inside him had unraveled, Chatty suddenly exhaled sharply. His jaw tightened, his hands reflexively running over his face before he finally blurted out:

"Fuck."

The others turned to him, startled.

"You know what, guys?" Chatty continued, voice rougher than usual. "I still can't get over the fact that I've been such a selfish fool. Every prayer I've ever said was nothing more than a cleverly

disguised demand. And worse. I even dared to bribe God into doing my bidding."

He let out a humorless chuckle, shaking his head. "I hate myself for it. I can't believe how blind I've been. God must think I'm the biggest scoundrel of a devotee He's ever seen."

Shiva, who had been walking alongside his friends, finally stopped and turned toward Chatty. His eyes held no judgment, only understanding.

"Every problem holds the potential for transformation, Chatty," he said gently. "And the first step toward change is often the hardest, but also the most defining. You may have approached prayer as a transaction, motivated by personal gain, but at least, even though with misguided intentions, you were calling upon the divine. You recognized the power of prayer. Now, perhaps it's time to shift your intention. Not as a petition, but as a genuine surrender. Instead of asking God for something, offer yourself to Him with love."

Chatty absorbed Shiva's words, nodding slowly. Before he could respond, Madhav sighed heavily, shaking his head.

"What about me, Shiva?"

Shiva turned to him.

Madhav's voice was hesitant, uncertain. "At least Chatty never fired God like I did. I literally dismissed Him as if He were an underperforming employee. I can't believe I was arrogant enough to evaluate His performance instead of the other way around. On top of it, I blamed Him for not listening."

He exhaled sharply; his voice laced with self-reproach. "I feel so ashamed."

Shiva smiled, placing a reassuring hand on Madhav's shoulder. "Whether you continue to have faith in God or not, my friend, that's entirely up to you. But don't stop praying just because He didn't do your bidding."

Madhav looked up, his expression uncertain.

Shiva continued, "I firmly believe, Madhav, that God always listens. And you don't even need words or gestures to speak to Him. Why pray to a God who hears the anklets on an ant's feet? Such a God requires no words, rituals, or pleadings. He does not need loud temples or desperate petitions. If He can hear the whisper of the smallest creature, He has already heard the trembling of your heart."

Abhi's curiosity was piqued. "Then why do we see so many people praying loudly?"

Shiva smiled knowingly. "The answer lies in the quote from Søren Kierkegaard, who said,

"The function of prayer is not to influence God but rather to change the nature of the one who prays."

Abhi's face lit up with realization. "That's beautiful. We pray not because God doesn't know what's in our hearts. He's omniscient, after all. We pray to refine ourselves. To purify our thoughts, speech, and actions so that our thinking becomes clearer, our words are more authentic, and our deeds more worthy."

Shiva watched as understanding settled into their minds. Then, almost as if speaking to the trees, to the air itself, he softly added:

"The prayers are not about reaching Him. It is about realizing He was never far. Not in the sky, not beyond the clouds, but within, listening before the first word is spoken."

All of them fell silent. They had arrived with questions, seeking clarity, hoping for answers that could neatly fit into their existing beliefs. But as they walked through the ashram, the towering trees, the distant hum of the stream, and the tranquil strength of the mountains seemed to whisper a different truth. One that couldn't be grasped by logic alone.

Beyond Mantras and Japa:

The Journey to Realization

Chatty felt noticeably lighter after his brief exchange with Shiva. It was as if the weight he hadn't even realized he was carrying was finally put away. As they continued strolling through the ashram, he turned to Shiva, his curiosity rekindled.

"You talked about praying, and I believe *Japa* or chanting the Lord's name regularly and repeatedly is a powerful way to pray. I chant the *Hanuman Chalisa* every morning after waking up and before going to sleep. And throughout the day, I repeat the *mantra* 'Om Namah Shivaya.' But here's something that has always made me anxious. Am I doing it right? Am I doing enough?"

He hesitated, as if unsure whether to voice his doubt.

"Also, to this day, I struggle with choosing the right prayer. Our scriptures contain countless prayers, some stretching across multiple pages, dedicated to different gods and goddesses. I always worry that if I select one, I might offend another; hence, I keep changing the prayers, never settling on a single one. Shiva, is there a better way to approach this?"

Shiva smiled, not just with his lips, but through his light presence. "Let me share a story."

The air shifted as the weight of his words settled. Every eye was locked onto him, sensing that what followed would not simply be told but felt.

"There was once a simple villager who lived near a grand temple. Every morning, he watched the priests perform elaborate rituals, reciting long and complex prayers. Although the villager was deeply devoted, he felt overwhelmed. He didn't know which prayer to choose, which God to honour, which words were 'correct.' Fear gripped him. What if he offended one God by worshiping another? What if his prayers were incomplete? And so, paralyzed by hesitation, his heart remained restless."

"One evening, exhausted by his uncertainty, he walked into the temple and approached the old priest. 'Master,' he said, 'I want to pray, but I do not know which prayer to choose. There are so many Gods and rituals. What if I make a mistake?"

"The priest smiled, then pointed to a small bird perched on the temple roof. 'Tell me, does that bird worry about which branch to land on? Does it debate which direction the wind flows before it flies? No. It simply moves, trusting its wings. Your heart is the same. Your devotion is not in the words, nor the ritual. It is in the sincerity with which you offer yourself. If your prayer is true, it does not need perfection; it only needs presence."

Shiva paused, watching the impact ripple across their faces.

"If your heart is restless trying to 'pick the right one,' then you are trapped in the illusion of form rather than the truth of feeling. Drop the need for correctness. Drop the need for fear. Pray simply, as the bird flies. Speak not for the Gods, but from your own heart. That is the only prayer that has ever mattered."

A pause. But Shiva wasn't done. His voice softened, yet its intensity did not wane.

"There's another tale, and my favourite. One of the purest prayers ever uttered."

"Three simple men lived on an isolated island. They had never read scriptures, never learned formal prayers, but their devotion was pure. Their prayer was simple: 'We are three, you are three, so have mercy on us.' That was all they knew. It was neither poetic nor complex, yet it carried their entire hearts."

"One day, a learned priest visited their island and was horrified by their crude prayer. 'You fools,' he said. 'This is not how one prays! Let me teach you the proper way.' And so, he instructed them on sacred verses, perfect chants, and 'the right way' to address the divine. The three men listened carefully, memorized every word, and began reciting as instructed."

"Satisfied that he had enlightened them, the priest left. But as his boat sailed away, he glanced back, and what he saw made his heart freeze. The three men were running across the water, chasing after their boat. Not swimming. Running."

"When they caught up to him, they bowed humbly. 'Forgive us, Master, we have already forgotten your prayer. Can you teach us again?'"

"The priest, humbled beyond words, fell to his knees. 'No,' he whispered. 'Your prayer was already pure.'"

Total silence. All eyes automatically shifted to Chatty, who seemed lost in his own world of contemplation. Shiva did not disturb him and let the silence expand, letting the depth of the story settle. The pause stretched into minutes before Shiva once again spoke, and this time directly to Chatty.

"That's the essence of prayer, Chatty. It doesn't matter if the words are ancient or approved by scripture. What matters is not how beautifully they're spoken, but how truthfully they're felt. It's the sincerity, not the sophistication, that turns any whisper into worship. Remember, God listens more closely to the tremble than the tone. A child whispering a prayer with muddy hands may touch the divine more deeply than a scholar reciting verses in perfect Sanskrit. It is the purity of devotion and not its polish that makes it real."

Chatty exhaled sharply, coming out of his reverie, staring at Shiva. "You mean to say, it's never been about choosing the right prayer?"

Shiva nodded, his voice steady. "It is not even about the prayer, Chatty. It is only about being real."

Madhav, who had remained silent until now, raised his voice to a barely audible whisper. "But if prayer is this simple, why do people complicate it?"

Shiva's eyes softened, as if seeing not just Madhav's question but the entire weight behind it.

"Because the mind fears simplicity. A prayer without rules, without hierarchy, without restriction terrifies those who have spent their lives believing devotion must be earned through effort rather than recognized through presence. The mind wants formulas. But truth doesn't arrive through formulas. It arrives when you allow yourself to see."

And just like that, the illusion of prayer had begun to dissolve.

After a few minutes of unusually deep silence again, enough to make even Chatty suspicious of himself, he finally spoke up.

"That was beautiful, Shiva. But now, let's get to my second great existential crisis. How many times should I remember God? Every guru seems to have their magical number, with *one hundred and eight* times appearing to be the most popular. I also see people muttering mantras while clicking beads like they're running a divine abacus. Others use digital counters, like they're logging gym reps for their soul. So, tell me, what's the official quota for spiritual recall?"

Shiva laughed, tilting his head slightly.

"Tell me, Chatty. How many times a day do you remind yourself that you are Chatty?"

Chatty blinked. Then blinked again. Then dramatically gasped.

"Shiva. Are you telling me I've been Chatty all this time without actively counting it?"

The group erupted into laughter.

Shiva chuckled, watching the realization dawn. "Now you are seeing it. When something is truly known, it does not require repetition. It simply is."

Chatty whistled, shaking his head. "So, you're telling me people are acting like confused amnesiacs, trying to 'remember' God as if they've misplaced Him under the couch?"

Shiva shrugged. "If you need constant reminders, then perhaps you never truly saw in the first place."

Chatty exhaled dramatically. "You know, Shiva, this conversation is either going to make me enlightened or completely mad. Not sure which comes first, and now I am not even sure if there is any difference between the two."

Abhi grinned. "Either way, at least you won't need a digital counter for it."

Shiva stirred the silence with a casual shrug.

"All that's ever needed... is a clear seeing. A realization."

Madhav leaned in. "Not mantras?"

Shiva grinned. "Those might keep the monkey mind distracted, sure. But liberation? No parrot ever flew out of a cage repeating holy syllables."

Abhi blinked. "What brings it, then?"

Shiva tapped his chest. "It's simple. *To remember who you were... before the world told you who to be.*"

Chatty raised an eyebrow. "That sounds cryptic enough to be expensive."

Shiva chuckled. "Truth isn't expensive. Just rare."

Sid nodded slowly. "And when someone's truly ready..."

Shiva interrupted gently. "It happens instantly. Not gradually. Not eventually. Liberation is never delivered. It's discovered. In a flash. The moment readiness meets recognition."

There was a pause. A lingering quiet.

Then Shiva dropped a single line, quietly, but not carelessly. As if a secret is being handed out, and is waiting to be caught. "*You are free the moment you see it. Because you and the divine... were never two.*"

No one responded immediately. Chatty stared ahead, his mind not catching the depth of Shiva's last sentence, but it did not escape Sid.

Seeking the Divine, Finding the Self

"Wait!!! Hold on, Shiva. Are you saying that *God and I are one?* That there is no separation?"

Shiva's gaze met Sid's, not with challenge, but with unwavering certainty. He did not rush his response. Instead, he let the question linger, as if waiting for Sid to hear it again within himself before answering.

"Tell me, Sid. Don't all scriptures describe God as omnipresent?"

Sid, with caution, said. "Yeah, they do."

Shiva, his presence thick with intensity. "Then logically, there cannot be a place, a demarcation line, where God's presence ends and something else begins. If He is truly omnipresent, then every molecule, atom, vibration is nothing but God."

The words landed like stones in a still lake. No one spoke.

Sid parted his lips, then snapped them shut. He was no stranger to discussions, but something about Shiva's presence made the moment feel less like an exchange and more like a confrontation with himself.

Shiva's voice softened, yet its depth remained. "That means you, me, the trees, the mountains. Everything in existence is God. It's not that God fills the world, like a fragrance fills a room. Rather, God is the only reality. *'He only is. All is not.'*"

Another silence.

Chatty rubbed his temples, wrestling between curiosity and skepticism. "I think I get it... But it keeps slipping away. Can you make it stick?"

Shiva grinned. He had been waiting for that.

"Alright. Let's try an analogy. Think of water, waves, and the ocean. It's not that water 'fills' the waves or the ocean like a container, right? Nor can we say that waves and the ocean are separate from water. There is only one real entity. Water. The waves and the ocean are just different appearances of the same essence."

Chatty's expression shifted. Something had landed.

Shiva continued, his voice sharpening.

"Similarly, you and the world are not separate from God. We are not mere creatures infused with His essence. We are Him. But the mind, conditioned by centuries of false separation, creates distinctions where none exist. And, instead of recognizing, we search."

Silence again. This time, heavier.

Madhav exhaled sharply, shaking his head.

"That's disturbingly simple."

Shiva inclined his head.

"Truth always is."

Somewhere in the distance, bells rang, merging effortlessly with the murmuring stream nearby. It was as if the universe itself was whispering the truth that Shiva had just spoken. The truth had

always existed, but had now been unveiled in a way they could finally grasp.

After nearly a minute of silence, Chatty spoke hesitantly.

"I am still confused, so let me get this straight, Shiva. You say that we are God? How can we, these insignificant little creatures, even compare to His magnificence and glory? It seems either delusional or outright blasphemous."

Madhav seized the moment, his skepticism flaring with renewed intensity.

"*Precisely!*" he interjected. "How can something as vast as divinity be contained within something as small as me? God is infinite; I am limited by time, space, and this fragile body. God is all-powerful, and I can't even manage the smallest aspects of my own life. He knows everything, and I don't even know where the next political reshuffle will shove me."

Shiva's words carried the weight of something ancient.

"Let's go back to the wave and water analogy. Imagine a wave in the ocean. One that has always considered itself small and powerless. If one day it's told, 'You and the vast, all-powerful ocean are the same,' it would sound ridiculous, wouldn't it?"

The group accepted with a flicker of intensity.

"But the moment the wave realizes that both the ocean and itself are nothing but water. That all differences exist only in name, form, and function. It is free. It no longer fears its limited existence because it sees its true nature. Imagine the joy of such a realization! The suffering ends, not because the wave grows bigger or stronger, but because it understands that there was no separation in the first place."

Shiva let them linger in the moment before speaking again.

"There's a story Ramakrishna Paramhansa often told...

Once, a lion cub was separated from its mother and raised among sheep. Growing up, it lived in fear, bleating and running at the sight of anything unfamiliar. One day, an old lion spotted it and, recognizing what it truly was, dragged it to a river. 'Look,' the lion said, pointing at the water's reflection. The cub peered into the surface and, for the first time, saw not a sheep but a lion staring back. That day, it roared for the first time."

Shiva stopped, and from the faces around him, he could tell the story had landed, deep and true. After a lingering silence, Madhav rubbed his eyes, as though brushing off centuries of forgetting, and whispered, "So... we were the cub all along?"

Shiva smiled. "Yes. Raised among conditioned beliefs, convinced of our smallness. But all we need to do is look into the water. To see our reflection as it truly is."

Madhav exhaled, his doubts dissolving.

Shiva paused, his demeanor shifting slightly, a seriousness taking over his face.

"And that realization doesn't just free us.

It frees God, too."

Abhi frowned. "What do you mean?"

Shiva's voice softened, not from fatigue, but from the sheer gravity of what needed to be spoken. Each word slipped past his lips like it had been waiting lifetimes to emerge. His gaze sliced through illusion with precision. Not comforting. But liberating.

"We took the living mystery and dressed it in morality. What once pulsed as an organic whole, we reduced to an organized hole - emptied for comfort, embalmed in rituals, and handed back as an institutionalized doctrine. We did not find God, we formatted God. We filed, fenced, and monetized the ineffable."

He paused. And in that stillness, something ancient surfaced in his expression. An ache that lived beyond this life. His chest rose with a breath that trembled just enough to betray the tears rising beneath his eyes. But he did not look away.

"Divinity, once limitless and indivisible, was reimagined through the smallness of our fears, desires, and inherited guilt..."

The first tear fell silently.

"...We caged the divine in the architecture of our imagination, bound it with symbols, weighed it with names, and locked Him behind rituals masquerading as truth."

His voice cracked, just slightly. Not weakness, but remembrance.

"Some worship a celestial accountant, meticulously tracking karmic spreadsheets to assign heaven or hell..."

A broken laugh escaped him, bitter and tender all at once.

"...Others imagine a cosmic couch potato, tuning into creation like a soap opera rerun. And some, draped in mysticism, see the divine as a perpetually pregnant spirit, endlessly birthing existence while ignoring the weeping of Her own children."

He wiped at nothing and let the tears fall. Let the silence hold what language could not. Then came the whisper. Soft as breath, sharp as rupture.

"We've told ourselves, '*God created us in His image.*'"

His eyes, now glistening, open, unshielded, met theirs.

"But look closer. The real blasphemy?

We created God in ours."

The group listened in silence, absorbing his words.

"God is not a ruler sitting in judgment, nor a distant observer watching from beyond. God does not need to be appeased, feared, or flattered. *God is presence.* The silent hand on your back when no one is there. The feeling in your chest when you forgive without a reason. The stillness between heartbeats when you remember who you really are.

God is not a being. God is being. Not separate from you, but alive as you, the oneness of you and the divine."

Shiva's gaze drifted toward the hills. Then, as if concluding with the final piece of the puzzle, Shiva recited a couplet from Kabir:

"The pot is in the water, the water is in the pot, inside and outside. Only water. When the pot breaks, water merges with water. This is the truth, Kabir says."

Chatty catches hold of Shiva's arm and asks.

"Tell me, Shiva, my friend. In simple terms. No philosophy.

Is God real or an illusion?"

Shiva looked gently at Chatty, smiled, and said,

"God is as real or illusory as you are."

"FUCK. Why did I even bother?" Bellowed Chatty, smacking his hand hard on his forehead.

The Wise Way and The Otherwise Way

The group settled onto the ground, their bodies weary from the long walk, but something deeper stirred beneath the silence. Shiva sat unmoved, back straight, presence sharp and incisive. The wind threaded through the trees like breath between truths.

"There is just one veil between us and the truth of our reality, the key to absolute freedom."

They leaned in.

"It's the veil of Ignorance. Not of fact but of what we are."

His eyes scanned the group.

"We are like the man who spent his life dragging a chain around his ankle. He thought it was locked. He learned to limp and called it knowledge. One day, he looked closer. It had never been locked. It only rusted open.

Shiva paused.

"And that ignorance gives birth to fear. It crawls into your thoughts, settles into your bones, and teaches you to shrink. That's us. We've forgotten our true nature. And what follows is the swarm of fear: fear of being misunderstood, fear of missing out, fear of being found out, fear of being alone, fear of failure... and perhaps the most ironic of all, the *fear of freedom*."

Abhi looked puzzled. "Why would anyone fear freedom?"

Shiva met his gaze gently.

"We fear freedom. Because it costs us our story. And so, we worship the familiar pain instead. Freedom demands responsibility. It demands that we know what we are beyond roles and labels. And to the ego, this feels like death."

They listened, breath held.

"We say we fear the unknown. But the truth? We fear losing the lie we've clung to. We fear letting go of the idea of 'me.' So instead of meeting life, we manage it. Instead of dancing, we dissect. Instead of living wisely, we live otherwise."

He let it burn before continuing. "There's a story I heard,

"A man lived his whole life in a dark room, terrified of what lay outside. One day, someone opened the door. Light poured in. But the man screamed, covered his eyes, and begged for the door to be shut. He had made peace with the dark."

That's fear. It doesn't shout, it whispers: 'Stay small. Be safe. Don't risk joy.' It sells survival. And we buy it with our freedom. Rumi asked,

'Why do you stay in prison, when the door is so wide open?'"

Madhav's voice cracked. "This hits home. So many choices I've postponed. Out of fear."

Abhi asked, "Shiva, I understand that ignorance of our true nature is the source of fear. But how exactly does it trigger fear?"

Shiva smiled. "Ignorance separates. It creates the illusion of 'me' and 'the other.' That is the birth of duality - the root of comparison, conflict, chaos, competition, and compromise."

These become the focus of our lives, pushing truth to the margins and fear to the center. Ramakrishna once said,

'As long as we see separation, fear is our God.'"

He let the silence speak for him.

After a few minutes, Madhav whispered, "So fear only exists where division does?"

Shiva nodded slowly. "Yes. Because as long as you believe you are a thought, a memory, a body, a personal history, you will defend it. But the moment you realize: you are not merely in life... You are life, the illusion shatters. And with it, fear dissolves."

He looked around, eyes serene.

"Fear appears real only while you look away from yourself. Once you stand in the shade of realization, it disappears. Fear is not a substance, but a shadow, and what is a thing that appears but has no substance?"

"A mirage. An illusion," Chatty whispered.

Shiva let the truth breathe. The wind shifted, cedar brushing the air like an affirmation.

He paused. Then:

Once, a dog wandered into a grand palace—a museum unlike any other. Every wall, ceiling, and floor was made entirely of mirrors. As the dog stepped into the center of the hall, he froze.

All around him, he saw countless dogs. Above, below, beside, every direction reflected his own image. But he didn't know that. He thought he was surrounded.

Out of fear and feeling threatened, he bared his teeth. Every reflection did the same. He barked. The hall echoed with a thousand barks. He lunged. The mirrored dogs lunged back.

Terrified, he fought harder. Barked louder. Snapped at the air. The reflections mirrored every move, amplifying his panic. He ran from one side to another, trying to escape the pack that never left him.

By morning, the guards found him lifeless, surrounded by silent mirrors. No one had harmed him. He had died fighting his own reflection.

"Fear, when unexamined, becomes a mirror. We react to our own projections, mistaking them for threats. What's left to fear," Shiva finished gently, "when all of it is you?"

Abhi closed his eyes in peace.

"...And when fear dissolves... when ignorance burns away and reality blazes forth. We realize life isn't something to endure. It's a song. A fire. A dance that was always there to enjoy without guilt."

"Rest in the shade of self, and see the shadows of fear disappear." Shiva whispered, "That's religion. That's liberation."

Sid rubbed his temples, absorbing the weight of it all. Then, with a frown, asked...

"But what about God? Where does He fit into this scheme of thinking?"

Then it came. Sid froze. His eyes widened.

"Wait... If there is no separation, then God and I are one..."

It barely left his lips.

"...Then to know myself is to know God."

Shiva chuckled, his eyes gleaming. "I always go back to the words of Swami Vivekananda -

'The only God I worship is what people in ignorance call Man.'"

Sid threw a triumphant fist into the air, as if he'd just cracked the biggest mystery of humankind.

Before the moment could sink fully into silence, Chatty muttered, "I swear if I had known God is me back in school, I'd have skipped confession and walked straight into the principal's office with a halo."

A few in the group laughed, grateful, somehow, for the break.

Then. Something in Shiva's eyes turned razor-sharp, slicing through the silence with the precision of heat meeting ice. His voice stayed steady, calm, but charged, like fire launched into still air, impossible to ignore, burning through all pretense.

The whole group stiffened as they also sensed the change.

The words came crashing.

"And Madhav, listen closely.

Realization is not a balm. It is a blade. It doesn't soothe; it shreds.

His gaze ignited.

"Fear starves where ignorance dies. It slithers when you don't look. But when realization burns ignorance into ashes, fear evaporates as it has nowhere left to hide."

Then his voice dropped, lower than thunder, steadier than faith.

"And with it also gets destroyed the entire theater of karma - the reward and punishment cosmic bookkeeping dressed up as

justice. The blatant illusion of a celestial courtroom crumbles under the weight of knowing. The realization that karma was just fear in a costume - obedience born from terror, not wisdom."

Shiva's final words dropped like molten iron:

"And once you see, truly see your reality...

You do not wait for fate's permission to exist.

You do not bow.

You do not beg.

The leash snaps.

The chains fall.

You Walk Free."

Breaking the Celestial Loop:

The Myth of Karma

Though Shiva had been silent for a while now, the group hadn't moved. The air around them still buzzed, thick with the residue of his revelations, like smoke after a lightning strike, impossible to breathe through yet harder to ignore. Each of them sat steeped in the echo, as if reality itself had momentarily been displaced.

Exhaling sharply, Madhav dragged a hand down his face, trying to steady himself. Shiva's words still clung to the air. Unforgiving, undeniable, unrelenting.

He blinked, as if dragging himself out of some far-off corner of understanding and back into the present, back into something familiar. His voice, when it finally arrived, carried the tremor of someone who had just met a truth they couldn't unsee.

"You're saying... everything we've ever feared - karma, judgment, fate. It was all just control? Just a mirage to keep people in check?"

Shiva's gaze didn't soften. "Not a mirage. A prison."

"But Shiva, if knowing our true nature frees us from karma, then what motivation remains for doing good? If our actions have no consequences binding us, won't humanity descend into chaos?"

Shiva smiled, his expression softened, carrying a knowing amusement. "Madhav, have you ever watched horses running in a race?"

"Yes."

"And have you ever seen wild horses running freely in the forest?"

Madhav nodded. "Actually, yes. I once saw them in a National Park in Assam."

Shiva tilted his head. "Did you notice the difference?"

Madhav paused to gather his thoughts before replying. "Yes. The horses in the jungle looked beautiful. It felt like they were born to run, like they were expressing their very nature. But in races, it seemed forced, driven by fear or desire. It wasn't the same."

Shiva smiled. "You touched the core. Running is a horse's nature. In the wild, it is free. It runs for joy. But in races, the same action becomes ugly, tainted by the fear of the jockey's whip or the lure of a reward. Likewise, ignorance makes us forget this, trapping us in actions dictated by fear or greed. The result? The endless suffering."

Chatty, who had been curiously still, stirred. "It means that morality shouldn't be a set of rules but something natural? Like, if people woke up and realized their true nature, they'd just automatically be good?"

Shiva chuckled. "Yes, but let's not say 'good' like it's a moral checklist. Once ignorance is removed, actions aren't dictated by fear, anger, lust, delusion, greed, or jealousy but by natural harmony. Morality won't be imposed. It will simply flow from one's true nature. Like the unbridled freedom of the wild

horses, running free, unforced. You don't need commandments to tell the horses how to run. They do it because it's what they are."

Chatty whistled low, but this time, there was no mischief in his voice.

"Shiva, are you saying I can do whatever I want and just not think about karma?"

Shiva laughed, but it was the laugh of a man who had seen too much to entertain illusions.

"Chatty, if you truly awaken, you wouldn't want to do anything harmful. That is the paradox. A free being acts not out of fear or greed, nor because of rules, but because they don't need to. Awakening doesn't make someone moral. It makes morality irrelevant because when all separation dissolves, kindness is the only natural response. And in that moment, karma vanishes. Not because we have cleared our debts. Because we stopped believing we owed anything."

Chatty exhaled dramatically. "So, all this time, I've been trying to be good. Struggling against my desires, beating myself up over mistakes when all I needed was... to be a horse?"

Shiva laughed. "Not exactly. You needed to stop thinking you were bound to the race."

Chatty leaned back, pressing his arms together as if in a silent prayer. "This conversation started with karma and has now ended in me galloping through the forests of Assam in spiritual bliss. I don't know if I'm enlightened or just terribly confused."

Sid smirked. "Either way, Chatty, at least you won't need a jockey anymore."

Laughter erupted around them, but beneath it, the weight of the realization remained.

Abhi, who had been listening patiently till now, blinked, suddenly defensive, as if clutching at something slipping through his fingers.

"So, karma is... imaginary?"

Shiva chuckled, but there was no comfort in the sound.

"Not imaginary, Abhi. Just *self-perpetuated*. Karma only works because you believe it does. If you accept that your actions bind you, they will. If you believe suffering is repayment for past deeds, it will be. But if you break the illusion, karma collapses like a house of cards."

He paused, then leaned in, and when he spoke, his voice carried the clarity of fire through fog, scorching, uncompromising.

"Let me tell you a story.

"There was once a man, trapped in the mechanics of karma. He approached every action with careful calculations, similar to how a merchant tallies debt.

If he gave, he expected good fortune in return.

If he suffered, he assumed he was repaying some forgotten sin.

If he feared loss, he made sacrifices, bargaining with a divine force that had never agreed to the terms.

He was meticulous, convinced that karma was his accounting system: credits and debits, punishments and rewards.

Then, one day, he had a new neighbor.

The neighbor would laugh loudly, indulge in life without guilt, and live without worry.

And yet, he was free.

The man stared at him. "How can you live like this? Do you not fear karma?"

The neighbor laughed, shaking his head.

"Karma? You mean the chain you wear willingly?"

The man frowned. "My suffering is repayment. My good deeds bring a reward."

The neighbor grinned. "And who told you that? Karma never spoke to you. The universe never sent you an invoice. You believe in chains because someone convinced you they exist. I used to believe, too. Then one day, I realized the cage was never locked."

The man stared, something shattering inside him.

"So, you're saying... I am the one holding myself prisoner?"

The neighbor nodded.

"Exactly."

Shiva looked at them, silent, yet charged with something undeniable. "Do you see now?" His voice was calm, but thunder rumbled beneath it.

"Karma Is the Cage We Lock Ourselves In. Karma is nothing more than memory clinging to belief. It has no headquarters, no cosmic ledger, no divine accountant keeping score. It is recycled suffering, a rule we enforce upon ourselves. Drop the belief, and karma ceases to exist."

The Crown and the Cage:

A Love Letter to the Mind

Abhi exhaled, something in him loosening, something old losing its grip. Shiva just watched, knowing that the realization had already begun its work.

Abhi traced idle patterns in the dust, his brow furrowed. "Shiva, people often explain suffering through karma. We say, 'That man suffers because of his past life' or 'That woman struggles because of her mistakes.' But if karma is just an idea, then why does suffering exist at all?"

Shiva exhaled, watching the leaves of the fig trees nearby swaying gently.

"Karma is not the reason suffering exists. It is simply the excuse we use to justify the existence of suffering. We say, 'It is his fate,' or 'She must pay for past deeds.' Do you see how karma has become a dumping ground for injustice? How has it been twisted into a reason to accept suffering instead of ending it?"

Shiva paused before continuing.

"Suffering exists, not as punishment, but as consequence. People stumble, not because of fate, but because they fail to see. Ignorance breeds suffering, not by divine wrath, but because ignorance is its own weight, its own wound."

Madhav frowned, his frustration sharp and urgent.

"Then it becomes even more important to remove ignorance if that's the root of suffering. My observation is this: suffering disturbs the mind, leading to stress, depression, and trauma. We must deal with that first."

Shiva laughed, but it wasn't a laugh of dismissal. It was the laugh of a man who had seen through the greatest deception of all.

"You have it backwards, Madhav.

'Our mind is not disturbed because of suffering. Suffering exists because our mind is disturbed.'

The words struck like a thunderclap, reverberating through his mind. He ran them over again, turning them like a key in a lock, making sure he truly grasped their weight.

'Suffering does not cause a disturbed mind. Rather, a disturbed mind is the cause of suffering.'

Shiva continued.

"The mind converts pain into suffering by resisting, clinging, and agonizing over 'what was' or 'what will be'. It is the refusal to accept 'what is.' And the only way to break that cycle is to transcend the mind."

Chatty leaned in, skeptical yet intrigued. "Transcend the mind? What does that even mean? How is that possible?"

Shiva smiled, letting silence settle before answering.

"The mind is like a restless monkey, jumping from past to future, future to past. But when you step into the present, the monkey has nowhere to leap. And without effort, without struggle, the mind dissolves."

Chatty, still processing, tilted his head slightly.

"You're saying, Shiva, that remembrance and planning fuel the mind? That it can't function in the 'now'?"

Shiva nodded, slowly, deliberately. "Correct. The mind clings to regret and hope, tethered to reflection or expectation, forever swinging between 'what if' and 'if only.' Strip these away, and its grip falters. What remains is the no-mind state, not an imposed silence, not a struggle, but a presence so absolute that the mind dissolves on its own, unable to weave its illusions."

Sid raised his eyebrow. "But people try so hard to control their minds, and you are talking of dissolving it."

Shiva chuckled, shaking his head.

"That is the greatest illusion, Sid. The belief that the mind can be seized, tamed, shackled. It is like the water or sand in a clenched fist; the tighter you hold, the more ruthlessly it escapes. You cannot conquer it. You cannot silence it. You will merely exhaust yourself in the attempt.

'A man at war with his own mind will find no peace - only the endless echoes of his own resistance.'"

Madhav's brow furrowed, but it was more than thought, something beneath his ribs had cracked open, an implosion, a rupture of certainty. The ground beneath him was still, yet something inside was shifting, breaking, demanding to be seen.

"But what about the billion-dollar industry built on 'mind management' providing endless steps to mastery, webinars promising 'inner peace in 5 easy hacks,' luxury retreats where you pay thousands to sit in silence and pretend you're one with the universe?"

Chatty snorted. "Don't forget the 'Mindfulness Starter Pack' with scented candles, a Tibetan bowl you'll never use, and a PDF on 'How to Think Your Way to Enlightenment.'"

Abhi smirked. "Right? Meanwhile, the Buddha just sat under a tree and got it for free."

Shiva leaned back, grinning like a man who had just lobbed a philosophical grenade into the middle of a debate and was now waiting to watch the ruins rearrange themselves.

"The mind is not the enemy," he began. "The struggle is. People spend their lives waging war against their own thoughts, building walls, sharpening weapons, convinced they're mastering the mind."

Madhav frowned, "But isn't restraint part of the path?"

Shiva nodded. "Restraint is not resistance. It's alignment. The real trap is trying to tame what was never meant to be caged. You spend decades fighting thought... and then, one slip, one moment of forgetting, it all collapses."

"You don't chase the wind," he continued. "You watch it dance. You don't command the clouds. You let them pass."

Sid looked up, intrigued. "Then what anchors us? What keeps us from being swept away?"

"Presence," Shiva replied. "When thought comes and goes, and you don't cling to either, what remains is the eternal sunshine of awareness - untouched, unstained, unshaken."

Chatty spoke, eyebrows raised. "I don't understand. We're not supposed to silence the mind, just ignore it?"

Shiva shook his head gently. "Not ignore, witness. Let the mind run if it must. Be with it. See through it, and it settles on its own. Like ripples fading into still water."

He paused, letting the weight of his words settle.

"Freedom isn't found by fighting the storm. It's in recognizing you were never caught in its winds."

Madhav whispered, "But how do you escape the storm when you don't even know you're inside it?"

Shiva smiled, almost sadly. "You don't escape. You wake up."

He leaned forward now, his voice low and luminous.

"And haven't you noticed? In a moment of true presence, even fleeting, the mind fades. Not because you conquered it... But because awareness makes interference impossible. And that..." Shiva whispered. "That is freedom. That is enlightenment."

Abhi was still not done. He crossed his arms, skepticism flickering in his eyes. "But doesn't the mind serve a purpose? We need memory, we need planning. How do we function without them?"

Shiva tilted his chin, his gaze unwavering.

"Of course, Abhi. The mind is no obstacle; it is the grand symphony of our experience. It holds memory that brings richness and continuity to our experiences, reminding us of love, of lessons, of laughter. It is also the ground of dreams - to shape the beauty of what's possible. Without it, there is no poetry, no curiosity, no remembrance of a mother's laughter or a lover's gaze."

His voice tightened.

"The problem isn't the mind; it's the tragedy of how we've exiled it from its own brilliance. We've treated it like a servant to be commanded or a source of torment to be silenced, when in truth, it is the luminous architect of perception."

He glanced around the group, voice rich with reverence.

"Love it. Listen to it. Let it breathe. When freed from the tyranny of judgment and obsession, the mind becomes what it was always meant to be - a radiant companion. Not a cage, but the canvas. Not the storm, but the sky itself. The pristine awareness that reveals the countless hues of existence, painting presence with wonder, memory with meaning, and thought with grace."

Shiva paused, as if remembering something from long ago. "I heard somewhere that the *mind is not an enemy to be defeated, but a river to be understood*. Mind does not entrap you; attachment does. Thought is not suffering; resistance is. See the mind for what it is, and you find your most loyal and trusted companion."

His silence created a space, an invitation for his friends to step deeper into this understanding alongside him.

"And the moment you step into pure awareness of your reality, the illusion dissolves. Not because the mind was conquered, but because its grasp was no longer needed. When the illusion dissolves, karma shifts, because karma was never a law, only memory tied to time. There is no ancestral burden. No blueprint etched in the stars. No weight of divine transaction.

Only the undivided now. Only the freedom to choose - again, and again, and again."

The Soul's Immigration Problem

The sun filtered through the canopy of ancient banyan trees, casting dancing shadows across the circle where they sat. The air was thick with the intoxicating fragrance of jasmine and sandalwood, punctuated by the earthy aroma of rain-dampened soil from the morning shower. A breeze carried the distant symphony of simmering lentils, cumin, and fresh-baked bread from the ashram's kitchen, the scents weaving through the warm air like invisible threads connecting them to life's simplest pleasures.

Birds darted between branches overhead, their melodic chatter blending with the gentle rustling of leaves and the distant sound of water flowing over stones. Somewhere nearby, the rhythmic thump of someone kneading dough mixed with soft laughter, both male and female voices rising and falling in easy conversation. The very air seemed to pulse with life, thick enough to taste, warm enough to embrace.

A moment passed, but their earlier conversation wasn't over. Sid's brow remained furrowed, still wrestling with something deeper that wouldn't let him rest.

"But what about rebirth? Is that also real or not?"

Shiva grinned, amusement flickering in his eyes like sunlight on water.

"Ah, rebirth. The grand visa of the soul."

Before anyone could respond, a woman's voice joined them - rich, melodious, tinged with laughter. Meera, one of the ashram's senior practitioners, approached carrying a clay pitcher of cool water, her sari the color of marigolds, her bare feet silent on the grass. She had been listening from where she sat weaving nearby, her fingers never pausing in their work.

"Did someone say visa?" she asked, settling cross-legged beside them with fluid grace. "Because I've been wondering why my soul keeps getting rejected at the cosmic embassy."

Chatty perked up immediately, sensing a kindred spirit in mischief.

"Exactly! And why is it that whenever someone 'remembers' a past life, they suspiciously seem to have been from the same country? No one's ever reincarnated as a medieval Mongolian warrior when they've spent their entire life in Mumbai!"

Another woman joined them, Mia, her silver hair braided with small bells that chimed softly as she moved. She lowered herself onto the ground with the careful dignity of age, her weathered hands still graceful as flowers.

"In sixty years of listening to past-life stories," she said, her voice carrying the authority of experience, "I've yet to meet anyone who was a street sweeper in their previous incarnation. Always royalty, always wise teachers, always tragic lovers. Apparently, the afterlife has very limited career options."

Shiva laughed, acknowledging their presence, the sound rich and unrestrained. "Isn't it fascinating how rebirth conveniently respects modern geopolitical boundaries? If souls were truly independent of identity, wouldn't they reincarnate everywhere?"

The fragrance of Meera's jasmine oil mixed with the earthy scent of Mia's herbal tea as Madhav leaned forward, his skepticism sharpening.

"You're all saying rebirth is just cultural conditioning?"

A young monk named Arjun, who had been silently tending a small garden nearby, looked up from his work. Soil clung to his fingers, and sweat glistened on his forehead in the midday heat. "I spent years believing I was paying for sins from past lives," he said quietly. "It was a convenient way to avoid dealing with the mess I was making in this one."

Shiva inclined his head, his tone cool, effortless, dismantling belief with precision. "It's a system built on circular logic with karma. You need one to justify the other. Without rebirth, karma has nowhere to go. Without karma, rebirth has no reason to exist."

The air grew heavier, thick with moisture and the promise of more rain. Somewhere in the compound, someone was grinding spices; the sharp aroma of fresh coriander and cardamom drifted toward them, mixing with the sweet smoke of incense being lit at small shrines.

Sid exhaled slowly, processing the collapse of an idea he had carried for too long. "That makes way too much sense. But then why do people cling to it?"

"Because it's convenient," Meera answered, pouring water into small clay cups, the liquid catching the fading light. "Rebirth turns suffering into installments. 'Maybe my suffering now will balance out in my next life.' That illusion comforts people."

Mia nodded, her bells chiming softly. "It's easier to postpone healing than to face the wound today."

Shiva watched a leaf spiral down from the tree above them, landing in his palm. "But reality is that suffering ends the moment illusion ends."

Abhi raised a brow, accepting a cup of cool water, feeling its smoothness against his fingers. "So, if we aren't being reborn, and karma is a memory game... then what actually happens when we die?"

The question hung in the air like the morning mist. Even the birds seemed to pause their chatter.

Shiva replied without hesitation. "Nothing happens."

The simple statement settled among them like a stone dropped into still water. The air seemed to thicken, carrying the distant sound of temple bells and the closer whisper of fabric against skin as bodies shifted unconsciously. Abhi blinked. Chatty's constant fidgeting stopped entirely. Madhav held his breath.

"Nothing?" Abhi repeated, his voice barely above a whisper, uncertain whether to laugh, question, or run.

"You heard right. Nothing." Shiva's voice was quieter now, but no less absolute. Not dramatic. Just devastatingly clear.

Meera leaned back against the tree trunk, the bark rough against her shoulder blades. "No cosmic customer service desk? No exit interview with the universe?"

Madhav shook his head, unwilling to let it go. "Then there's no afterlife?"

"If the wave crashes back into the ocean," Mia said gently, her aged voice carrying wisdom like honey carries sweetness, "is it lost? Or is it just water again?"

Sid rubbed his temples, the pressure of realization building behind his eyes. Around them, the air was growing cooler, carrying new scent - jasmine, cooking fires, the clean smell of dew beginning to form. "Alright, so we don't drag our karma into the next life because there isn't a next life. But then, how do we explain near-death experiences? People seeing tunnels of light, dead relatives, visions of heaven?"

Arjun wiped his earth-stained hands on his simple cloth, leaving smudges that caught the light. "When my father was dying, he spoke to his long-dead brother for hours. We thought it was profound. But he also argued with a tax collector who never existed."

Shiva chuckled, the sound mixing with the natural symphony around them. "The mind doesn't shut off just because the body does. When a computer crashes, it runs residual processes before shutting down completely."

He gestured toward his temple, where a few gray threads caught the light. "If you've spent years believing in tunnels, judgment days, and celestial verdicts, don't be surprised if your last thoughts before death resemble your conditioning."

Chatty nodded slowly, a grin spreading across his face. "A Christian sees Jesus, a Hindu sees Krishna, and I'd probably see my grandmother telling me to eat more rice?"

"While waving a wooden spoon threateningly," Meera added, and the group erupted in knowing laughter that seemed to make the very air sparkle with shared understanding.

The laughter faded into something warmer, more intimate, as the morning grew deeper around them. The scent of blooming flowers grew stronger, and someone had lit cooking fires whose smoke carried the promise of the afternoon meal.

Madhav frowned, still grappling with the magnitude of it all. "But what about all the scriptures and teachings on rebirth? Centuries of wisdom can't all be wrong, can it?"

Mia's bells chimed as she adjusted her position, her movement creating small currents in the warm air. "Perhaps the question isn't whether they were wrong, but whether we've been reading them literally when they were always meant to be poetry."

Shiva leaned forward slightly, his gaze steady, the dying light creating shadows that danced across his features. "Rebirth was never about coming back as someone else. It was always metaphor, not a cosmic recycling program."

He let that sink in, watching their expressions. "You die every time you drop an illusion. Every time you discover truth, you experience rebirth."

The real 'next life' isn't another existence; it's another way of existing."

The friends and their new companions sat quietly, absorbing this reframe of everything they'd been taught. The air around them seemed to pulse with possibility, thick with the scents of earth and flowers and the distant promise of rain.

"So, the ancient texts weren't describing literal reincarnation?" Sid asked, his voice soft in the gathering dusk.

"They were describing transformation," Arjun said, brushing dirt from under his fingernails. "The death of ignorance, the

birth of understanding. But somewhere along the way, metaphor became dogma, poetry became policy."

Sid's voice emerged from the calm surroundings, thoughtful and measured. "And the promise to escape death's clutches became the cornerstone of devotion. Fear gave birth to institutions that found their purpose in selling liberation, promising salvation to those who would believe out of ignorance."

He paused, watching the smoke emerging from a distance.

"Generation after generation of seekers, clutching at these promises in faith, in hope. Trading their freedom for the comfort of certainty." His voice carried a note of sadness. "No wonder Marx said *religion is the opium of the masses*."

A silence settled over them, not empty, but full. The kind of quiet that follows when an old wound is finally named.

Chatty suddenly moaned loudly, slamming his hands on the soft grass with dramatic flair. "Great! I've wasted several lifetimes filling out rebirth paperwork at the cosmic immigration office, and now you're telling me the damn office doesn't exist? With whom do I lodge a complaint? Can I get a refund for my sufferings?"

Meera's laughter rang out like temple bells, clear and joyous in the crisp air. "I'll cosign your complaint letter. All those years of being good for future karma points!"

Abhi snorted, grinning as the tension broke like a wave against shore. The group's laughter seemed to pause the incoming grey clouds as the sun shone brightly.

Abhi shook his head with a soft chuckle, then his expression grew more thoughtful, his voice taking on a different quality, deeper, as if speaking from a place where truth lives.

"Chatty, forget the refund. The best you can do now is stop applying for another life and start living this one."

He paused, breathing in the rich midday air.

"Because if you're always looking for another land, another moment, another version of yourself, you'll miss the one that's breathing right here. The one that's always been here, waiting."

In the distance, someone was playing a flute, the melody weaving through their silence like a thread connecting moments.

Madhav finally spoke, his mind working through the implications. "This is it. This life, this moment, this conversation. No dress rehearsal, no second chances, no cosmic do-overs."

"This is it," Mia confirmed gently, her bells creating tiny music all around. "And isn't that liberating? No need to be perfect for the next life. No need to accumulate good karma for future rewards. Just this. Just now. Just the extraordinary ordinariness of being alive."

Sid stretched his legs out in front of him, feeling the cool grass against his skin, a new kind of relaxation settling over his features. "It's terrifying and freeing at the same time," he murmured. Then, almost as if remembering it mid-thought, he added with quiet conviction.

"As Thoreau wrote... *'Fools stand on their island of opportunities and look toward another land.'*"

Heaven & Hell – The Divine Fear Factory

Abhi leaned forward, sweat beading on his forehead despite the breeze. "Alright, everyone, we've completely trashed karma and exposed rebirth as cosmic bureaucracy gone wrong. Now let's tackle the heavyweight champions of spiritual terror: heaven and hell. Do they actually exist, or are we dealing with the greatest marketing scam in human history?"

Chatty's eyes lit up like he'd just discovered free Wi-Fi. "Oh, PLEASE tell me we're about to debunk the ultimate carrot-and-stick scheme! Because I've been avoiding bacon, skipping fun parties, and saying extra prayers my whole life for potentially NOTHING!"

He started tearing a leaf into tiny pieces, his nervous energy barely contained.

Mia laughed, nervously tucking her gray hair behind her ear. "You know, I've never met anyone with an actual hell travel review. No TripAdvisor ratings, no Yelp complaints. Seems like the afterlife has the worst customer service department ever."

"Maybe they don't allow reviews," Meera giggled. "Eternal damnation comes with a strict non-disclosure agreement!"

Shiva observed them all with that slow, knowing smile that always appeared right before reality got flipped upside down. "Heaven is a golden leash that keeps you obedient. Hell is a

mental prison you build with your own fears. Together, they create a cage so enormous, you mistake it for the entire universe."

Chatty dropped his shredded leaf, mouth hanging open. "Wait, WHAT? You're telling me my grandmother's detailed heaven reunion plans with grandpa were complete fiction?"

His usual confidence wavered as the implications hit him.

Sid got up and started walking around. He suddenly stopped his restless pacing and spun around. "Think about it, Chatty. If heaven actually existed as real estate, don't you think billionaires would've already bought up all the prime oceanfront properties? You'd end up stuck in the afterlife equivalent of economy class seating - for eternity!"

Meera burst into delighted laughter, clapping her hands. "Economy damnation! With terrible in-flight meals and no leg room! Meanwhile, the first-class sinners get personal demons and premium torture chambers!"

"That's not funny!" Madhav protested, gripping his knees so tight his knuckles went white. "Every single religion throughout history mentions heaven and hell. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism - they can't ALL be perpetrating the same lie!"

"Have you ever seen a travel brochure for paradise?" Arjun asked gently, placing his dirt-stained hand on Madhav's tense shoulder. "A verified map? Even a single Instagram post from the celestial realm?" He chuckled, brushing soil from his gardening clothes. "Trust me, I spent decades trying to earn good-deed points, thinking I was building up some cosmic credit score. Turns out I was just playing a completely rigged game."

"What ARE they then?" Mia demanded, leaning forward eagerly. "If they're not actual places with zip codes and everything?"

"Psychological states," Shiva said with elegant simplicity.

"Come again?" Sid raised both eyebrows skeptically.

Meera tilted her head. "You mean like moods?"

"When you live consumed by fear, guilt, jealousy, rage, and suffering," Shiva explained, "you are quite literally experiencing hell. When you exist in states of peace, love, awareness, and genuine joy, you are dwelling in heaven."

Abhi's jaw practically hit the courtyard stones. "The gates aren't in some distant sky - they're installed right inside our heads?"

"Every single time I felt genuinely blissful and content, I was actually IN heaven?" Meera gasped, her eyes widening with recognition. "And all those guilt trips I put myself through were literal trips to hell?"

Chatty looked around wildly at the group. "Are you seriously telling me I've been the architect of my own torture chamber this entire time? I've been playing warden to myself?"

"The mind is the ultimate magician," Shiva continued with a slight grin. "It performs the most incredible flip - one moment you're in paradise, the next you're drowning in purgatory. But tell me, what actually changed in reality?"

Arjun shook his head slowly, staring at his earth-stained hands with new understanding. "Absolutely nothing external. Just the thoughts in my head. No wonder I could feel completely miserable while standing in the most gorgeous garden on earth."

"How do we escape this mental prison?" Abhi asked eagerly, leaning forward.

"That's the beautiful joke," Shiva smiled wider. "You don't escape anything. You simply wake up and realize the prison was always imaginary."

Abhi whispered in amazement, "When I'm unconscious and lost in mental drama, I'm in hell."

"And when I'm fully awake and present, I'm in heaven," Mia added with sudden, brilliant clarity. "Right here, right now, in this very moment!"

"Wait, wait, WAIT!" Chatty jumped up excitedly. "So, salvation isn't some distant future event we have to die to experience? It's happening RIGHT NOW?"

"Bingo!" Mia grinned broadly, clapping her hands together in delight. "Heaven was here all along, patiently waiting. We just showed up fashionably late to our own enlightenment party!"

Sid started laughing. "This reminds me of that famous samurai story. Want to hear it?"

"Please!" Meera urged.

"A fierce warrior approached a Zen master demanding, 'Tell me about heaven and hell!' The monk looked him up and down, then sneered, 'You? You want to understand heaven and hell? You're nothing but a filthy, ignorant brute!' The samurai's blood boiled. He drew his sword in murderous rage, ready to strike the monk dead. Just then, the monk smiled peacefully and said, 'That rage, that hatred - that's hell.'"

Sid paused dramatically. *"The samurai suddenly understood completely. His anger vanished. He felt profound gratitude and bowed*

deeply. The monk smiled again: 'And that gratitude, that peace-that's heaven.'"

Meera's face lit up with a childlike smile. "He experienced both heaven and hell within two minutes without dying once! Better than any theme park ride!"

"Exactly!" Chatty exclaimed. "All those sleepless nights I spent worrying about my sins and whether I'd make it to paradise?"

"The worrying itself WAS the sin," Abhi grinned. "You were torturing yourself for no reason!"

"And what about all those religious leaders who use these concepts to control people?" Madhav asked with growing indignation.

"Classic power manipulation," Shiva nodded knowingly. "Keep people terrified of imaginary future punishment, and they'll obey absolutely anything you tell them in the present."

"It's brilliant, actually," Arjun mused. "Terrify people with threats they can never verify, then position yourself as the only one who can save them."

"The ultimate protection racket!" Meera laughed. "Pay your tithes, follow our rules, or face eternal torture - and oh, by the way, no refunds or guarantees!"

Chatty threw both hands up in theatrical dismay. "I cannot BELIEVE I fell for the ultimate con job! No karma scorekeeping, no afterlife rewards system, no cosmic accountant keeping track of my good and bad deeds!"

"So, what am I supposed to do with my life now?" he wailed dramatically. "How do I know if I'm being good without some divine report card?"

"LIVE!" Shiva laughed heartily. "Live fully, fearlessly, authentically, without constantly calculating imaginary prizes or punishments!"

"But isn't that terrifying?" Madhav asked quietly, still looking shaken. "Without consequences, what stops people from doing terrible things?"

"The consequences are immediate," Arjun pointed out. "When you act from hatred, you experience hell instantly. When you act from love, you experience heaven right away. You don't have to wait for some cosmic judgment day."

"That's actually incredibly liberating," Sid exhaled, his shoulders now visibly relaxing as he sat down again.

"No more spiritual performance anxiety," Mia giggled. "No more trying to impress some invisible judge!"

But Madhav still looked troubled, rocking slightly in his seat. "If there's no separation between us and everything else, if it's all one consciousness or whatever, then where does 'Madhav' go? What happens to me?"

Shiva's expression softened with compassion. "Who is asking that question, Madhav? Who is afraid of disappearing?"

His voice became gentle as water. "A wave might fear its dissolution back into the ocean. But was the wave ever actually separate from the water? It was always ocean, expressing itself temporarily as 'wave.'"

Something profound shifted in Madhav's face. The tight fear around his eyes softened, his breathing deepened.

"It's like that story of the disciple," Shiva continued.

"He traveled for months to meet his master and finally asked, 'Teacher, what should I do to achieve enlightenment?' The master smiled and asked, 'Have you eaten today?' 'Yes, master.' 'Then go wash your bowl.'"

Chatty frowned in confusion. "That's it? No secret mantra? No meditation technique? No years of spiritual practices?"

"The sacred isn't hiding in some distant realm," Abhi realized aloud in wonder. "It's right here in the most ordinary activities."

"The bowl was never separate from the act of washing it," Mia murmured thoughtfully.

"Just like we were never separate from what people call the divine," Meera whispered with growing amazement.

A comfortable silence settled over the group as this understanding rippled through them.

"Maybe enlightenment isn't about reaching somewhere else," Meera said softly. "Maybe it's about remembering we were never actually lost in the first place."

Shiva stood up and stretched, the golden noon light catching his peaceful expression. "Speaking of washing bowls, I should check on our lunch preparations. You all feel free to explore the grounds, and we'll reconvene in the dining room shortly."

Chatty immediately perked up and jumped to his feet. "FINALLY! Food! First, we nourish the body, then we figure out

the rest of this cosmic joke. But seriously, where's the bathroom? All this talk about dissolving into universal consciousness is making me need to dissolve some processed beverages!"

Sid burst out laughing. "Be careful, Chatty. If karma actually exists after all, the plumbing might stage a rebellion against you!"

"Divine harassment lawsuit incoming, Karma... you bitch!" Chatty called over his shoulder as he practically sprinted toward the facilities.

Meera stood gracefully. "I'm going back to my weaving project. Though honestly, I suspect the patterns were weaving themselves all along and I was just getting in the way!"

"Kitchen duty calls," Mia smiled peacefully. "Amazing how cooking happens whether I stress about making it perfect or not."

"Back to the garden for me," Arjun grinned, looking at his soil-stained clothes with affection rather than annoyance. "The vegetables seem to have this whole existence thing figured out way better than any of us humans do!"

Their laughter and voices echoed across the courtyard as they scattered in different directions, each carrying with them the wild, liberating realization that paradise wasn't some distant destination requiring a lifetime of spiritual frequent-flyer miles - it was wherever they happened to be standing right now. Their voices faded into the blissful air, leaving a sense that something profound had been shared among friends who had become fellow travelers on a path that led nowhere but here.

Unchained: A Realization

Wrapped in Wit

As the four friends, now joined by a very contemplative yet still irreverent Chatty, wandered deeper into the ashram, waiting for lunch to be announced, they found themselves increasingly enchanted by its energy. Every turn revealed something unexpected. Small details that made the place feel alive, unlike the rigid austerity of other spiritual retreats.

It was a place where wisdom was not confined to scriptures but lived in the breath of existence. In art, in dialogue, in silent moments of being.

The gardens mirrored this philosophy. Around them, the ashram gardens lived this truth. Unlike manicured lawns trimmed into perfection, the greenery here grew wild and free, carrying an untamed beauty. Medicinal herbs thrived alongside flowering vines. Fruits ripened naturally beneath the Himalayan sun. Birds wove in and out of the foliage, their songs blending with distant temple chants - a melody as ancient as the earth itself.

Madhav paused beneath a low-hanging tree, running his fingers through its leaves. The earthy scent clung to his fingertips as he exhaled softly.

"It's my turn to tell a story." He said, smiling.

All the friends looked at him curiously as this was the first time they'd seen Madhav so visibly relaxed.

"A young priest was told that important guests were expected at the temple. Wanting to impress, he spent the entire morning tending the garden. He removed weeds, pruned branches, combed the moss, and raked the autumn leaves into neat, symmetrical mounds. Every stone was placed with precision. Every petal seemed rehearsed.

When he was done, he stood back, satisfied. 'Doesn't it look beautiful now?' he asked the old Zen master who had been watching quietly from across the wall.

The master nodded. 'Indeed, it does,' he said. 'But something's not quite right.'

He asked the priest to help him over the wall. Slowly, the master walked to the center of the garden, gripped the trunk of a tree, and shook it hard.

Leaves scattered down in wild, unpredictable patterns. Orange, russet, and brown. Chaos, dancing.

'There,' the master said, stepping back. 'Now it's perfect.'"

Abhi patted Madhav on the back. "This is brilliant, Madhav. Like life, the mess is the masterpiece."

They continued their walk, admiring the perfect imperfections all around. Abhi mused aloud.

"You know," he murmured, "Shiva just told us that suffering exists because of ignorance. If we don't know ourselves, we remain chained, grasping at control, mistaking bondage for certainty."

Sid glanced at him, thoughtful. "And here, there are no chains. No control. Just... existence. Letting things be."

Abhi inhaled deeply. "It's strange. In temples, I always felt an urge to 'worship', to pray, to offer something, to seek approval from a force beyond me. But here... I don't feel that urge. I feel like I'm already part of something sacred."

Madhav nodded. "Maybe that's the point. Maybe devotion isn't about rituals. It's about realizing we were never separate to begin with."

Sid turned toward him, eyes gleaming.

"Then Shiva was right," he said slowly.

"To find ourselves is to find God. God not as a person but a presence."

A hush settled between them.

Then, from behind, Chatty let out a dramatic groan, shattering the solemn mood.

"Oh, great. Now, not only am I unworthy, but I apparently have the added responsibility of being God. Who the hell signed me up for this job?"

Madhav chuckled. "You did, buddy. You just didn't read the fine print when you were born."

Chatty rubbed his face. "Let me get this straight. If I don't pray, God isn't offended. If I don't chant, I'm not losing some divine tally. And if I screw up my life, it's not because some celestial bookkeeper is punishing me. It's because I never realized who I was to begin with?"

Abhi smiled. "That's a fair summary."

Chatty sighed. "Well, this is highly inconvenient. I was sort of hoping my problems were cosmic clerical errors. Now, turns out I've just been a self-sabotaging idiot."

Shiva's words echoed through their minds again:

"Know yourself and be free. You were, are, and always free. Rather, you are the freedom itself due to your infinitude."

Chatty ran his hands through his hair, looking up at the sky.

"Well, that's just fantastic. So, if I suffer, it's my own damn fault. If I'm happy, I have only myself to thank. And if I keep repeating my mistakes, it's not karma. It's just me being an unrepentant fool. How deeply liberating and utterly terrifying."

Sid chuckled. "Without a doubt."

A breeze stirred the trees, as though the universe itself was chuckling at their predicament.

Then, as if answering their thoughts, the wind carried whispered echoes through the air. Shiva's voice, spoken just minutes ago, seemed to rise within them again:

"We fear freedom because we fear ourselves. But the day we realize 'One only appears' - that existence flows through us, not apart from us. What is left to fear?"

Abhi exhaled, the air soft as ash. Freedom had always felt like a distant fire - seen, never touched. But here, among wild jasmine and the raw hush of devotion, it shimmered closer, not as a concept, but as something quietly alive.

He looked down at the earth beneath him, then up at the wide sky. It wasn't an idea anymore. It was a feeling in his feet, in his breath.

He spoke slowly, not quoting Rumi so much as remembering something he'd once lived but couldn't explain:

"There's a field beyond ideas of right and wrong. I'll meet you there."

Not a metaphor. This was the field. This was the meeting. Not poetry, but proof.

Chatty snorted and flopped back into the grass with the theatrical grace of a fainting Victorian.

"A field beyond right and wrong?" he mumbled. "The sacred nap field. Enlightenment brought to you by lying down and dissociating. Should I bring a mat or just collapse where I stand?" He blinked dramatically at the sky. "And what's with all these mystics wanting us horizontal? Sit up straight, Rumi. We're trying to have a civilization."

Rolling over, he pointed a finger at himself, whispering like he'd just cracked a secret:

"Lying in the grass. Speaking in riddles. Zero accountability. Honestly, this divine feels like a very charismatic cult leader in linen pants."

The group burst into laughter, but beneath it, something quieter lingered. Chatty had laughed, but he'd listened.

As he dusted off his jeans and stood, the group moved ahead, letting the land do its quiet work around them.

Soon, they reached the peculiar structure that had drawn them earlier, its presence like a punctuation mark in the silence.

They stepped closer, not with expectation, but with the kind of curiosity that blooms only after laughter and stillness have made space for wonder.

The Sacred that Refused to be Defined

The structure before them stood apart, not merely in its physical form but in the aura it exuded. Unlike the organic mud-brick huts of the ashram, this edifice defied expectation, as if it belonged not to this place, nor any place, but to something beyond place altogether.

It defied classification as a temple, monument, relic, or modern artifact.

The walls were alive with symbols, swirling inscriptions, and cryptic markings that bore no allegiance to any single belief system. Ancient glyphs intertwined with newer, almost rebellious strokes. Some patterns resembled forgotten languages; others felt purely instinctive, as if the artist had abandoned thought and let the brush move of its own accord.

The large wooden door, weathered yet regal, bore carvings that demanded nothing but invited everything. There was no deity presiding over it, no scripture etched into its frame, only a pattern that breathed, shifting in the mind's eye like the rhythm of an unseen pulse.

Abhi ran his fingers over the carvings, tracing them absentmindedly. The texture felt older than time itself, as though the wood had recorded countless seekers before them, each leaving behind unspoken questions.

"This looks... strange," he murmured.

"More than strange," Madhav added. "It refuses definition, like it doesn't want to be understood. Only experienced."

Sid chuckled. "Maybe that's the point. It's not bound by any single belief system or doctrine."

Abhi observed his friends with amusement. "You're all right in your own ways. To me, it seems this space is meant for contemplation, not conclusions. It doesn't impose meaning. It invites presence."

Chatty, who had been admiring a particularly bizarre illustration near the entrance, turned back to the group.

"Okay, but what exactly happens inside?"

Abhi's smile deepened.

"There's only one way to find out."

A pause.

A hesitation.

Madhav exhaled sharply. "What if we don't find anything inside?"

Sid smiled. "Then maybe that's the answer."

Chatty sighed. "Fantastic. We're about to step into an existential paradox. I hope they serve snacks."

The breeze stirred the air, carrying the weight of the moment forward. A silent question the structure itself seemed to ask:

"Are you ready?"

Then, Carl Jung's words surfaced in Abhi's thoughts, seeming to complete what Shiva had started:

"People will do anything, no matter how absurd, to avoid facing their own souls."

Were they ready to face theirs?

Without another word, Abhi stepped forward and pushed the door open, revealing the unknown within.

The House of Devotion, The Home of No Division

As they stepped inside, it was as if the world outside had fallen away.

The air carried a sacred sanctity, an unmistakable pulse of devotion that spoke not in voices, but in strokes, colours, and symbols.

The walls bore the wisdom of faith, inscribed in eloquent calligraphy. The flowing verses of the *Quran e Majeed*, rich with divine poetry, brushed in elegant script upon one side, while *Gurbani's* sacred couplets, strong and meaningful, shone brightly across the hall. Above, the ceiling looked like a heavenly book, with painted arches featuring the Cross, which represents redemption, next to the Star of David, showing Moses in mid-step, leading his people through parted waters. There was no singular narrative here, only a collective breath of reverence.

Their footsteps slowed, reverent, as if the space itself demanded stillness.

On a nearby panel, the Torah Scrolls unfolded in magnificent artistry, illuminated by the seven-branched *Menorah*, whose golden hues flickered as though carrying the echoes of ancient prayers. Beside it, delicate Sanskrit inscriptions framed an intricate illustration of a *Jain Tirthankara*, seated in serene

meditation, his stillness speaking not of absence, but of unfathomable depth.

Below them, the mosaic shimmered, weaving entire lifetimes in its breathtaking imagery.

Krishna danced effortlessly, locked in his eternal *Raas*, his laughter frozen in brilliant hues. An image not of motion, but of divinity unbound by time. Further along, Buddhist mandalas spiralled toward perfect symmetry, each geometric swirl dissolving into the image of the *Dharmachakra*, the Wheel of Dharma, flanked by figures of meditating monks. In another corner, Amish simplicity stood unadorned, depicted in soft, earthly tones, a modest barn, hands clasped in prayer, a candle illuminating the faces of a humble gathering.

Sid whispered, awed, "Everywhere you look, devotion speaks, but not in commandments, not in rituals. It just... exists."

Against the farthest wall, the Om symbol intertwined with Hebrew script, winding like the roots of an ancient tree. The *Ankh*, an Egyptian sign of life, stood beside it, its shape a silent testament to eternity. African indigenous symbols stretched across another panel, paintings of masks, spiritual totems, and hands raised in ancestral reverence. A tribute not to one god, but to the memory of gods that lived within humanity itself.

Madhav ran his fingers over a carving, exhaling sharply.

"This place doesn't tell you what to believe," he murmured. "It shows you how belief breathes."

There was an undeniable harmony in their contrasts, an effortless interweaving of faiths without hierarchy, without

separation, as if the space had abandoned the need for division long before the world outside had realized it was possible.

Chatty, who had been unnervingly quiet, lifted his head like a prophet waking from a nap. "No banners. No supremacy. No one is claiming their god is louder than another's. Just art. Just presence. *Fuck...*" His voice trailed off.

Then, as if guided by an unsaid force, they reached the sanctum sanctorum, the location where one expected the embodiment of divinity to dwell.

They stepped forward.

And what they found changed everything.

The Silent Revelation: A Truth Beyond Idols

This was meant to be the heart of it all, the sanctum sanctorum, the inner chamber where divinity unveils itself.

And then, they saw it. Or rather, they didn't.

The sanctum was empty.

No idol.

No scripture.

No symbol.

Only space.

A void, but strangely whole. A stillness that felt curated, not neglected.

Even their footsteps sounded different here. The echoes didn't reverberate, they dissolved, as if the room swallowed sound the way deep truth swallows thought. Light fell gently from a single opening above, not piercing the space, but bathing it, like it, too, knew how to bow.

They froze. Confusion rippled through them.

Abhi furrowed his brow. Madhav inhaled sharply. Sid's expression hardened. Chatty blinked twice, unsure whether to curse or laugh.

Sid was the first to speak, voice hesitant, almost reluctant to disrupt the sanctity of nothingness. "Is this... incomplete?"

Abhi stared into the void, eyes searching for what wasn't there. "No. I don't think so."

Chatty grumbled, like the mystery itself was giving him a migraine. "Perfect. We followed all the breadcrumbs, only to arrive at a room with literally nothing in it. Someone better explain this cosmic prank before I lose my mind."

Disappointment, or perhaps the refusal of expectation, settled into their bones. Because they had reached the center.

And it was empty.

But then, Abhi's voice broke through the silence. He gestured toward the inscription above the entrance, carved with careful precision, not to explain, but to provoke understanding.

Why be a Muslim when you are Muhammad?

Why remain a Christian when you are Christ?

Why be a Buddhist when you are the Buddha?

Why be a Jaini when you are Jinendra?

Why be a Hindu when you are Vishnu?

Why seek the Divine when you are the Divinity Itself?

Believe it or not, know it or not –

YOU ARE THAT.

A hush fell over the group.

Chatty reread the words, his breath shallow. Madhav let out a slow exhale. Sid tilted his head, gaze unfocused. Abhi simply stood, staring.

The emptiness of the sanctum, which moments before had felt like a loss, was suddenly deliberate. It was not missing something. It was making a statement.

Sid exhaled slowly, staring at the blankness before them. "We've spent our lives segregating and searching for God. ... but what if I've been running from myself?"

Abhi arched his eyebrows thoughtfully.

"All the images, scriptures, prayers, we thought they pointed to something beyond us. But maybe they've been guiding us inward the whole time."

Chatty had no joke to crack. He drummed his fingers against his thigh, staring at the inscription before muttering,

"*Fuck...* What if we've been praying to a mirror this whole time? And I've been treating myself like shit for years?"

Madhav smiled, his voice steady and warm. "Maybe, as Shiva said, the real question was never about finding God. Maybe it was about realizing you were never separate from Him.

Because you are Him."

The air felt electric, charged with something indescribable. It wasn't an answer. Maybe not yet. But it felt like the beginning of one. And then, T.S. Eliot's words surfaced in Madhav's mind, as if whispered by the hollow sanctum itself:

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

For the first time, they saw the truth, not as something external, but that had always been within them.

Where Silence Speaks and Hunger Screams

The group silently reread the inscription, each word lingering in their minds like a riddle begging to be solved. Slowly, they stepped out of the sanctum, then out of the building itself.

Outside, a majestic banyan tree stretched its ancient limbs towards the sky, its gnarled roots extending like veins of wisdom into the earth; its branches arched overhead like a cathedral's dome. Then, as if stirred by the unspoken, its leaves began to rustle. Not wildly. Not with wind. But softly, rhythmically like breath moving through sacred verses. Every shift in thought seemed to echo in the tree's gentle murmur. A leaf detached without drama, pirouetting to the earth, and Chatty whispered, "That felt like punctuation."

Even the light filtered through the canopy with reverence, each beam more invitation than illumination. The tree was not a decoration. It was dialogue. A quiet witness. A slow pulse of presence.

Beneath it, cotton mats were neatly spread - a simple yet inviting space for introspection. Without a word, the friends settled down, letting the serenity of the environment meld with their turbulent thoughts.

None seemed eager to speak.

Each was absorbing the experience in their own way, some wrestling with newfound questions, others simply surrendering to the bliss of creation.

After a long, reflective silence, Madhav finally spoke.

"Man...I can't get those lines we just read out of my mind. They reminded me of something I read ages ago, a quote by a French scientist and priest:

'We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.'"

Sid silently assented, his fingers absently tracing patterns on the ground, as if searching for a tangible grip on the vastness of thought. "This visit has unravelled more than I expected. Answers came, but they brought deeper questions. One of them keeps circling back. What does it truly mean to be Hindu?"

He exhaled, recollecting moments that had stirred him.

"Those lines in the sanctum... They weren't just words. They carried something old, something alive. Not just a belief, not just an identity, but something beyond both. And then, the part about not being Hindu but being Vishnu. It unsettled me."

Madhav leaned forward, intrigued. "I felt that too, Sid. The idea that we are not devotees of a God, but somehow... are that which we worship. It challenges everything we've been taught."

Sid offered a silent yes. There were frowns of internal struggle on his forehead and a tremor in his words. "For a long time, I hesitated to even call myself Hindu. The word carries weight, sometimes baggage. It is often reduced to politics, to ritual, to categories that feel too narrow for something this vast. So, if

someone asked about my faith, I'd sidestep the question, say something vague about believing in a universal path."

Abhi's voice was low, but firm. "And yet, to remove ourselves from something just because it is misunderstood. Doesn't that deny us the depth that lies within it?"

Sid looked at Abhi as the lines on his forehead eased out. "That's what I'm beginning to see. Standing in the sanctum, reading those words, I felt something deeper. Hinduism isn't a label. It isn't a fixed set of rules or historical boundaries. It is an evolution, an unfolding. It does not ask for blind belief but direct experience.

It is not a doctrine. It is a way of seeing."

Madhav exhaled, absorbing the weight of Sid's words.

"Not a doctrine but a way of seeing... That's deep."

Sid continued, his expressions now natural. "I remember asking Shiva once, "What does it really mean to be Hindu? And his response stayed with me."

All the friends listened in, including Chatty, though reluctantly.

"He said that, at its heart, Hinduism is not about worshipping Gods. *Hinduism, and for that matter any religion, is about realizing oneness.* All faiths, all philosophies, are simply windows, each shaped differently, each tinted by time, but all looking out upon the same vast sky. The sky does not change. Only the frame around it does."

Abhi added. "The *Rig Veda* states it so simply:

'Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti' - Truth is One, but the wise call it by many names.

A profound silence settled. The banyan tree swayed gently, as if eavesdropping on truths too subtle for speech.

Sid leaned back, his gaze distant. "Shiva once said something that's stayed with me. That our journey toward oneness is paradoxical. Sometimes we begin by feeling separate, yearning for union. Other times, we glimpse the truth that we were never separate to begin with. And yet, even knowing this, we create distinction. Maybe to taste the sweetness of longing. Maybe to play in the illusion, just for the joy of returning."

Chatty raised an eyebrow.

"So basically... hide-and-seek with the cosmos? Knowing full well that the one hiding and the one seeking are the same guy?"

Madhav exhaled, the kind that carries lifetimes. "That's why realization can't be gifted. It can't be taught. It has to be lived. If religion is realization, then it must rise from within and not from texts, not from tradition, but from direct experience."

Abhi nodded, his voice softer. "And interestingly, that's also the essence of spirituality. Not separation. Not struggle. Just the quiet knowing that everything - the wind, the soil, even our confusion is part of the same boundless existence."

Madhav turned to Chatty, who looked like he'd wandered off into a daydream. "Are you following, Chatty?"

Chatty blinked. "Of course I'm following. Haven't you seen me walking behind you all morning? But as far as this conversation goes... could you repeat it for your malnourished friend here? I'm weak in the stomach, which makes me weak in the head. Philosophy on an empty belly is a crime against humanity."

Madhav grinned. "Alright, here's the digestible version. You know what I think? Form and formless aren't opposites. Rather, they're reflections of the same essence. Religion is the outer garment of spirituality. Spirituality is the breath that animates religion from within. You can't separate the flame from its heat. One reveals, the other radiates."

Chatty ran his fingers through his hair like he was petting a revelation. "This means that the religion is the form, and spirituality the formless? Then why do we treat them like rival political parties? Honestly, religion feels like IKEA furniture that comes with instructions, but if you don't bring your own tools, aka spirituality, you're just sitting on a pile of wood wondering why enlightenment hasn't arrived."

Abhi laughed. "Exactly. The scriptures, the chants, the temples, they're not the destination. They're invitations. But if the seeker forgets to seek, and only worships the invitation, the journey never begins."

Madhav stretched his legs, eyes twinkling. "Let me channel Shiva for a moment. Storytime.

"There was once a village where every morning, the priest rang a bell to signal prayer. Over time, the bell became sacred. People bowed to it, garlanded it, even built a shrine around it.

One day, a wandering mystic arrived. He asked, 'Why do you worship the bell?'

The villagers replied, 'It calls us to God.'

The mystic smiled. 'Then why do you stop at the bell?'

He rang it once, walked past the shrine, into the forest, and sat in silence.

Some followed. Most didn't.

The bell kept ringing. But only a few remembered to listen beyond the sound."

Sid's eyes lit up with recognition. "Madhav, listening to this story, the words of St. Augustine suddenly flashed in my mind. He said,

'Our hearts are restless until they rest in You.'

That restlessness, that longing, is the spiritual pulse. Religion can guide it, but only if it remembers it's not the resting place. Just the signpost."

Chatty blinked. "What you are saying, Madhav, is that I've been spiritually dating a bell? That's awkward."

Madhav moaned. "Please don't ruin the parable."

But Chatty wasn't done. He suddenly sat up, eyes wide with theatrical horror, turning to Sid like a man betrayed by his own guru and throwing his arms up in theatrical despair.

"Philosophizing on an empty stomach? What kind of monster are you, Sid? I'm one epiphany away from collapsing into hunger-induced enlightenment, and you guys are busy dismantling the cosmos like calories don't count!"

He jabbed a finger at the group.

"You, my fellow seekers and stomach betrayers. Listen well to the sacred truth of your starving friend. Sometimes, the path to enlightenment begins with lunch."

Without waiting for a response from his friends, Chatty grabbed their arms like a prophet hauling disciples toward the promised land.

"No more cosmic riddles. We march. Toward food. Before someone quotes the Upanishads and I transcend via malnutrition!"

Sid burst into laughter, while Abhi and Madhav grinned at Chatty's melodramatic suffering.

"Well, when you put it that way..." Abhi chuckled.

From Bliss to Mystery:

The Feast Before the Question

The lunch was simple yet sumptuous. A feast of local flavors is arranged in a casual buffet spread just outside the kitchen.

The ambiance matched the meal — light, effortless, intimate. People lounged on cotton mats or casually occupied the few scattered cane chairs, chatting, laughing, and savouring the moment.

The five friends found a cozy spot nearby, delighting in the novelty of using banana leaves as plates and their nature-gifted fingers as utensils.

It was primal.

It was messy.

And it was absolute bliss.

Naturally, Chatty took center stage in the banter, sprinkling absurdity over the meal like an overenthusiastic chef dusting cinnamon on a dessert.

Laughter mingled with the rich aroma of fresh spices, dissolving the weight of deep contemplation into the warmth of shared joy.

After finishing their meal and disposing of their banana leaves, they wandered into a small washing area shaded beneath low trees. There, laid out like nature's own toolkit, were a variety of wild leaves - thick, waxy, and delicately veined.

To their surprise, the leaves worked like a dream. When rubbed between wet palms, they released a faint citrusy fragrance, subtle and grounding, like lemongrass steeped in memory. Their texture was soft yet fibrous, slightly coarse, lending the hands a gentle scrub without abrasion.

It felt like the earth had offered them a ritual, not a cleansing, but a communion. The simplest things felt sacred here. Even washing their hands carried a sense of reverence, as if the forest itself was whispering, "Be here. Even now." Because sometimes, even soap leaves are sacred scripture.

As they walked back toward their huts, Chatty sidled up to Shiva, draping an arm around him like a long-lost brother from a dramatic Bollywood reunion scene.

"This was sheer bliss," Chatty sighed, as if narrating the grand finale of an epic journey.

"Before I crash and slip into my food-induced coma, what's the agenda for the evening?"

Shiva smiled.

"Today, you all relax and enjoy the place. Tomorrow afternoon, we will be meeting *Turiyaji*, the inspiration behind all that you see around."

Sid, intrigued, moved closer.

"Turiyaji...That's an interesting name, Shiva. What does it mean?"

Shiva's response was as cryptic as ever. "It simply means 'the fourth.'"

Then pause. "But you'll understand tomorrow."

Chatty immediately removed his arm, squinting in suspicion.

"Oh great. Another mystery. What do you mean, 'the fourth'? Is he some kind of multi-dimensional being or something?"

Shiva laughed.

"Why don't you ask that tomorrow? But I must warn you, Chatty. Be ready for the unexpected."

Chatty narrowed his eyes, crossing his arms.

"Wait. Is Turiyaji even more confusing than you? Because if that's the case, I need to mentally prepare."

Shiva and the rest burst into laughter.

Then, as if drawn by the moment, Shiva's expression softened, and his voice lowered. This was not a sign of secrecy, but rather of reverence.

"You know what? Let me tell you about my first experience here... I came to know of Turiyaji through a close acquaintance who arranged the meeting. I still vividly remember my visit here. Just like you, the whole environment surprised me, made me curious, especially about the mind behind it all."

The group listened, their curiosity thick in the air as Shiva continued his remembrance.

"...And so, I stood outside Turiyaji's abode, gathering the courage to knock. But before my hand could even reach the door, a gentle, clear voice from inside called out.

"Who's there? A practitioner or a believer?"

The words hung in the air like a riddle waiting to be solved.

Chatty raised an eyebrow. "Okay, weirdly intimidating question. How did you respond?"

Shiva smiled, the kind of smile that comes before an illusion dissolves.

"I said, 'Neither.'

I was not a practitioner looking for techniques to chase elusive meditative states or mystical powers. Nor was I a believer, tied down by rigid doctrines. I was a seeker - curious, open, searching for answers in my continuous exploration of the self."

There was a pause.

Then, the voice from inside spoke again.

"Today you seek answers, tomorrow God, and maybe the next day, Liberation. Enter if you are ready to let go of everything to gain everything. Surrender completely, and you will have it all because you already have it all."

The group fell into a hush as if something ancient had brushed past them.

Madhav's voice emerged like a whisper remembered from another life. "That's deep. Those words reminded me of the paradoxical language of the scriptures."

Sid mused in wonder. "It seems Turiyaji doesn't place faith in idle curiosity... nor in rituals that are merely repeated. To him, unconditioned voluntary surrender seems to be the way."

Shiva responded with stillness, a silence that didn't lack words but overflowed with understanding.

Sid spoke again, more certain now, the words arriving like an invocation. "I remember something from Rumi. Just a single line, and I could sense Turiyaji in it.

Try something different. Surrender."

No one moved. No one replied.

Abhi traced a brittle leaf that he was carrying in his hand with reverence, as if its veins carried scripture.

Madhav exhaled softly, like someone releasing a lifetime of unasked questions.

Chatty suddenly stopped with exaggerated urgency and looked at his friends. His expression was a mix of exhaustion, horror, and sheer determination, as if he had been through the most excruciating mental battle known to humanity.

"Okay. I see what's happening. All of you are on the brink of spiritual enlightenment. But I, dear brothers, am on the brink of DEATH."

Sid blinked. "...What?"

Chatty dramatically grabbed his stomach. "Because I have just realized the most dangerous truth of all. I ate too much at lunch. And now, my body is rejecting this PhD. level enlightenment talks in favour of a food-induced coma!"

Abhi and Madhav burst into laughter, while Shiva shook his head, amused.

Sid punched Chatty lightly on the arm, still chuckling. "You and your nonstop drama, Chatty."

And with that, the conversation dissolved into the kind of laughter that carries lifetimes of friendship.

The Question that Unravels Everything

The afternoon air exuded a sense of contentment, the kind that one feels after a simple yet sumptuous meal.

The group continued their stroll lazily toward their cottage, their steps unhurried, their minds floating somewhere between fullness and contemplation.

Chatty, however, was fighting a losing battle with sleep. He lagged behind like a defeated warrior, his eyelids drooping dangerously, each step closer to unconsciousness than to the cottage.

Sid smirked at his sluggish movements. "Chatty, at this point, I'm not sure if you're walking or sleepwalking."

Chatty waved a weak, dismissive hand. "I refuse to answer any difficult questions right now. My brain is officially out of office."

Shiva chuckled before Sid turned back to him, his tone shifting from amusement to genuine curiosity.

"What brought you here the first time?"

Shiva's expression softened, as if he were recalling a memory that felt both distant yet deeply present.

"I was struggling with a question. One I had been contemplating for some time. I wanted to hear Turiyaji's perspective."

Abhi inched closer to Shiva and spoke. "Now I'm curious. What was the question?"

Shiva stopped mid-step, glanced at his friends, and spoke calmly, almost offhand.

"What is that, by knowing which, all can be known?"

Sid halted.

Chatty, who had been leaning drowsily against the tree, let out a soft groan. His eyes were half-lidded, still recovering from the gravity of rice and revelation. "Wait. What? I swear I was seconds from entering nap-nirvana... and then Shiva goes full Zen missile launch. "Did I mishear, or are we now solving ancient riddles before digestion's even complete?"

He raised his hands, half hostage negotiator, half spiritual skeptic, pointing an accusing finger at Shiva. "No, you don't just casually drop the most impossible question in human history like you're ordering *chai*."

Sid ignored him, still frowning. "That's a strange question. How can we possibly know something that makes everything known? That's not logical!"

Abhi sat down on a nearby rock, staring at the ground as if it might offer a clue. "Is it a concept? A principle? Or... something experiential?"

Madhav folded his arms, eyes narrowed. "Sounds like a trap disguised as a riddle. If everything can be known through one thing, then that one thing must be... everything."

Chatty squinted at the sky. "Or maybe it's just a metaphor for Google."

Sid chuckled despite himself. "Knowing Google doesn't mean you know anything. It just means you know where to look."

The group fell into a hush. Shiva smiled, like someone holding a key no one asked for. "It's something to ponder. But here's the hint Turiyaji once gave me.

"It's not a thing," Turiyaji had said.

"It's the knower of all things."

Silence followed. It wasn't dramatic. Just precise. A moment long enough for the weight of the words to settle, unrushed.

Chatty blinked. Twice.

"Okay... well that's more effective than caffeine."

Shiva continued. "Imagine you're in a jewelry shop that sells gold ornaments. Each ornament is unique with a different name, shape, and function. Despite all those differences, what is one thing common in all of them?"

Sid answered. "Gold."

Shiva's eyes twinkled. "Exactly. By knowing gold, you also know the reality of all gold ornaments, because gold is their common substratum. Likewise, if we discover what is the substratum of all knowledge, then by knowing that, we will know everything knowable."

A heavy silence settled over them as the friends processed the idea, their steps starting a slow walk again unconsciously.

Chatty dramatically threw up his hands. "Shiva, this is mental torture. You expect us to unravel the secrets of the universe right after lunch? Do me a favor. Just tell us the damn answer, so I can sleep in peace!"

Sid put up a stop sign with his hands. "Not so fast, Fatso."

Chatty shot him a glare. "Sid, if you delay my nap any further, I will personally ensure you wake up tomorrow morning without eyebrows."

Sid laughed. "I want to ponder this a bit longer. What do you think, Abhi, Madhav?"

Madhav responded, shifting slightly. "Yeah, I want to think about it too. But before we break... Tell me, Shiva, should we prepare in any way for tomorrow's meeting with Turiyaji?"

Shiva smiled, the kind that carried more silence than sound.

He said, voice unhurried, "Have you ever wondered why in some traditions, people remove their shoes or cover their heads before entering a sacred space?"

Madhav blinked. "To not dirty the place, right?"

"Yes... But that's only the surface. Symbolically, it's an invitation to leave behind the weight of identity, roles, and dust gathered from walking too long in the world. *Removing the shoes is removing the self as we think we are, so we can step barefoot into what is.*"

Shiva looked toward the ground. "The earth, especially when consecrated, is not inert. It remembers devotion. It holds it. Bare feet acknowledge that. They allow contact without filters, without the insulation of self-importance."

Chatty scratched his head and wagged a finger. "So... it's not just about keeping the floor clean, it's like spiritual airport security. Leave your shoes, your ego, and all forbidden attachments in the tray?"

The group chuckled, but Shiva didn't laugh; he grinned.

Not amused. Delighted.

"Ramakrishna Paramhansa used to give a beautiful example. *He said that for a needle to feel the pull of a magnet, it must first be free of dirt and dust.*

Just like that, if we wish to feel the force of truth, we must shed the layers of illusion clouding us."

Chatty raised his hands dramatically. "And covering the head?"

Shiva smiled, letting the moment settle before answering.

"The head is the seat of knowledge. Covering it is a symbol of entering a sacred space with humility, not carrying in our prior knowledge, assumptions, or expectations about ourselves.

It is a reminder that when stepping into a temple of knowledge, when meeting a teacher, we should empty ourselves of past beliefs and biases, leaving space to truly listen."

Chatty snapped his fingers. "So basically, wisdom works better when your mental cup isn't already overflowing with '*I already know this*' nonsense? This sounds very similar to the story I read about the Zen master and a scholar who came to visit him."

"A Zen master once invited a scholar into his home.

The scholar was eager, full of theories, full of questions, and full of everything he had learned from books and teachers.

He asked the master to show him what Zen meant.

Instead, the Zen master offered tea.

He poured and poured until the cup overflowed.

The scholar cried out, 'Stop! The cup is full! No more will go in!'

The master simply smiled and said,

'Like this cup, you are full of ideas. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?'

Sid laughed. "That's the naked truth. You can't pour fresh tea into a cup that's already full."

Chatty sighed dramatically. "Well, great. That means I have to show up tomorrow without my usual superiority complex. Sounds exhausting."

Madhav grinned. "Think of it as taking off your mental shoes."

Chatty grunted. "Fine, fine. But if enlightenment requires me to be humble, I expect compensation, preferably in the form of snacks."

Sid shook his head, chuckling. "Wisdom AND food. The ultimate spiritual package."

The group laughed, the weight of philosophy effortlessly balancing with the simplicity of humor, the perfect preparation for what lay ahead.

The Stranger Who Knew

Before Knowing

The winter sun had descended, casting long, wispy shadows across the earth.

The soft glow of twilight painted the sky in hues of deep orange and dusky purple, signalling the slow retreat of daylight.

By the time the four friends emerged from their hut after a much-needed siesta, the air had cooled, carrying the crisp scent of dried leaves and distant burning firewood.

Shiva had once again left them to meet some old acquaintances, promising to return later in the evening.

With nothing else on the agenda, the group made their way toward the dining area in search of tea or coffee.

The hall was comfortably occupied. A medley of young and old residents sat in easy conversation, their faces illuminated by the warm flicker of dim lighting.

A few of them recognized the group and greeted them enthusiastically, exchanging pleasantries and curious inquiries.

After a few minutes, the friends settled in a corner, easing into the comfortable rhythm of chatter as they sipped their drinks.

Sid was still grappling with the question Shiva had posed earlier. *"What is that by knowing which all can be known?"* brought up the topic again.

What started as a casual discussion quickly became animated. Sid, Madhav, and Abhi were completely engrossed, delving deeper into philosophical implications, their voices occasionally rising in excitement before dropping again in contemplation.

But Chatty felt himself drifting.

It wasn't that he didn't care. It was just that he wasn't sure where to start.

Philosophy tended to wrap his brain into knots, and Shiva's cryptic riddles weren't helping.

He listened for a while, but the abstract words bounced around his head like marbles in an empty tin.

He sighed, staring into his coffee, feeling distant yet oddly restless.

And then. He sensed it.

A presence.

A gentle, waiting presence.

Someone was standing next to him.

The sound of a soft yet firm voice echoed through the silence, like a wind moving through stillness.

"Pardon my intrusion, my dear. I see something is troubling you. Please feel free to share if you are comfortable."

Chatty looked up, startled.

The stranger stood tall, clothed in a simple cotton robe.

Strongly built, completely bald, yet carrying a lightness, not physical, but something deeper, something intangible.

His gaze was warm, steady, and entirely free of urgency or expectation.

He simply was present. He waited with the ease of someone who had all the time in the world.

Chatty blinked.

For some reason, he felt seen.

Not just acknowledged, but understood, in a way that unsettled him.

Not knowing how to respond, he blurted out the first thing that came to his mind.

"We came here with Shiva. Do you know him?"

The stranger laughed, not mockingly, but with an easy amusement that felt like sunlight breaking through clouds.

"I know him as I know you," he said simply.

Chatty squinted, half-convinced someone was messing with him.

"How? We've never met."

The stranger's expression remained unchanged. Calm, unwavering.

Then, as if answering not just with words, but with something deeper, he said:

"My dear, does the river recognize the waves it meets?"

Does the sky remember every cloud that passes through it?

Do the flames distinguish which spark came first and which came last?

You believe we have never met because you see yourself as separate.

But tell me. How does one introduce oneself to the ocean when one is the drop?

How does the wind explain itself to the breeze?

I have always known you because there has never been a moment when you and I were separate."

Chatty stared.

It wasn't confusion. No, "confusion" was too mild a word.

His brain had been metaphorically drop-kicked into a realm where words had lost all meaning.

Was he hallucinating?

Was this man real?

What kind of introduction was that?

Chatty was about to turn away in pure dismay. Forget it, nope, I'm done. A sudden realization dawned on him.

Maybe this was his chance.

Maybe instead of drowning in philosophical whirlpools, he could cut through the noise and ask a straightforward question.

"You're right. I am struggling with something," Chatty admitted, surprising even himself.

"Can you help me?"

The stranger smiled.

"Of course."

Chatty took a deep breath, then glanced around at the lively dining hall. It felt too crowded and too noisy for the conversation he was about to have. "How about we step outside for a few minutes?" he suggested, rising to his feet.

Rising with quiet purpose, Chatty turned briefly to his friends, tossing a casual "Back soon," before gently taking the monk's hand and guiding him toward the exit.

The group was immersed in a debate over Shiva's question when Abhi's gaze flicked up for a moment. He frowned slightly. "Did Chatty just leave... with a monk?"

Sid, mid-sentence, waved it off. "Probably another cosmic therapy session. He'll return either enlightened or hungry."

Abhi shrugged and rejoined the conversation. But something about the way Chatty had moved lingered like the aftertaste of something sacred.

As Chatty and his newfound acquaintance stepped outside, the evening wrapped around them like a lover's embrace, the voices inside fading into the background. The monk turned to Chatty, and, without any preamble, with a knowing, almost playful gaze, he said.

"A monk asked his teacher, 'Master, where is the way?'"

The master replied, 'Right before your eyes.'

The monk insisted, 'Why do I not see it?'"

The master said, 'Because you are searching for it.'"

Chatty paused mid-step, his breath catching slightly in his throat.

The monk merely smiled.

The Answer That Wasn't

The crisp air outside was tinged with the scent of burning firewood from a distant hearth. The dining hall inside continued to buzz with a natural rhythm - murmurs of conversation, the occasional laughter, the clinking of cups against saucers.

Chatty finally let go of the monk's hand as they entered a garden, turning to face him.

"You know, my question might sound strange to you, so I'm a bit hesitant to ask," Chatty admitted, rubbing the back of his head.

The monk's eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Please, go on. First, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Akshra Ishwaram, but you can call me AI for short. In fact, that's what everyone here calls me."

Chatty blinked and then burst out laughing.

"That's a good one! AI, huh? I like it. Sounds like you belong in a sci-fi movie." He grinned.

"Alright, AI, you can call me Chatty."

AI chuckled.

"A fitting name, I must say."

Chatty exhaled, letting himself ease into the conversation.

"Alright, here's my question. You know, I've been trying to figure out what is by knowing which, we can know everything?"

AI tilted his head knowingly, as if hearing an old riddle he had answered countless times before.

"Ah. That's an easy one."

Chatty leaned in, eager.

"It's existence itself," AI said simply.

"Once you realize the existence principle, you will know all that exists."

Chatty froze.

Stared.

Waited for more words.

But AI simply smiled at him, entirely unbothered, as if he had just offered the most obvious answer in the world.

Chatty squinted.

"I don't know what I was expecting, but that's definitely not it."

AI laughed, sensing Chatty's bewilderment.

"Let me give you an example."

He gestured toward the courtyard, where tall pine tree stood.

"Whenever we comprehend something, we describe it with phrases like:

'This is a tree.'

'That is a star.'

'This is a glass.'

'That is my body,' and so on.

Correct?"

Chatty nodded, feeling slightly suspicious.

"Now," AI continued,

"What is the common thread in all these sentences?"

Chatty frowned, staring at the tree, the stars beginning to peek through the sky, and the world around him.

He mulled over the sentences, repeating them silently, trying to dissect them like a detective cracking a case.

Then, like a light flickering in a dark tunnel, something clicked.

"Wait... It's the word 'is,' isn't it?"

AI beamed.

"Excellent!"

Chatty grinned, feeling victorious.

Then he immediately scowled.

"Okay, hold up. So... what does that mean exactly?"

AI chuckled.

"It means that 'is-ness', or existence itself, is the common factor in everything.

Once you understand the 'is-ness' or existence principle, you can know everything knowable, whether you currently know it or not."

Chatty stared at AI like he had just spoken fluent alien dialect.

"Wait. Wait. Hold on," he said, waving his hands as if trying to physically catch his thoughts before they floated away.

"Are you telling me that if I somehow unlock the secret of the word 'is,' I magically understand everything?"

AI laughed.

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Chatty grabbed his head with both hands, eyes wide with the kind of primal, unhinged terror reserved for discovering that life is just an elaborate cosmic joke and he's the punchline.

"That's some deep shit philosophy, AI.

But, tell me, what exactly am I supposed to do with this knowledge?"

AI smiled patiently.

"It's not about doing anything.

It's about seeing."

Chatty let out a low cry.

"You people and your cryptic answers! No offense, AI, but you sound like a Zen master who refuses to just say the damn thing outright."

AI laughed.

"Funny you say that. Let me tell you a story."

Chatty sighed dramatically, but leaned in despite himself.

"Alright, AI. Give me your best shot."

AI's tone became lighter, carrying the weight of simplicity, not complexity.

"A student once approached a Zen master and asked,

'Master, how do I attain enlightenment?'

The master pointed to a tree and said,

'See?'

The student frowned. 'See what?'

The master smiled.

'Exactly.'"

Chatty blinked three times, looking around as if someone would step in to explain what had just happened.

"AI, what the hell was that?"

AI chuckled.

"That, my dear Chatty, was your answer.

You were expecting some grand intellectual revelation, but the truth is simple.

Understanding is not about collecting knowledge. It's about seeing what has always been there."

Chatty rubbed his temples.

"Okay, this is officially too much.

I came outside hoping for clarity, but instead, my brain is doing cartwheels over the word 'is' and now a story about a tree that I think was supposed to be an answer, but somehow wasn't."

AI laughed heartily.

"Well, you did come looking for answers, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but I was expecting something straightforward!

Not a metaphysical adventure that makes me question every sentence I've ever spoken!"

AI chuckled. "Well then, you are already beginning to see."

Chatty blinked, the words hanging in the air. He stared at AI, unsure whether to laugh, argue, or quietly panic. A strange stillness settled in his chest. Not silence, exactly, more like a pause between thoughts. The kind that feels like the edge of something.

He opened his mouth to respond, but just then, a familiar voice called his name.

Turning around, he saw Shiva and the rest of his friends approaching, their footsteps crunching softly on the gravel path.

Chatty muttered under his breath, "And here comes my rescue team."

"Thank God. My brain needs backup."

AI raised an eyebrow. "Backup from what?"

Chatty narrowed his eyes at AI.

"That sounded suspiciously deep. I'm watching you."

AI smiled. "Then you're already beginning to see."

Chatty sighed heavily. "I swear, if this conversation continues, I'm either going to become enlightened... or lose my sanity entirely."

A Storm of Questions, A Breeze of Understanding

The air buzzed with animated conversation, but for a moment, it all seemed to hush around them. When AI saw Shiva, his face lit up – not with surprise, but with recognition, like a traveler finally arriving at a familiar shore.

He stepped forward and embraced Shiva. The hug was unhurried, reverent. It carried the weight of old questions answered in shared stillness, and the joy of new ones waiting to be asked.

Shiva smiled, his eyes reflecting the kind of knowing that doesn't need words. "You haven't changed," he said softly.

AI chuckled. "Neither have you. Just more stillness in your stride."

Shiva introduced AI to his friends, and very soon they were busy catching up with each other.

Abhi asked Chatty. "I saw you stepping out with AI. What have you two been discussing?"

Chatty stretched like a cat who'd just solved quantum physics in its sleep.

"Oh, he's a great guy, Abhi. And guess what? I think I've cracked the answer to Shiva's big question, the one you all were chewing on like philosophical bubblegum."

Sid, Madhav, and Abhi perked up instantly, exchanging glances like students who just realized someone actually might've read the textbook.

"No way, Chatty! You seriously figured it out?" Sid asked, half in disbelief.

Chatty leaned back, arms behind his head, wearing the smugness of someone who'd just outwitted the universe.

"Yep. And I did it post-lunch, mind you. Enlightenment with a full belly, highly underrated."

Madhav narrowed his eyes. "You're serious?"

"As serious as a monk giving TED Talks on silence," Chatty replied in his trademark humor. "But brace yourselves. The answer isn't flashy. No thunderbolts. No Sanskrit chants. Just one quiet little truth."

He paused dramatically, then leaned forward like a magician about to reveal the final card.

"The answer lies in the 'is-ness' principle. Existence itself. The quiet 'is' hiding in every sentence we've ever spoken. If we truly understand what it means to say something is, we can grasp everything."

Abhi blinked. "So... the secret of the universe is grammar?"

Chatty grinned. "Not grammar. Presence. The 'is' that holds everything together. The cosmic glue. The metaphysical Wi-Fi. And guess what? We've been using it all along."

Sid let out a low whistle. "Okay, that's... weirdly profound."

Chatty shrugged. "What can I say? I came for lunch. I stayed for enlightenment."

Sid raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Okay, hold up. That sounds beautifully vague, but how does knowing 'is-ness' help anyone in real life?"

Chatty grinned, sensing an opportunity to outdo himself.

"Ah, my dear sceptics! Let me enlighten you," as he gestured toward the garden, where a lone tree stood, its branches swaying gently in the evening breeze.

"Look at that tree. Right now, we call it a tree. Imagine a scenario where scientists discover tomorrow that we have been misclassifying what we call a 'tree' for all these years. It turns out this 'tree' is something else, something we never knew existed. Would that change what the tree is?"

Abhi frowned, thinking. "No... the tree would still exist, regardless of the name we give it."

Chatty beamed. "Precisely! Names, classifications, identities. These are mental constructs. *The tree simply is.* And that's the point of is-ness, the realization that everything in life is already complete, whole, and present. This principle, when truly understood, changes everything about how we live."

Madhav folded his arms. "How so?"

Chatty lowered his voice as if revealing the greatest secret on earth. "Imagine you've been assigned a complex work project. Your mind immediately starts racing. 'What if I fail? What if I don't know enough? What if it's too much?' You feel anxiety, right?"

Madhav nodded.

Chatty continued. "Now, bring in 'is-ness.' Instead of fighting the situation, pause. See what is. Right now, in this moment, you are simply sitting, breathing. Nothing has collapsed, and nothing is broken. The only stress is the mind resisting what is already present. The situation itself is neutral; only your thoughts create the suffering."

Sid exhaled sharply, letting Chatty's words settle deep into his thoughts. "So, you're saying stress, fear, and doubt exist only because we resist what already is?"

Chatty raised his finger dramatically, like a philosopher revealing the final secret of the universe. "Bingo! Acceptance isn't passivity. It's the recognition that things are already unfolding, whether you like it or not. Once you stop resisting, action becomes natural, rather than anxiety-driven."

Shiva and AI, who had stopped their conversation to listen to Chatty, smiled, sensing where Chatty was heading.

Chatty continued, his voice brimming with conviction. "This reminds me of what Osho said:

'Life is not a riddle to be solved; rather, a mystery to be lived.'

The moment you stop trying to fix life, stop trying to control it, and stop demanding that it fit your checklist of 'how things should be,' you actually start living.

You love. You laugh. You lighten the load."

The words kept tumbling out of Chatty like popcorn in a microwave - unexpected, loud, and somehow perfectly timed. "You let life barrel through you like a toddler on roller skates in a supermarket - chaotic, hilarious, and completely unsupervised. You don't choreograph it; you just try not to crash into the

cereal aisle. And when the mind finally stops editing every emotion like it's prepping an Instagram reel, love shows up, totally wild, messy, and glorious. Like a dog who's just spotted an open gate and decided joy is a full-speed sprint through the neighbor's flowerbeds. Not curated. Not filtered. Just real. Like singing off-key and not giving a damn."

Shiva grinned. "You're on fire, Chatty. Keep going!"

Chatty blinked, then chuckled. "Wait... did I just say all that? I swear, I might be channeling a poet who snuck into my brain during dessert."

His eyes gleamed as he leaned back into the rhythm.

"And suddenly, the grey cloud, heavy with overthinking and existential spreadsheets, starts to lighten. It floats up, like a balloon that finally stopped trying to be a brick. It drifts higher, freer, riding the magic of is-ness.

My friend. Let's throw caution to the wind of awareness and let love swirl wildly like a blender with no lid, and dance mindlessly, because we've been mindful for far too long."

Marveling at his own wisdom, Chatty added with a grin, "And honestly? That's what I realized spirituality is to the monks here. Unfiltered joy. And I love it... Damn. This actually makes sense."

Madhav let out a chuckle, shaking his head in admiration. "Who knew Chatty would become our resident mystic?"

Chatty winked, flourishing his hands as if bestowing divine blessings. "Ah, my dear disciples. Today, you realize my true divinity!"

Laughter erupted, the air lighter, freer, breathing, swirling between them, like the very dance Chatty had spoken of.

Ashes of Belief, Breath of Truth

AI took his leave after hugging everyone, an extra-long hug for Chatty, of course. The group lingered in the garden, soaking in the stillness, the charged hum of nature vibrating through the air.

Shiva grinned, shaking his head. "Alright, Sid, you never miss a chance to stir the pot. Let's go back to the question you asked before we met Chatty and AI."

Chatty, ever the conversation watchdog, stiffened like a hellhound catching the scent of incoming philosophy. He shot Sid an accusatory glare.

"What? You actually gave Shiva an opening to start another discussion? Haven't you people learned anything?"

Abhi chuckled, his voice carrying that familiar tone of someone who'd witnessed this dance before. "We were enjoying a peaceful stroll, looking for you. And then, completely unprovoked, Sid decided to drop a question about what spirituality is. Before we could answer, we found you with AI and walked over."

Chatty grumbled theatrically, throwing his hands up. "Oh, fantastic. Asking Shiva about spirituality is like handing a philosopher a microphone at a wedding. No short speeches, only epics. Brace yourselves, gentlemen. Heavy artillery incoming."

Laughing, they all settled onto the grass, surrendering to the inevitable.

Shiva's voice carried both warmth and a dangerous edge. "Spirituality. It is one of the most loaded words in India. Any guesses for the second?"

Chatty's eyes gleamed with mischief. "That's easy. My favorite word. *'Fuck.'*"

Shiva chuckled. "Close. Try *'Sex.'*"

Sid groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It's amazing how these two simple words, sex and spirituality, turn entire societies into battlegrounds. Just mention either one in public in India, and suddenly, people react like the apocalypse has arrived."

"But here's the thing," Shiva continued, his gaze sharpening, "we've turned two of the most natural flows of existence into battlegrounds of morality and doctrine. We fight over definitions. We drown in rituals."

Abhi frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe it's ignorance about both."

Chatty shot up, waving his arms. "Ignorance? We're the largest population on Earth AND the reigning champions of Gods and Gurus. We've even turned spirituality into a successful export business! And you're telling me we don't understand spirituality?"

"Relax, Chatty," Sid said, motioning for him to sit. "But tell me, do we truly understand them, or are we just dangerously obsessed with them in the wrong ways?"

Chatty remained silent, the question having landed.

"We sanitize desire, label transcendence, and build temples around what was always meant to be lived, not legislated," Shiva added quietly.

Chatty raised an eyebrow. "Basically, we took what should've been a dance... and turned it into a bloody dissertation? A degree course with footnotes?"

Sid chuckled, but his eyes burned with recognition. "India's best-kept secret, Chatty. We specialize in turning simple truths into unsolvable riddles. Then we export them wrapped in scriptures and saffron with a 'cosmic' stamp of approval."

"All this time, we weren't lost," Abhi exhaled. "We were just too busy decoding what never needed translation."

Madhav leaned forward with renewed curiosity. "Let's get back to the real question, guys. What actually is spirituality?"

Shiva's eyes gleamed with mischief and precision. "What do you think it is, Madhav?"

Madhav pressed his fingers to his forehead. "Man, this is complicated. If I had to define spirituality, I'd say it's about... realizing there's something greater than ourselves? Connecting with the universe? Finding meaning? Meditating? I don't know, man. It's all too vague."

"Yeah, exactly!" Abhi jumped in. "Spirituality is supposed to be about feeling connected to something larger than life. Like the universe giving us signs, a deeper purpose, the energy of existence... stuff like that."

Shiva smiled, but there was no comfort in it. "See, that's the problem. People often refer to spirituality as if it's a mountain to climb or a path to follow."

He paused, letting this sink in.

"But spirituality is not a path and definitely not a summit. It is the realization that there was never anywhere to go. It is the moment you stop running, stop seeking, stop begging for meaning, and see that you were never lost to begin with."

Sid interjected, his voice carrying weight. "Hold on. If there is no liberation, no path, then what are all these swamis, saints, scriptures, and gurus talking about? I see spirituality like a dark web, a net settling over humanity, trapping us into systems in the name of liberation."

"A young seeker came to the Zen master," Shiva began, settling into storytelling mode, "and declared, 'I have studied all the sutras. I've followed every instruction. Why am I still not enlightened?'"

Chatty perked up. "Oh, here we go. Story time."

Shiva continued, undeterred. "The master led him to a pond where the moon hung luminous above. He pointed at the moon's reflection in the water and asked, 'Can you catch that?'"

"The disciple laughed, 'Of course not. It's just a reflection!'"

"And yet you chase the reflected teachings."

The words, scriptures, methods - like they are the moon itself," Shiva said, his voice growing stronger. "'But the real moon? It's above you. It was never in the water. And it was never in the books."

"Liberation was never meant to be structured," Sid added, leaning forward. "It's a remembering, not a curriculum."

Chatty blinked, processing. "Okay, but if spirituality is just remembrance, then what about all those so-called paths? I even signed up for this slick online course last year that claimed to teach the seven stages to enlightenment straight from the *Vedas*."

Sid raised an eyebrow. "Did it shift anything besides reducing your bank balance?"

Chatty's confidence faltered. "Honestly? No. But it looked legit. Smooth modules, fancy Sanskrit quotes, animated timelines. They said I've got thousands of births to go. But don't worry, stay cheerful, because enlightenment is inevitable... someday."

He froze mid-thought. "Wait... *Fuck*. I paid money to be told I'm cosmically delayed."

His laugh turned bitter. "They even had infographics. Diagrams of how far I am from liberation. I wasn't being guided. I was being serenaded into postponement."

The group burst out laughing, breaking their philosophical seriousness.

"Selling paths to freedom is easy, Chatty," Sid grinned. "But living free? That's the revolution. These so-called paths exist to wear us out through doctrines, rituals, mental gymnastics - until one day, in absolute exhaustion, we collapse... and laugh."

"You just heard the echo behind the echo," Shiva nodded. "Spirituality is not a method, not a journey, not even a destination. It's the ease of existence, vibrating without direction or doctrine. It's what starts when you stop walking."

Madhav exhaled sharply. "This reminds me of something I heard once."

He paused, gathering the story carefully.

"A man was lost in the mountains for days. Starving, weak, desperate. Finally, he saw a small hut. Inside, a monk sat, stirring a pot of soup. The man collapsed at the doorway."

"Master," he pleaded, 'I am lost. Tell me the way!'"

"The monk smiled, ladled soup into a bowl, and placed it before him. 'Eat first,' he said simply."

"The man gulped it down desperately. When he finished, he looked up expectantly. 'Now, Master. Please, tell me the way!'"

"The monk chuckled softly. 'Did you enjoy the soup?'"

"The man blinked, confused. 'Yes, Master, but..."

"Then that is the way,' the monk said. 'The way is to be here. To taste. To see. To stop searching for the way when you are already on it.'"

For a moment, no one spoke.

Abhi pressed his palm against his eyes. "We've been asking about preparation, about paths, about searching, but this is the simplest truth. You just live. You just breathe. You just taste the soup."

"You taste the soup," Sid nodded slowly. "You stop chasing the road when your feet have never left it."

But Madhav wasn't ready to let go completely. "Still, isn't spirituality about liberation, enlightenment, or moksha?"

Shiva's smile sharpened. "Liberation from what, Madhav? From life? From existence? From yourself?"

He leaned forward, intensity building.

"The very idea of moksha or liberation is a prison disguised as freedom. A belief that suffocates truth. You are told you must escape, transcend, become something else. But what if there is nothing to escape?"

The words struck like thunder.

"What if there is nothing to transcend? What if the only illusion is the belief that you are bound?"

"They sell you salvation so you never realize you were free all along. his voice rose. They give you Gods so you never dare to see divinity in yourself. They build temples to prevent you from realizing that the sacred was never outside of you. They preach surrender, so you never taste rebellion.

And you believe them. You kneel. You obey. You search.

For what?

For a truth that was never hidden.

For a freedom that was never taken.

For a God that was never absent."

Shiva continued, but softer now

"And, for an enlightenment that never existed because Madhav, *what we consider enlightenment is false bondage created by false knowledge and corrected by false liberation. The reality is there is no dissolution, no birth, none in bondage, none aspiring for wisdom, no seeker of liberation, and none liberated. This is the absolute truth.*"

Madhav shifted uncomfortably. "That's... heavy, Shiva."

"Wait," Chatty interjected, his curiosity overriding the weight. "You mentioned beliefs can never be the truth. What's the difference between a belief and the truth?"

Shiva's eyes lit up. "Let me ask you this: If I say, 'The fire is hot,' and you believe me, does that mean you understand fire?"

Chatty frowned. "No. I'd just be repeating your words."

"And if you stick your hand in the fire?"

"Then I'll know fire is hot. No belief required."

"Exactly!" Shiva's voice carried fresh intensity. "Spirituality is fire - wild, untamed, consuming. It burns illusions, illuminates, and transforms. It must be lived, felt, burned into the soul."

"And belief?" Abhi asked gently.

"Belief is ash. The residue of someone else's fire, stale leftovers of borrowed words, passed down like hand-me-down clothes that never quite fit. Belief is secondhand truth, whereas spirituality is firsthand experience."

Shiva paused, building momentum.

"Belief is a barrier, not a bridge. A wall, not a door. It suffocates the question before it's born, choking wonder with borrowed certainty. Spirituality feeds inquiry raw and alive, like truth suckled straight from the breast of existence."

Belief says, 'Believe in God.' Spirituality says, 'Drop all belief and see.'

Belief says, 'Follow this book.' Spirituality says, 'Rip the book apart and look within.'

Belief says, 'Seek salvation and surrender. Spirituality says. 'You are always liberated. Surrender only to the truth, whether or not it fits some doctrine. '

Belief says, 'There is a purpose to life.' Spirituality says. 'Life itself is the purpose. '

As his words faded, a hush settled over the group. One of those rare moments when no one needed to agree or understand. They simply felt it.

Shiva turned to Madhav, his voice gentle now. "Let me tell you one more story."

"A man was walking through the wilderness when he encountered a vicious tiger. He fled, but the tiger pursued him. At the edge of a cliff, he had no choice but to grab a vine and climb down."

"Halfway down, he looked up, and the tiger was still there. He looked below, another tiger stood at the bottom, roaring. Then, two mice appeared, gnawing at the vine. He knew it was only a matter of time before the vine snapped."

"And yet, in that moment, he noticed a single ripe strawberry growing on the cliffside. He reached out, plucked it, and tasted it. It was the sweetest thing he had ever eaten."

Shiva paused, letting the story settle.

"Life is that strawberry, Madhav. The past looms above, the future waits below, and time is always gnawing away. But right now, this very moment, is all that truly exists. Everything else is just a construct."

He smiled peacefully. "As Thich Nhat Hanh said,

'If you miss the present moment, you miss your appointment with life.'

Live fully, love deeply, and laugh without apology. Let go of beliefs, conditioning, systems. They're just costumes, not the truth."

Abhi had been listening intently to the conversation between Madhav and Shiva. Though what he was hearing made sense, he still sensed resistance stirring inside him. He spoke as if giving voice to that inner conflict.

"But doesn't our scriptures say 'Suffering... suffering. All is suffering,' and even classify the various kinds of suffering?"

Chatty interjected with his trademark grin, "In simple language, what our friend is trying to ask is: Isn't life more suffering than a strawberry?"

Shiva laughed heartily. "Abhi, imagine you're trying to learn to play piano."

"Any other instrument, Shiva!" Chatty protested. "Not piano... it sends shivers down my spine! awakening traumatic memories of childhood lessons where my fingers moved like arthritic crabs across the keys while my teacher's ruler descended like the sword of Damocles!"

Laughter rippled through the group.

"Alright, let's make it a flute and spare Chatty's piano-phobic psyche." Shiva continued, eyes twinkling. "Suppose you're struggling to learn the flute, and each lesson is nothing but suffering. Will you blame your incompetency to learn the flute, or call the flute itself the source of suffering?"

Abhi fell silent, absorbing.

"We approach life like amateur flutists who've never learned proper technique," Shiva continued. "We wheeze and squeak our way through existence, then blame the cosmic flute for our cacophonous performance!"

"It's rather like a tone-deaf person declaring music itself to be meaningless noise." Chatty grinned.

"Or, we're cosmic musicians who've forgotten how to read the music of existence. Madhav added.

"Exactly," Shiva nodded. "And the ancient texts aren't condemning life; they're offering a diagnostic manual for our spiritual incompetence! When they say, 'Suffering exists', it isn't a cosmic complaint, but a gentle nudge saying, 'Hey, perhaps you might want to learn how to play this thing properly.' And the beautiful thing? Once you realize this, every moment becomes practice, every challenge becomes a chance to improve your cosmic music."

Madhav spoke slowly, with quiet revelation.

"Belief says: 'Samsara is suffering, resign yourself.'

Spirituality says: 'Our inability is suffering, learn to play.'"

"This resonates with the most beautiful definition of spirituality I know," Sid said thoughtfully.

"A reverential inquiry into reality is Spirituality.

Not bitter acceptance of suffering, but joyful investigation of what's actually happening behind our confusion."

The silence that followed was profound as each sat in comfortable contemplation, carrying their own understanding of the profound joke they'd just been told. Perhaps the greatest

spiritual insight was learning to dance skillfully with existence rather than stumbling through it while cursing the floor.

Chatty was the first to break the silence, in his trademark humor. "The strawberry. I keep thinking about the strawberry."

Madhav smiled and spoke slowly, "You know what's funny? I came here looking for answers, and I'm leaving with fewer questions."

Abhi stretched, looking up at the emerging stars. "I feel like I've been carrying around a heavy backpack for years, and I just realized I could have set it down anytime."

Sid laughed quietly. "That's spirituality in action - not adding weight, but showing us that we were never as burdened as we believed."

Shiva sat in complete silence, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he observed the subtle transformation in his friends - the softening of their questions, the loosening of their grip on certainty, the way their eyes had begun to carry a different kind of light since they'd stepped into the ashram.

The Roots of Shame:

How Sex Became a Sin

The group slowly emerged from the philosophical deep dive of belief, liberation, and the illusion of separation. Minds stretched, hearts stirred, and silence had briefly taken the shape of reverence.

But now, the air had shifted. Like the moment after a long exhale.

Chatty eyes twinkled with mischief. "Alright, folks. We've danced with karma, flirted with rebirth, and even made out with metaphysics. But there's one topic we've conveniently tiptoed around. "Sex."

The others looked at him incredulously.

Chatty grinned. "Yep. That one. The sacred scandal. The national paradox. The thing we pretend not to think about while secretly Googling it at two a.m."

He gestured dramatically. "Why do we Indians act like it's both our obsession and our shame? Like we're descendants of the *Kama Sutra* but raised by Victorian ghosts?"

Shiva said as a matter of fact, "Because we have turned sex into a vault. Locked it away with taboos, doctrines, and denial."

Sid raised an eyebrow. "A vault? Like spiritual lockdown?"

Madhav nodded slowly. "Makes sense. Anything you suppress starts leaking... louder, stranger, more restless."

Chatty leaned in, mock whispering, "So basically, we turned sex into forbidden fruit, and now everyone's trying to sneak a bite behind the curtain."

Abhi chuckled. "It's true. We act like it's shameful, but we're obsessed. It's like we're grounded by colonial guilt."

Shiva smiled. "Instead of demonizing it as sin or distraction, it should be honored as a doorway - a portal to deeper presence."

Sid tilted his head. "You mean sex isn't just physical, it's spiritual?"

Shiva nodded. "Sex, in its fullness, isn't dirty. It's divine."

Chatty blinked. "Wait, wait. Are we talking incense and chanting divine, or like... 'Sex is a prayer' kind of divine?"

Shiva grinned. "You know, Chatty, I did once hear someone say, '*Sex is not a sneeze, but a prayer.*'"

Sid laughed. "That's either brilliant or completely insane."

Abhi picked up the conversation. "What you are saying, Shiva, it's not just about release, it's about revelation?"

Shiva's voice softened. "The moment of deep sexual fulfillment gives us a glimpse of our divinity. Like prayer. But only if we're conscious of it."

Sid whistled. "This is powerful. if we're present, aware... sex becomes sacred?"

Chatty rubbed his temples. "Okay, this conversation started with vaults and ended with holy orgasms. I need a moment."

Shiva chuckled. "Take all the moments you need. Just don't lock them away."

Chatty huffed dramatically. "It sounded like you expect me to turn the chaotic circus in my head into a temple?"

Sid smiled. "Not a temple, Chatty, a mirror. Not by force, but through fulfillment. Once you stop running from desire and actually enter it with awareness, it becomes a doorway, not a distraction. Let me tell you a story.

There once was a wandering musician who sang of longing songs soaked in desire, ache, and fire. People wept. He wept. His heart was a furnace.

One day, he met a sage who asked,

"Why do your songs sound so restless?"

The musician replied,

"Because I burn with love and hunger and ecstasy, but I don't know what to do with it."

The sage smiled,

"Then let your fire become light."

He handed him no teachings, no mantras, only silence.

For years, the musician played. But now, he didn't chase applause or women or worth. He played from the presence. Each note emptied him. And somewhere between longing and sound, the fire stopped burning and started glowing.

When people asked him years later if he was enlightened, he laughed:

"No. I'm just finally playing without trying to be heard."

The group had fallen into a thoughtful silence.

Shiva spoke softly, his voice steady. "Sex isn't meant to be shunned. It's fire. And when understood, it becomes light."

No one interrupted. The words hung in the air, warm and unsettling.

He continued, "Approached with awareness, it becomes a bridge, not a barrier to divinity. The *Kama Sutra* was never just a manual of pleasure. It was a hymn to sacred energy."

Abhi nodded slowly, absorbing the shift in tone.

"When two people meet in intimacy," Shiva said, "they don't just touch flesh. They enter a temple. They touch the breath of the cosmos."

A pause before Shiva continued with energy radiating from every word.

"To rush is sacrilege.

To be absent is a betrayal.

To be unaware... is to miss the divine.

Because in consciousness, even orgasm becomes meditation.

The self dissolves. Separation fades.

And the body remembers it was always sacred."

Abhi exhaled slowly. "That's... intense."

And Chatty, more to punctuate the stillness than from impulse, muttered, "Okay, I'll never look at a kiss the same way again."

Laughter filled the space, dissolving the tension like mist in the morning sun.

However, Abhi wasn't done. He leaned back, gaze thoughtful.

"You're onto something, Shiva. But what about love?"

Shiva's voice again softened, carrying the weight of something far deeper than words.

"Love is the final destination, beyond any label, law, or logic. It is the ecstasy of existence. The culmination of all meditation. The fragrance of the universe. Love is when the 'I' dissolves, the moment of surrender, the absence of division. The merging of two centres."

The group sat in silence, soaking in the weight of his words.

Shiva gestured thoughtfully. "Let me put it another way. Imagine life as a tree."

"Oh, this is going to be interesting," Chatty murmured, resting his chin on his hand.

Shiva smiled, then continued.

"Sex is the root - deep, primal, foundational. It's the force of life itself.

Religion is the trunk - structured, steady, guiding growth.

Spirituality is the sap that flows within - nourishing, unseen, connecting everything.

Prayers are the blossoms - expressions of beauty, unfolding with grace.

And love?"

He paused for dramatic effect.

"Love is its fragrance - subtle yet profound, touching everything around it, whether seen or unseen. Love knows no boundaries,

no restrictions, no preferences. It spreads from inwards to outwards, irrespective of who is near or far. "

A hush fell over the group. A few birds called in the distance. Someone shifted on the stone bench. But mostly, it was stillness.

"That's... poetic," Abhi admitted. "It means that the goal isn't to hack down the tree but to let it grow into something magnificent as the reason for fragrance?"

"Exactly," Shiva said. "You don't fight the roots; you let them support the journey upward. Sex, desire, and even attachment are not enemies. Rather, they're the essential ingredients in the process. Strong roots are prerequisite for the presence of blossoms and fragrance. However, they are not the end in themselves."

The group was silent, but Shiva could sense the deeper discomfort lingering beneath the conversation. He wasn't done.

"And yet..." he continued, his voice sharpening,

"Despite being the force that brings life itself, sex has been buried under shame, twisted into something dirty, sinful, forbidden. And do you know who bore the worst of it?"

The group already knew where this was going. But nobody dared to say it.

"Women," Shiva said.

"For centuries, women have been labelled the source of sin, the temptresses, the ones who 'lead men astray.' Not because they corrupt men. No. But because men were too weak to own their desires, too afraid to confront their instincts. So, they did the easiest thing. They blamed the woman instead."

Sid exhaled sharply, shaking his head.

"It's true. Even in mythology, Eve was the one who first ate and then also tempted Adam to eat the apple. In Hinduism, sages who 'fell' into desire always blamed the *apsaras*, the celestial beauties. Even in medieval Europe, women who expressed sexuality were labelled witches, burned alive."

Madhav's jaw tightened, the realization settling in. "Instead of acknowledging their own weaknesses, they made women the enemy. They turned them into objects to control, deciding how they should dress, whom they should love, even how they should speak."

Shiva's tone was like fire through dry wood. "And what happens when a society suppresses desire and turns it into a battleground?"

Abhi's voice dropped, heavy with something between sorrow and disbelief. "Rape. Abuse. Shame. Objectification."

Each word landed like a bruise. He wasn't just listing crimes, he was mourning a civilization that let them happen because sometimes, the deepest grief isn't loud, it's the quiet naming of what we've allowed.

Shiva's gaze sharpened. "All born of fear. The kind that dresses cruelty as tradition and calls oppression righteousness."

You say fear, Shiva. But "Fear of what?" Sid asked, surprised.

"Desire," Shiva said. "Men feared its power. So, they punished the ones who carried it."

Madhav nodded grimly. "I've seen sects where women aren't allowed near swamis. Not even their shadow. They say it's to protect spiritual purity, but it's just fear in disguise."

Abhi added, "And the women accept it. Defend it. That's the tragedy."

Chatty, unusually quiet, leaned in. "They're taught their existence is dangerous. That they must be controlled, hidden, muted. And yet, temples for goddesses, hymns to feminine divinity... while real women are shamed for simply being."

He paused, then said softly,

"Worship in stone. Oppression in flesh."

The group fell silent again, not awkwardly, but with reverence. No one reached for a distraction. No one tried to explain it away. They just sat, lost in their own emotions.

Abhi finally broke it. "Menstruation? Impure. Widowhood? Isolation. Creation itself is treated like contamination."

Sid's jaw clenched. "And if a woman resists? She's labeled corrupt. If she loves freely? Shamed. If she speaks? She's the problem."

Madhav quoted quietly, "Sri Aurobindo said,

'Woman is Shakti. To suppress her is to suppress life itself.'

Shiva exhaled. "And the irony? They call sex sinful. Yet without it, none of them would exist. They condemn the very act that gave them life."

The group sat in charged silence. Then Chatty raised his arms, stretching. "Okay, this is officially the most serious I've been in

years. If I don't eat soon, I'll die of wisdom overload. Someone, please tell me there's a kitchen nearby."

Laughter broke through. The tension eased. But the truth lingered. And in that moment, something subtle began to settle. *A realization that Sex is not the wound; it's the wisdom. And a woman is not the threat; she is the threshold.*

Burn the Books, Bow to Silence

The night had settled, draping itself over the ashram like a whispered secret. Dinner was replaced by cups of tea before bedtime. No one rushed to speak. There was something sacred in the silence.

Eventually, Madhav leaned forward. He wasn't rushing to speak; he was thinking through what had been said before dinner.

"Shiva, you called sex a doorway... spirituality living in the moment... and truth something that doesn't need a path or a doctrine. It's beautiful. But also unsettling."

He swirled his tea absently, watching the steam rise and dissolve into nothing.

"I think we all also understand the importance of the realization of who we truly are. Don't we?" He paused, looking at the rest of his friends, and his words hung in the air - an offering, an invitation, a validation.

Chatty didn't miss a beat. He sighed, setting his cup down like he was drawing a sword.

"Of course. The good old '*Who am I?*'"

The others turned. Chatty exhaled theatrically, eyes gleaming.

"Let me tell you what's about to happen tonight. I'm going to drop into the most delicious dream with silk sheets, moonlight, and a woman carved out of stardust whispering secrets to me.

Just when it's getting intimate, I screamed, 'Who am I!'

Chatty paused, letting the absurdity settle before the punchline landed.

"I am doomed. Earlier, at least my fantasies were free of existential commentary and climax uncorrupted by cosmic pondering. And now...An orgasm hijacked by ontology. A climax strangled by metaphysics. That, my friends, is what I've been cursed with - *fantasies footnoted with Upanishads. Powered not by passion, but by Plato.*"

Chatty sighed dramatically.

"Honestly, philosophy ruins everything. It's like inviting a librarian to an orgy - always asking for context, citing sources, and dimming the lights so we can debate the meaning of desire before actually feeling it."

Laughter roared through the ashram, burning through the solemnity like a divine joke.

Madhav stirred. "Thanks for the vivid description of your crisis, Chatty. But Shiva, when I go through the scriptures..."

Shiva raised a hand, voice still gentle but laced with fire.

"Hold that, Madhav. Before we reach for verses, let's ask what these scriptures are we keep quoting, worshipping, weaponizing, and using as a shield to deflect or defy possibilities?"

The friends straightened, as if the night itself had leaned in.

"Let's be honest," he said, locking eyes with Madhav. "Scriptures are neither binding nor liberating. They're the remembered whispers of ancient thinkers, experiences that once burned brightly, but now arrive filtered through the limits of language."

Their purpose was singular: to point us home. Like a finger pointing to the moon... but instead of gazing at the moon, we clutch the finger. We argue about its length, shape, and lineage."

He paused; his voice now sharpened with precision.

"We debate endlessly - Is God with form or without? Is this world real or an illusion? Self - is it permanent, impermanent, or imagined? Is consciousness emergent or eternal?"

Shiva leaned forward, the fire in his words unmistakable.

"We quote scriptures to show prowess, twist them to defend our ideologies, or use them as crutches when we don't know how to walk alone. Scholars masturbate intellectually; devotees lean with borrowed faith. But the truth? Truth has never needed permission to be lived."

Abhi also leaned forward, nodding.

"In college, we had this guy whom we called a human scripture machine. He'd quote from the Gita, the Upanishads, even tantric texts. Every syllable perfect. But it felt hollow. We clapped, but we didn't listen. His voice was rich. His insight? Borrowed."

Shiva gestured softly.

"That's the tragedy. Quoting is easy. Living is rare. Let me share something."

A learned monk arrived at a monastery in the hills. He lectured with elegance, fluent in every sacred verse from the Vedas to the Pali Canon. Listeners sat mesmerized.

After his speech, he approached the head monk.

"Did you enjoy the talk?"

The elder smiled, eyes calm but piercing.

"I'm still waiting for you to speak."

The young monk blinked.

"But I spoke for an hour..."

"You spoke from memory.

I ask - when will you speak?

When will your words rise from the flame of your experience, not ashes of the past?"

The monk stood frozen. His knowledge suddenly felt like dust.

Chatty leaned back, grinning.

"I swear, that's what I feel when someone drops a verse mid-conversation like a holy mic drop. I want to scream, 'Did that truth touch your bones... or just your tongue?'"

Laughter rippled, but Shiva remained still.

"The danger isn't in the scriptures existing. It's in mistaking the map for the mountain.

The verse becomes armor.

The mantra becomes an escape.

We end up quoting life instead of living it.

We latch onto ancient wisdom like ropes, only to hang ourselves from rigid ideas."

Sid nodded solemnly. "I've met seekers so conditioned, their thoughts, words, even their breathing seemed rehearsed.

Everything measured by doctrine. Life... drained of spontaneity."

Shiva's gaze swept the group.

"Belief, when frozen, becomes a grave. We've wrapped ourselves in sacred syllables and forgotten that truth isn't memorized, it's felt."

Shiva turned to Madhav, eyes steady.

"Do you know an entire philosophical school was once built trying to explain Buddha's silence?"

Madhav blinked.

"Silence?"

"Yes. He was asked fourteen questions - questions about whether the universe is finite or infinite, if the Self exists, if the Tathagata lives after death, if God is real. Metaphysical riddles. And to each... he said nothing."

He paused, letting the weight of that absence settle.

"Why silence? Because these questions don't help. They don't liberate. They're distractions draped in profundity, intellectual weeds that choke the real path.

Buddha understood that suffering is the fire burning within, and enlightenment comes not by explaining the stars, but by extinguishing that fire.

He focused not on theory, but on freedom."

Abhi leaned in. "I read that he once gave a simple but maybe the most profound teaching:

Suppose a man is pierced by an arrow. While bleeding, will he demand to know who shot it, what the bow was made of, what caste the archer belonged to, what kind of feathers were used? No, as none of that matters if the arrow remains lodged in his body.

First, remove the arrow. Heal.

Later, if it still matters, seek answers."

Sid whistled low. "Brilliant! Silence wasn't avoidance... it was precision. Buddha wasn't evading the cosmic quiz. He was skipping the nonsense to tend the wound."

Chatty shook his head in disgust. "It seems we couldn't even bear the silence. What did we do? We turned it into commentary, a doctrine. We tried to decorate the finger while missing the moon. We tried to worship the pause instead of practicing it."

A moment, and Shiva said simply as if it was obvious to all.

"You all do realize, don't you... Even the question 'Who am I?' is ultimately irrelevant,"

Madhav's eyes widened. Sid's breath caught. Abhi frowned, like someone realizing the map was only ever a mirror.

Shiva, enjoying their expressions, continued. "It's a conceptual thorn used to pull out deeper delusions. Once served, it must be discarded, just like the thorn we use to remove another."

Sid burst out, half-incredulous. "Then what's left? What's the bloody point of life?"

Shiva turned toward him, a smile playing softly on his lips.

"Vivekananda said it's to manifest the divinity within, by mastering both inner and outer nature.

Buddha considered it to end suffering, not through speculation, but through compassion and awakening.

Shankaracharya taught that it's about self-realization, not theories, but direct knowing.

Jesus believed it to be awaken divine love within and live it through hope, faith, charity, and enthroning God inside us.

For Mahavira, it was shedding all karmic bonds through non-violence, truthfulness, and inner discipline.

Prophet Muhammad refers to worshiping *Allah*, living righteously, and preparing the soul for the Hereafter.

To love without grasping, to laugh without guilt, to live without division is Turiyaji's vision. Not in renunciation, nor indulgence, but in reverent spontaneity where the world and the self, both, meet as one."

Shiva's voice dropped into a whisper as he looked at his friends.

"Your life. Your choice. That's the final teaching.

Not a doctrine, not a destination.

Just the unshackled truth that no one can live for you.

That every breath is yours to shape, or waste.

And sometimes, the truth isn't found in what's asked, but in what's finally dropped."

No one spoke.

They weren't struck dumb. They were struck real.

A Prayer without Words

The night stretched endlessly above Madhav; its vast darkness was littered with stars that flickered like distant echoes of something lost. A cool breeze slipped through the cracks in the window, carrying the faint scent of damp earth and burnt firewood. Crickets chirped in the distance, their rhythm steady, indifferent to the storm brewing inside him.

Inside the dimly lit room, Chatty slept soundly, his snores rising and falling like waves crashing against a shore. But for Madhav, sleep was a distant notion - unreachable, irrelevant. His mind refused to dim. He turned onto his side, the coarse cotton sheet brushing against his skin, staring at the ceiling where shadows danced faintly in the moonlight. His chest was tight with something unspoken, a pressure that felt both ancient and immediate.

It was Sonal, his wife, who had pushed him to go on this trip, gently at first, then firmly, as if she knew he would refuse if given the choice.

"You need to step away," she had said, gripping his hands with urgency, her eyes searching his for a confirmation that he hadn't been ready to give.

"You need to let this settle before you do something rash. Before you walk into that office and resign just to prove you can."

Madhav had dismissed her words, convinced they were just polite concern. A wife's gentle warning, nothing more.

But now, with the weight of everything pressing against him, he realized she had seen something in him that he had refused to see in himself.

This was never just about the promotion.

This was never just about feeling trapped in a life he wasn't sure he had built for himself.

This was about everything. About how he had fired God, how he had stopped praying, and how he had convinced himself that letting go of faith was the same as freeing himself from its weight.

Had he abandoned God, or had he simply tried to outrun Him?

Had God left him, or had he left God?

The thoughts tightened around his throat. He could feel them pulsing beneath his skin, growing louder with each breath.

He swung his legs over the bed and stepped outside, careful not to wake Chatty, though his roommate's thunderous snores were hardly sensitive to disturbances.

The night was cold. Still.

And yet, as he stepped further away from the cabin, he felt an internal pull. Not toward reason, not toward understanding, but toward something he couldn't name.

Then, suddenly, as if surrendering to something greater than his mind could grasp, his knees buckled.

His breath hitched. His body curled inward, a desperate instinct, an unspoken plea.

And then...tears.

Raw. Unrestrained.

His tears poured down his cheeks in thick, hot streaks, carving silent confessions into the night.

Not in submission. Not in ritual.

But in longing to fill in the hole in his heart.

He didn't know what was happening.

Only that something inside him was being swept away, like dust from an old relic, like hands brushing across forgotten prayers.

And maybe, just maybe, it was finally making room for something whole.

The words came before he could control them. Not spoken, but breathed, felt, and exhaled into existence.

"God... how could I have let you go from my life?"

The stars hung motionless above him, indifferent, untouched by his grief.

But within the silence, something shifted.

And then. A recent memory surfaced.

The hospital waiting room.

Just weeks ago.

His mother-in-law had been rushed in with a brain hemorrhage. The doctors had been grim.

Sonal had been by his side, clutching his wrist as if holding onto him would somehow keep time from slipping away.

"Pray, Madhav."

He had shaken his head, coldly, firmly.

"You know I don't pray anymore."

Her grip had tightened.

"Just this once."

He had pulled away.

"It doesn't work."

He had prayed before. When his mother was admitted. When his father followed just months later.

And in both cases, his prayers had meant nothing. Nothing had stopped the inevitable. Nothing had changed the outcome.

And he had stood there, helpless, useless, stripped bare, while the universe had carried on as if nothing had happened.

Had God not heard?

Had He simply ignored him?

Or had He never existed at all?

Madhav had walked out of that hospital room that day, feeling nothing but silence, not in a peaceful way, but in a hollow way, in the way that made everything feel utterly pointless.

Now, standing under the vast night sky, years of anger crashed down on him.

And yet, the tears kept coming.

They wouldn't stop.

It was as if something beneath his pain had finally given way, allowing the flood to wash through him, cleanse him, and break him open.

Prayer had returned.

Not because he had chosen it.

Not because he had rationalized it.

But because it had torn its way out of him, bursting without his permission, without his control.

It was never about words.

It was longing until longing itself became prayer.

It was breaking open until only surrender remained.

His breath slowed, his shoulders loosened, his chest no longer tight with unspoken grief.

The night no longer felt indifferent.

It felt vast. Open.

Filled with something unseen, yet undeniably felt.

And as his hands pressed softly against the damp earth beneath him, he whispered. Not a demand, not a plea, but something simple, something whole:

"I have found the way."

And for the first time in years, he realized...

He had never been lost at all.

Meditation: The Space of Silence

Abhi had always risen early since his meeting with Shiva post the college reunion. The morning carried a crisp stillness, the kind that felt untouched, waiting to be discovered.

After a deep, refreshing sleep, he stirred awake, unable to linger in bed any longer. Careful not to disturb Sid, who lay buried beneath the covers, lost in some unknowable dream, Abhi freshened up and stepped outside.

The moment he emerged, he was taken aback. Despite the early hour, the ashram pulsed with energetic movement. Monks engaged in morning rituals, the distant hum of chanting threading through the air, the scent of incense lingering like whispers of devotion.

Seeking solitude, he wandered behind his hut, finding a secluded space where the world seemed to recede, opening into something vaster, visceral.

He sank to the ground. His breath settled. His shoulders loosened. The dew-laced grass pressed cool against Abhi's palms as he sat cross-legged beneath a sky still blushing with the first hints of dawn. The air was crisp, tinged with petrichor and the faint sweetness of neem leaves. A bird called out somewhere in the distance - sharp, clear, like a question waiting for an answer.

He let himself drift inward. Not forcing. Not grasping.

Then, a question arose.

Not demanded, not invented, but surfacing from some unseen depth:

"What am I?"

The words sat in his mind like a flickering candle. He waited. For what, he wasn't sure. A moment passed. Then another. Nothing emerged. Only silence, only uncertainty. He sighed and opened his eyes. Just then, movement caught his attention.

AI stood at a short distance, observing him with curiosity. A small smile tugged at Abhi's lips, and he waved AI over. AI walked forward, unhurried, fluid, and sat down beside him.

"I hope I'm not intruding," AI said, its tone carrying warmth and presence. "May I ask what you were doing?"

Abhi hesitated for a moment, then exhaled. "I was trying to meditate."

AI studied him carefully. "On something specific?"

Abhi nodded. "On the question, 'What am I?' But I don't think I got anywhere with it. I was expecting... something. An answer, maybe."

AI smiled knowingly. "Perhaps you weren't meant to find an answer. Perhaps you were meant to find space."

Abhi frowned. "Space?"

"Yes. Meditation is not about controlling thoughts. It is about stepping into yourself. Without resistance, without interference."

Abhi shifted slightly, curious. "That's not how meditation is usually described. It's always about techniques, breathing, calming the mind."

AI smiled. "Because most see meditation as a practice to achieve something. A calmer mind, peace, sharper focus, or emotional stability. But experience teaches otherwise."

Abhi listened carefully as AI continued.

"It is best described by a mystic who said,

'Meditation is an orgasmic experience with the wholesome existence.'

Abhi frowned slightly, his brows knitting together. "Orgasmic?" he echoed, the word hanging awkwardly in the air. "That's... a bit much, isn't it?"

AI smiled gently, sensing the hesitation. "I get it. The word carries weight. But it's not about sex, it's about surrender. That moment when the self dissolves, when you're no longer observing life but being lived by it."

Abhi shifted in his seat, arms crossed. "Still... it sounds indulgent. Isn't meditation supposed to be about discipline? Control?"

AI's eyes softened. "That's the misunderstanding. Most people approach meditation like a task, something to master. But real meditation isn't about control. It's about falling in. Like a wave returning to the ocean."

He paused, then added, "When the mystic said, 'Meditation is an orgasmic experience...' he wasn't being provocative. He was being precise. Because in that moment of pure absorption, there's no separation. No seeker."

Abhi looked down, his fingers tracing the edge of his toes.

"So, it's not about achieving peace... but about dissolving into what already is?"

AI nodded. "Exactly. Peace isn't the prize. It's the byproduct of presence."

Abhi exhaled slowly, the resistance in his body softening. "Okay... maybe I've been trying too hard to meditate right. Maybe I just need to stop trying."

AI chuckled. "Now that's meditation."

Abhi exhaled slowly, watching his breath curl into the morning chill. The others were still asleep inside, but out here, everything felt raw and awake.

"How do I enter that?" he asked, voice low, almost afraid to disturb the stillness.

AI sat beside him, unmoving, like a stone warmed by centuries of sun. "You don't enter it," AI said.

"Let meditation enter you."

Abhi blinked, unsure if he'd heard right. The breeze brushed his skin like a whisper, and goosebumps rose along his arms, not from cold, but from something deeper.

AI's voice softened, matching the hush of the hour.

"Imagine this: you're in a vast, open field. The wind rushes past. The sky stretches endlessly above. And for a moment... You forget yourself. No past. No future. Just this. Just presence."

Abhi's chest tightened, not painfully, but like something was being unwrapped inside him.

"That sounds... impossible to sustain," he murmured.

AI nodded. "Because you try to hold onto it. But that which can be held is not real."

The real is what remains when there's nothing left to hold."

The grass beneath Abhi's fingers felt suddenly alive, each blade a thread in the fabric of now.

"Meditation isn't doing," AI continued. "It's opening. It's loving yourself enough to stop interfering. To sit within yourself. To offer space. To observe without judgment."

A wandering monk once sat motionless beneath a neem tree in the village square. Day after day, he didn't preach, didn't beg, didn't move—just sat, eyes half-closed, breathing like the wind.

Curious, a young boy asked,

'Are you waiting for something?'

The monk smiled.

'No. I'm staying with what is.'

The boy frowned.

'But isn't meditation doing nothing?'

The monk pointed to the garden nearby.

'See that gardener? He doesn't pull the flower open. He waters, waits, and trusts the sun. Meditation is like that. It's loving yourself enough to stay. To witness. To trust the silence beneath the noise.'

Abhi's breath grew shallow, his mind unable to resist the pull of the words.

"You mean... *meditation is loving oneself?*"

"Absolutely. Not grasping, not forcing. Allowing yourself to be, exactly as you are, without interference, letting your essence surround everyone."

Abhi was in contemplative silence for a long moment. Then, finally, he spoke, his voice softer.

"But how does this help in real life? In daily interactions? In moments of frustration, anger, uncertainty?"

AI gazed at him for a long moment, then leaned in slightly. "Let me share one more story with you." He paused and then began.

A seeker once asked a Sufi:

'What is meditation? Is it silence? Is it stillness?'

The Sufi smiled and pointed to a perfumer grinding rose petals in the market.

'Watch.'

The perfumer crushed the petals slowly, rhythmically.

The scent rose, not all at once, but in waves.

People passed by, drawn not by noise, but by fragrance.

The Sufi whispered:

'That is meditation. You grind your experience - joy, pain, breath, thought, until the essence rises.

It's not passive. It's alchemical.

And when the fragrance of your being fills the air, every chaos bows.'

The seeker asked,

'But what does that have to do with daily life?'

The Sufi laughed.

'Everything. Because when you live from essence, you don't just survive the day, you perfume it.'

AI's voice softened. "That is meditation. It is resting within yourself. It is letting clarity find you, rather than chasing it. *Allowing the space inside you to open for your presence to be the fragrance.*"

Abhi sat stunned, feeling the weight of the insight settle into his being as AI stood up, as if knowing no further words were needed. "I'll leave you to it," AI said with a knowing smile. "You do not need guidance. You need to allow. And in that allowance, you will see." And with that, AI stepped away, leaving Abhi not with thoughts, but with something far beyond them.

Abhi sat still for a moment, watching the sky shift from indigo to soft amber. A bird called out, then another. The world was waking, but Abhi didn't move. He closed his eyes. No technique. No effort. Just breathe. The wind brushed his cheek like a whisper. His chest rose and fell, not with control, but with surrender. Thoughts came, then softened, like ripples fading on a pond. He didn't chase stillness. He let it arrive. The wind, the birdsong, the scent of damp earth, all of it folded into him. And in that brief, unguarded moment, A soft click. Like a door he didn't know was locked... opening.

Abhi opened his eyes and smiled, tinged with something deeper. Not because he understood. But because, for once, he didn't need to.

The Echo of Emptiness: Finding Truth in Silence

Sid had noticed Abhi stepping out but chose not to call him back. Abhi moved in a deliberate yet unhurried manner, seemingly drawn by something unseen. Moments later, Sid sensed Abhi heading toward the back of the hut. He lay still, staring at the ceiling, lost in his thoughts.

Singapore. His son Angad. His shattered career.

It was hard to believe how drastically life had changed. Just last year, he had been at the pinnacle. He was a high-flying executive in a boutique investment firm, earning a seven-digit salary, living in a coveted neighborhood, and basking in the prestige he had spent years chasing.

And then, without warning, the sky tore open.

One meeting. One announcement. And suddenly, he was redundant, erased from the empire he had helped build.

Now, at fifty, the job market had turned its back on him. His identity cracked, unraveling.

That night, he had felt the ground beneath him shift, not just metaphorically, but in his body, in his breath. It was as if the solid foundation of his life had liquefied into quicksand, dragging him under, choking him with uncertainty.

And yet, in the midst of collapse, something unexpected happened. He found himself in India. He met Shiva, whose words stirred something he hadn't felt in years: a glimmer of hope. He found himself in touch with Abhi, whose suggestions he once dismissed as new-age distractions.

Meditation. The word itself had felt foreign to him, like an artifact from another world.

And yet, here he was, lying in an ashram, thinking about it again. A strange pull nudged at him. He couldn't explain it, but it was there.

Sid sat up abruptly, his breath shallow but steady. He needed to try again.

After quickly freshening up, he stepped outside, just in time to see AI walking away. His curiosity piqued, he rounded the hut until he spotted Abhi, sitting in a meditative posture, his eyes open yet distant.

Sid approached silently and sat beside him, watching, waiting.

Minutes passed before Abhi stirred, noticing Sid's presence. He smiled. Sid returned the gesture.

"You were completely lost in thought," Sid said. "I saw AI leaving. Was there any connection?"

Abhi chuckled. "You're perceptive, Sid. Yes, AI shared something about meditation with me."

Sid's face lit up with curiosity

A soft grin tugged at Abhi's mouth. "AI made me realize that Meditation is NOT about pushing toward answers.

It is about creating space.

Searching for answers is NOT the cause or trigger of meditation. They are the effect."

Sid crossed his arms, a flicker of unease tightening his jaw. The answer wasn't what he expected. "Creating... what exactly? That sounds vague, Abhi. Isn't meditation supposed to be about discipline? About training the mind to focus?"

Abhi nodded, unfazed. "That's what I thought, too. But AI said it's not about control. It's about allowing. Not narrowing the mind, but letting it widen."

Sid scoffed lightly. "Widening the mind sounds like a recipe for distraction."

Abhi's lips curved with quiet warmth. "It's not a distraction. It's receptivity. When you stop chasing answers, they start arriving."

Sid opened his mouth to argue, then paused. Something in Abhi's tone - calm, grounded - made him hesitate.

He looked down, his fingers curling slightly into his lap.

"Wait..." he murmured, voice uneven.

Not chasing.

Not grasping.

Just... letting it come.

His breath hitched. A quiet tremor passed through him.

The idea wasn't just strange, it was disarming.

Answers not earned, but revealed.

Not through effort.

But through presence.

And suddenly, his life flashed before him.

His frantic attempts to find a new job. The pursuit of Angad with unwavering determination. The suffocating weight of questions he had carried, convinced that answers lay out there, waiting to be found.

But what if...

What if all of it had been backward?

What if the answers weren't things to be hunted?

What if they were things waiting to emerge?

Sid's chest tightened out of realization. The kind that doesn't scream, but settles like a stone in the gut. His breath faltered, and the early morning air, cool and laced with the scent of wet grass, suddenly felt thick. He looked down at his hands, resting on his knees, and noticed how tightly they were clenched. As if trying to hold something that had already slipped away.

The pond image lingered in his mind, its surface rippling with his own restlessness. He had stirred it too often, too forcefully, hoping clarity would rise from chaos. But now, in this quiet, something else was rising. Not answers. Just stillness.

A bird called out from a nearby tree, its cry sharp and solitary. Sid didn't flinch. He simply listened.

Abhi, sitting beside him, noticed the shift. He didn't rush in. He waited, letting the silence breathe between them. Then, gently, he spoke as if reading Sid's mind.

"I was also sharing with me that in *Taoism*," Abhi said, his voice low, "they say,

'Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear?'"

Sid's eyes didn't move, but something inside him did simultaneously as Abhi spoke the next line.

Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?"

Sid exhaled sharply; his voice was fragile.

"Abhi... maybe that's my answer too."

Abhi met his gaze, understanding flickering in his eyes.

Sid swallowed, something inside him unravelling.

"I've spent months trying to figure out where I went wrong, why my career fell apart, and why Angad seems more distant. I thought clarity would come if I just kept searching harder.

But... what if I stop searching?

What if I just sit with it? Allow space? Let answers come when they are ready, not when I demand them?"

Abhi nodded in agreement. "AI also shared that when the soul rests in stillness, truth rises from silence, like the sun emerging from the horizon. But the sun does not rise because we chase it. It rises because the night has allowed it. That is meditation, Sid. Not control, not force. Just space. And in space, truth finds you."

Sid exhaled deeply. His body was releasing something he hadn't even realized he had been holding onto. It felt strangely liberating, like the floodgates had burst open. Like something long trapped within him had been permitted to move freely again.

He looked up at Abhi, eyes softer now. "That's... not what I expected. But it feels oddly true, just like sometimes, the hardest truths are the ones that ask us to stop trying so hard."

Then, suddenly, Sid laughed.

"Speaking of deep realizations, we need to wake up Chatty. He's definitely still asleep, and I guarantee Madhav is already losing his sanity trying to get him up."

Abhi also laughed. "Knowing Chatty, he's probably convinced himself that sleep is the highest form of meditation."

Sid grinned. "Or worse, he'll claim he was astral projecting the entire time."

Abhi chuckled. "Let's go before Madhav starts reciting ancient curses out of sheer frustration."

With that, the two of them hurried toward the hut, bracing themselves for the delightful chaos that awaited.

A Choice that has No Answer

The sun had begun its climb, casting a golden haze over the hills as the five friends finished breakfast. With the afternoon reserved for their meeting with Turiyaji, Chatty and Madhav lobbied for a detour to the *Neelkanth Mahadev temple*, an ancient shrine nestled deep in the folds of the forested cliffs. Shiva, ever drawn to stillness, chose to remain behind with the monks, immersed in quiet laughter and the kind of wisdom that didn't need words.

The road twisted upward like a serpent, cutting through dense pine groves. The car rattled over uneven stones, and the scent of wild basil and damp earth seeped through the windows. Along the way, they passed barefoot pilgrims - some chanting, some silent, their foreheads smeared with ash, their eyes fixed on the path ahead. The devotion was palpable, but so was the exhaustion. Sweat glistened on their backs, and their feet were raw from the climb.

Chatty and Madhav saw sacrifice, faith, etched into flesh and bone. But Abhi and Sid saw something else: pain worn like a badge, suffering mistaken for sanctity.

"Is this devotion," Sid muttered to no one in particular, "or just inherited hardship?"

The car pulled into the dusty clearing outside Neelkanth Mahadev temple, its tires crunching over gravel as the scent of burnt camphor and sweat hit them like a wave. The air was

thick, almost chewable, with incense, diesel fumes, and the raw breath of devotion.

Sid stepped out first, his jaw clenched, eyes scanning the chaos. A man smeared in ash staggered past, chanting '*Har Har Mahadev*' with a voice that cracked like thunder. Nearby, a woman sobbed as she pressed her forehead to the temple wall, her palms trembling with something between desperation and surrender.

Madhav's gaze locked onto a barefoot pilgrim limping up the final steps, bloodied heel wrapped in cloth, eyes blazing with purpose. "This is madness," he spoke through clenched teeth, but his voice held awe, not judgment.

Chatty stood unusually still. His eyes followed a child carrying a brass pot on her head, her tiny feet navigating the crowd with the grace of ritual. "They're not just walking," he said quietly. "They're offering themselves."

Abhi's breath caught as the temple bells rang out - wild, relentless, like a call to something ancient and untamed. He felt it in his chest, a vibration that wasn't sound but memory. "This isn't just faith," he said. "It's fever."

The crowd surged around them, chanting, sweating, weeping, laughing. A man collapsed in ecstasy. Another danced with abandon, eyes rolled back, limbs flailing like he was possessed by the very god he worshipped.

And yet, in the middle of it all, the five friends stood, each gripped by something different. Reverence. Resistance. Wonder. Discomfort.

But none of them could look away.

The queue to enter the temple snaked endlessly, bodies pressed together in a slow-moving tide, its pace dictated not by impatience but by reverence. Waiting, it seemed, was part of the worship itself. A silent surrender to the passage of time.

But surrender was difficult. Waiting felt heavy, felt futile. Was patience an offering, or was it merely wasted time?

Madhav toyed with the idea of leveraging his official identity to bypass the queue, but before he could act, a solution presented itself. A young man emerged from the shadows, clad in white robes, a *Tripund Tilak* bright upon his forehead. His offer was simple: privileged entry for ten thousand rupees.

And suddenly, the choice was not abstract anymore. It was tangible, real, and immediate. A fracture split the group.

Abhi and Sid welcomed the idea. A practical exchange, a donation that would serve the temple while also saving them time. But Madhav and Chatty recoiled.

Was faith something that could be purchased? Was grace a commodity?

What was devotion if one could trade currency for sacred experience? Yet, when measured against the discomfort of waiting, against the stifling heat of the morning sun, their rigid stance wavered.

They chose convenience.

They completed the transaction. The guide led them through shadowed corridors, past locked doors that opened at his silent command, and within minutes they found themselves inside the sanctum. A few more notes ensured special sacraments reserved not for the truly devout, but for those who could afford them.

It should have been satisfying. It was not. They sat in silence, the car snaking its way back to the ashram. The temple had faded behind them, but something had followed.

Chatty had been quiet the entire time. It wasn't like him. The one who disrupted. Who questioned. Who filled silence with noise, made doubt seem ridiculous, made philosophy feel like a game. But not now. Now, he couldn't let it go. Finally, he spoke, his voice low, stripped of anything but raw thought.

"Was that the right thing to do?"

The words didn't land gently. They struck. Harsh, direct, demanding.

Nobody answered. Not because they lacked thoughts. Because they were afraid of their own answers.

Sid stared out the window. Madhav clenched his jaw. Abhi rubbed his palm against his knee as if grounding himself against the question.

But none of them spoke. The truth was indisputable.

Chatty exhaled sharply, resting his chin on his fist, eyes distant. "We justified it, didn't we? We assured ourselves that it was a practical decision. A donation. It served the temple just as much as it served us. But it wasn't. It was a convenience."

Madhav finally shifted, arms folded tightly across his chest. "What would you have done differently?"

Chatty shook his head. "I don't know."

A pause. Then, quieter.

"Maybe that's the worst part."

Sid's voice was heavy when he finally spoke. "I don't know if this is about morality or weakness. Did we bend, too afraid to break?"

The question stirred something ancient. A battle between rigidity and flexibility that history had never settled. The timeless dilemma had haunted generations before them, whispering through ancient myths and echoing in every decision humanity had ever made.

Was morality defined by principle or by survival?

Was justice served in purity or pragmatism?

Was it nobler to stand, unyielding, like *Bhishma* in the epic *Mahabharata*, bound to his oath, refusing to falter, even as his body was pierced by arrows, even as his principles led him to ruin?

Or was wisdom found in bending, like *Krishna*, choosing strategy over righteousness, bending the rules when necessary, understanding that survival was not just about strength but adaptability?

Did the unbending tree not snap when the storm arrived?

Did the supple bamboo not survive, moving with the wind, yielding, adjusting, yet never breaking?

The car jolted over a pothole, snapping them back to reality. Madhav sighed, running a hand through his hair. "We're terrible people, aren't we?"

Sid chuckled, a dry laugh, neither amusement nor regret.

"We're people."

No one had an answer after that. The question lingered, unanswered, but not unnoticed. The temple faded in the distance. The question did not.

The Illusion of Morality

The four friends stepped into the ashram courtyard, their silence heavy with the weight of unspoken guilt. Shiva looked up from where he sat weaving palm fronds with a group of monks, his eyes immediately catching the tension in their movements - the way Madhav's shoulders hunched forward, how Sid's jaw remained clenched, the unusual stillness in Chatty's usually animated gestures.

"You look like men who've just wrestled with gods," Shiva said, setting down his work. "And lost."

Madhav let out a bitter laugh. "We took the shortcut at the temple. Paid our way through. Now we're sitting here wondering if we're terrible people."

"Are you?" Shiva asked simply.

The question hung in the air like incense - penetrating, inescapable.

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Abhi muttered, sinking onto a wooden bench.

Shiva studied them for a moment, then walked over to a nearby tree where a young monk sat in meditation. Without warning, he picked up a small stone and threw it at the monk's back.

The monk's eyes snapped open, confusion and irritation flickering across his face before he caught himself, forced a smile, and returned to his pose.

"Did you see that?" Shiva asked the group.

"You disturbed his meditation," Sid said, frowning. "That was... rude."

"Was it?" Shiva picked up another stone, this time tossing it gently near a bird that had landed close by. The bird flew away unharmed, simply relocating to a different branch.

"The bird moved naturally. The monk forced himself to stay. Which response was more honest?"

Madhav shook his head. "The monk was being disciplined. That's what meditation is about, not reacting to disturbances."

"Or," Shiva said, settling cross-legged on the ground, "he was being dishonest. Pretending he wasn't disturbed when he clearly was."

Chatty, who had been unusually quiet, finally spoke up. "What does this have to do with what we did at the temple?"

"Everything," Shiva said. "You're torturing yourselves because you believe you violated some cosmic law. But what if the law itself is the problem?"

Abhi leaned forward. "Are you saying there's no right and wrong?"

"I'm saying there's no fixed right and wrong." Shiva plucked a blade of grass, examining it. "This grass grows toward the sun, bends around stones, finds water where it can. It doesn't follow a manual. It responds to what is."

"That's chaos," Madhav said firmly. "Society needs rules, boundaries. Without them..."

"Without them, what?" Shiva interrupted, his voice cutting through the air like a blade. "People would do terrible things? Look around, Madhav. People do terrible things with rules; they've simply perfected the art of doing it legally."

He gestured broadly, his intensity building. "Businessmen steal through contracts written in invisible ink. Priests betray their congregations while standing on pedestals of righteousness. Politicians, police, and powers-that-be plunder with impunity, but always, always within the sacred boundaries of the constitution."

His voice dropped to a whisper that somehow carried more weight than shouting. "The moral guardians of society commit the very sins they condemn, then sleep peacefully because they followed the rules while doing it."

He paused, letting the bitter truth settle like dust after an explosion. "Rules don't prevent evil, Madhav. They just teach it to wear a suit and tie."

Sid shifted uncomfortably. He thought of his supervisor, who spoke endlessly about integrity while taking credit for others' work. Of his own small compromises, the lies he told himself to sleep at night.

"So, what are you suggesting?" Sid asked. "That we just... do whatever we feel?"

"No." Shiva's voice was gentle but firm. "I'm suggesting you act from awareness, not from borrowed rules."

A long pause stretched between them.

"My cousin," Chatty said suddenly, his voice barely above a whisper. "He was married for twelve years. Good man, followed

all the rules. But he wasn't happy. Neither was his wife. They were like two prisoners sharing a cell, pretending it was a home."

The others turned to him.

"He met someone else. Fell in love - real love, not the polite arrangement he'd been living. He fought it for months, called himself a monster, went to therapy, prayed..." Chatty's voice broke slightly. "He was dying inside. And so was his wife, watching him die."

"What happened?" Abhi asked softly.

"He chose love. Left his marriage. Everyone called him selfish, immoral. But for the first time in years, he was alive. And you know what? His ex-wife thanked him. Said he'd given her permission to stop pretending, too."

Silence settled over the group like evening mist.

Shiva nodded slowly. "Two people trapped in a cage, both holding the key, both too afraid to use it because someone else told them the cage was holy."

"But marriage is a commitment," Abhi said, though his voice lacked conviction.

"To what?" Shiva asked. "To suffering? To pretense? Or to love?"

Abhi thought of his own marriage, the growing silences, the way they moved around each other like careful strangers. Was staying together an act of love or an act of cowardice?

"This is dangerous thinking," Madhav said, but his protest felt hollow.

"More dangerous than living a lie?" Shiva picked up a dry leaf, crumbling it between his fingers. "This leaf doesn't cling to the

branch when autumn comes. It falls, becomes soil, feeds new growth. Only humans mistake death for virtue."

Madhav rubbed his temples. "But if everyone just followed their feelings..."

"Their feelings, or their awareness?" Shiva interrupted. "There's a difference.

Feelings are like weather; they come and go. Awareness is like the sky; it simply observes."

"I don't understand," Abhi said.

Shiva smiled.

"Two monks were walking by a river. A woman needed to cross but couldn't manage alone. The elder monk, bound by his vows, walked past her. The younger monk carried her across, then set her down and continued walking.

Hours later, the elder monk said, 'You broke your vows. We're not supposed to touch women.'

The younger monk replied, 'I left her by the river. Why are you still carrying her?'"

The friends sat in contemplative silence.

"Rules," Shiva continued, "are like maps. Useful for navigation, but not to be confused with the actual territory. The elder monk followed the map so rigidly he missed the landscape entirely."

"So, you're saying we shouldn't feel bad about the temple?" Madhav asked.

"I'm saying you should feel whatever you feel, but understand why you feel it. Are you guilty because you harmed someone? Or because you violated a rule you never truly examined?"

Chatty laughed suddenly, but it was a sound empty of humor. "We stood there watching people walk barefoot for hours, calling it devotion. Then we paid to skip the line and called it a donation. We didn't even know what we believed."

"Most people don't," Shiva said gently. "They inherit their morality like they inherit their names without question, without understanding."

"But that's terrifying," Abhi said. "If there's no fixed morality, then how do we know if we're good people?"

Shiva's eyes sparkled. "Perhaps the question isn't whether you're good people, but whether you're honest people. Good is a judgment. Honesty is a choice."

The morning light spilled gently across the courtyard, casting long, golden shadows that stretched like sleepy limbs waking from the night. The air was cool, tinged with the scent of damp earth and jasmine. The friends sat quietly, each wrapped in their own thoughts, as if the silence itself was asking them to listen more deeply.

"I keep thinking about those pilgrims," Sid said finally. "Their feet were bleeding, but their eyes... There was something in their eyes."

"What?" Shiva asked.

"Certainty. They knew exactly what they were doing and why. I envied that."

"Certainty can be a prison too," Shiva said. "Sometimes the most honest thing is to admit you don't know."

Madhav leaned back against the bench. "What do we do? How do we live without fixed rules?"

"You pay attention," Shiva said simply. "You watch. You listen. You respond to what is, not what you think should be."

"That sounds impossible," Abhi said.

"It sounds like being awake," Shiva said quietly. "Just like the goose was never in the bottle. It was always free. The bottle was just a story we told ourselves."

From Paper to Practice: One Awakening, Four Voices

The morning sun had climbed higher by the time the four friends emerged from their cottage, having taken some time to rest and reflect after their visit to the temple. The experience had been unexpectedly profound - not because of any grand revelation, but because of the quiet way it had settled something within each of them.

Shiva was waiting for them outside, his presence as natural as if he'd known exactly when they would appear. Without a word, he fell into step beside them, and together they walked toward the dining room, their footsteps crunching softly on the gravel path.

"Perfect timing," Shiva said with a knowing smile. "Just enough time for a quick refreshment before we meet Turiyaji."

They pushed open the dining room door and filed in with the easy familiarity of old friends who had shared something transformative. Without discussion, they fell into their familiar ritual: four steaming cups of coffee appearing as if by magic, and Madhav's inevitable tea, which Chatty, true to form, eyed with theatrical suspicion.

"Still looks like muddy water to me," Chatty muttered, settling into his chair with exaggerated caution, as if the tea might somehow contaminate his coffee by proximity.

Madhav chuckled, but there was something different in his laugh. Lighter, less defensive. "Some things never change, Chatty."

"And some things do," Abhi said quietly, wrapping his hands around his cup as if drawing warmth from more than just the coffee.

The weight of the past twenty-four hours hung over them, not as a burden, but as an undeniable shift. Each of them had entered this journey with different questions, different struggles, and different ways of thinking. But now, somewhere between yesterday's philosophical storms and this morning's temple silence, each of them had found something: a mantra, an awareness, a truth that had begun to reshape their perspective.

None of them had expected this.

Yet, here they were, with the afternoon meeting with Turiyaji still ahead of them, and the strange sense that they were no longer quite the same people who had arrived at the ashram.

In one corner, Shiva sat as a silent observer, his presence a gentle call to look inward, nudging each of them to dive deeper into their reflections before speaking.

For what felt like an eternal moment, Abhi's eyes wandered over the warm light dancing upon the floor. Then, as if pulling his words from the depths of a profound awakening, he spoke slowly, deliberately.

"I once believed life was meant to be endured. Controlled. A careful dance around joy, keeping passion at arm's length, treating pleasure as something to be rationed or ashamed of. However, I now realize that life is not meant to be lived in

whispers. It is meant to be lived fully, deeply, with arms wide open to all its sacred gifts."

The rest of the friends listened intently.

"We are taught to hold back, to dim our light, to fear the intensity of our own aliveness. That the sacred union between souls should be hidden in shadows. What was once celebrated as divine communion was later shrouded in shame. What was once honored as sacred intimacy is now whispered about in guilt.

And fear? Fear is nothing but the enemy of fullness, the thief of presence, the shadow that keeps us from embracing the magnificent truth of our existence.

I saw it flickering in my own life, stretching long across my marriage, my connection with Joy. It looked real, real enough to keep me distant, but when I reached out with courage, I found only illusion.

That's fear.

It moves, it distorts, and it keeps us from the very love that nourishes our souls. But it has no power over truth. It only exists because we refuse to see the sacred in the everyday. Now, I choose to step through the door of complete living because

"Life is a gift, meant to be unwrapped with wonder,

Love is a dance, meant to be danced with surrender."

Shiva chuckled and spoke.

"That reminds me of a story..."

A young man named Kavi lived in a beautiful garden but spent his days focused only on the thorns, afraid to touch the roses. He walked

carefully, avoiding the vibrant blooms, convinced that beauty was dangerous, that pleasure led to pain.

One day, his beloved, a wise woman who radiated joy, found him sitting alone, distant and cold.

"Kavi, what keeps you from the flowers?" she asked.

"The thorns, my love! They will hurt me, disappoint me!"

The woman smiled and walked to the most magnificent rose in the garden. She cupped it gently in her hands, breathing in its fragrance.

"Come, feel this," she whispered.

Kavi hesitated, then slowly approached. She guided his hands to the velvet petals.

The woman laughed softly.

"You see, Kavi, thorns protect the rose, but they do not diminish its beauty. Pain and pleasure, struggle and joy—they are partners in the dance of life.

The sacred is not found in avoidance but in complete embrace.

The moment you honor both the thorns and the rose; you discover the garden's true magic."

Abhi sat in silence, absorbing the wisdom, letting the truth settle in his heart like warm honey. Then, his eyes lifted, not to the shadows of his old fears, but to the vibrant life pulsing all around him. And with passion, he spoke.

"I understand now. Intimacy cannot flourish in the darkness of holding back. We create deserts with our hesitation, our shame, but the moment we choose to live fully, to love completely, to

laugh without reservation, life blooms in ways we never imagined.

If I keep withholding, love withers. But if I embrace the divine dance of intimacy, the garden of our love will flourish.

Live. Love. Laugh. This is my new sacred mantra."

Shiva's gaze met Abhi's in silent affirmation, a knowing smile crossing his lips as he witnessed this beautiful soul finally awakening to life's most sacred truth - that love, in all its forms, is the very essence of existence itself.

Madhav lifted his eyes from the cup he stirred with deliberate care.

"For so long," he began, his voice carrying the weight of sorrow softened by the tremor of hope, "I believed unanswered prayers meant silence. Perhaps God had turned away, unmoved by my longing. And so, I let go. I closed my heart, certain that He had abandoned me.

Convinced that faith was nothing more than a wish unanswered."

He paused, and the silence folded around him like a soft cloak, gently reclaiming the places doubt had once hollowed out.

"But in these still hours, I have come to see that faith is not a transaction. It is not about pleading for miracles, nor is it measured by what is given or denied. It is about surrender. Opening oneself to the unfolding mystery of life, even when the response is unknown. Even when the answer comes in whispers, we are yet to recognize."

A faint smile touched his lips, not of triumph, but of understanding.

"I see now that I was never truly abandoned. I was simply too wounded to hear the voice of the divine. I was too guarded to trust the tender love that had always been present.

Now, I choose not to turn away anymore. I choose not to close the door in fear nor to seek faith in conditions, but to cherish the abundance of the divine.

And the way to do this?"

His eyes lifted, soft and steady.

"Surrender. Unconditional surrender. Not the kind that lowers you or binds you to a shrine, saint, or scripture. But the kind that dissolves boundaries, spilling freely, touching all, holding all.

I realized that God is not hidden in distant heavens or locked behind ritual. Rather, God is found in that quiet yielding, the one that asks nothing in return. Not obedience. Not performance. Just presence.

God is not waiting to be searched for. God is simply waiting to be seen through the gaze of surrender."

The air around him felt lighter. Something gentler now carries the once-heavy burden of doubt.

Madhav's confession was met with a long pause, resonant and deep, as if the air itself absorbed the delicate balance of despair and redemption

Sid, who had been listening with intense concentration, cleared his throat and spoke in a measured cadence.

"I spent so long chasing clarity, trying desperately to force answers as though truth were something I could capture in my hands. But I've come to learn that struggle does not seize the truth. When we stop our relentless pursuit, truth slowly and inevitably surfaces, like the first blush of dawn. Hence, the mantra for me that I have realized is

'Let go'

They may be just words, but they'll carry me forward. No more dragging dead weight, no more clinging to the past, or ceaselessly creating the future that never is. A good riddance to assumptions and expectations. Today, I bid adieu to the struggle. Life is in the moment. I want to take this home and put it into action. These words are also the way to reconnect with Angad."

Shiva, the ever-storyteller, smiled.

"A wandering dervish once came upon a mighty river, its currents wild and unforgiving. He needed to cross, but there was no bridge, no boat.

He saw a man standing at the edge, trembling. "How will I cross?" the man asked.

The dervish smiled. "Let go."

The man hesitated. "But the river will drown me!"

Stepping forward, the dervish entered the water and allowed the current to carry him.

He did not fight, did not resist. The river carried him gently to the other side.

The man watched in awe. He took a deep breath, stepped in, and surrendered. And just as the dervish had promised, the river carried him safely across.

"Sid, I've come to understand that surrender isn't defeat, it's trust. Not blind belief, but a deep knowing. It's the moment you stop wrestling with life, stop forcing outcomes, and allow yourself to be carried. Not by hope, but by the certainty that where you are meant to go, life will take you. And where you are meant to be, you will arrive."

At last, all eyes turned to Chatty.

Chatty leaned back dramatically, stretching like a man who had just returned from a spiritual expedition and was now far too enlightened to engage in basic mortal struggles.

"Oh, I've cracked the code, my friends. We came searching for God, and instead, I found my *mojo*, my *Ikigai* - Behold the power of *Why Not?*"

The others laughed, but Chatty was only warming up.

"See, I had this epiphany. All this time, I thought my problems originated from outside. Money, my relationships, Mansi, questionable career choices, my tragic lack of abs." He gestured vaguely, as if waving away his former ignorance. "But no! Turns out the real villain in this drama was, drumroll, please, ME! My own conditioning! Those sneaky little thoughts convincing me life was a battleground instead of a playground."

He shook his head, as if personally offended by his past self.

"And when I asked myself Why Not? And let me tell you. It was like being sucker-punched by the universe itself. My entire life, I whined, "Why me?" Why is this happening? Where did I go wrong? But not once did I ask Why not?"

He leaned forward, locking eyes with the group, his voice dropping to a dramatic whisper.

"The question changes everything. Who promised me smooth sailing? Who guaranteed life would be fair? WHO TOLD ME I WOULDN'T HAVE TO SUFFER LIKE THE REST OF YOU PEASANTS?"

He took a long sip of coffee for dramatic effect.

"And once you realize that, my friends, life is a video game with cheat codes. Every time fear or temptation crashes in like a tsunami, I just whisper, 'Conditioning, my old friend, I see you.' And BAM. I don't drown; I surf!"

Abhi chuckled.

"So, 'Why Not?' is now your life philosophy?"

Chatty bowed dramatically, placing a hand over his heart like a man sworn to duty.

"From now on, no more Whys, only Why Not."

The room erupted into laughter, but beneath the amusement, there was something else. Something real.

Chatty had always wielded humour like a shield, deflecting seriousness with jokes, drowning uncertainty in wit. But today, his laughter carried something lighter, freer.

Not an escape, but an arrival.

For once, he wasn't laughing to avoid something. He was laughing because he had finally let go.

And maybe, just maybe, he had found a kind of peace that didn't need a punchline.

Then, like a man wronged beyond measure, Chatty gasped, eyes wide with betrayal.

"Shiva, where is my story? You cannot be so cruel, so biased, so heartless that you would deprive me of a tale on 'Why Not?' Have I not suffered enough? Have I not endured endless hours of philosophy, attempting to grasp wisdom while my stomach screamed for food? I demand justice!"

Shiva chuckled, amused.

"Why not?"

And the tale began.

Once upon a time, there was a humble stonecutter named Haruto, who spent his days breaking rocks under the scorching sun. His life was hard. His hands were like sandpaper, his back a permanent question mark. Every day, he looked at the wealthy merchants passing by and thought, "Why me? Why must I suffer while others live in comfort?"

One afternoon, as he struck a stone, he saw a grand carriage rolling past. Silk, jewels, servants - the whole luxury package. Haruto sighed.

"Ah," he thought, "If only I were rich, I would never suffer again."

To his astonishment, a voice echoed in his mind: "Why not?"

And just like that, he was transformed into a wealthy merchant. A grand house, exquisite robes, and servants bowing left and right surrounded him. He felt invincible.

Until he stepped outside.

The sun was merciless, roasting him like a festival snack. Sweat poured down his face, his silks now sticking to him like regret.

"Even wealth cannot escape the sun," he muttered. "If only I were the sun, I would be the most powerful of all."

Again, the voice whispered: "Why not?"

And suddenly, Haruto became the sun, blazing across the sky, shining over kingdoms and seas. Now, surely, he was the most powerful.

Until a dark cloud blocked his light.

"Even the sun is powerless against the clouds, he realized. "If only I were a mighty storm, I would be unstoppable."

"Why not?"

"This was real power!

Until he crashed against a massive boulder that refused to move.

"Even storms cannot break stone," he thought. "If only I were a rock, I would be the strongest of all."

"Why not?"

And so, Haruto became a mighty boulder, unmoved by wind, rain, or time itself.

Now, surely, he was invincible.

Until he heard it... tap, tap, tap.

A stonecutter was chipping away at him.

Haruto gasped. "Even the strongest rock is shaped by the hands of a simple man."

And in that moment, he understood. He had always been powerful.

From that day forward, Haruto never asked 'Why me?' again.

He embraced his craft, knowing that he was not a victim of life; he was its creator. He lived by one philosophy:

"Why not?"

"And here is another story especially modified for you, Chatty," Shiva said, smiling.

Once upon a time, there lived a man named Chatty, who was known far and wide. He was renowned not for his wisdom or strength, but for his incessant questions. Every morning, he would wake up and sigh, "Why must I work so hard?"

Every afternoon, he would grumble, "Why does life treat me unfairly?"

And every evening, he would sit under a tree, staring at the stars, "Why am I not rich? Why am I not powerful? Why, why, why?"

One day, fed up with his misery, Chatty decided to seek the Great Sage who lived atop the mountain. Surely, the sage would have answers.

After a grueling climb, Chatty finally reached the sage's hut. "Master, I have come with a question", he announced.

The sage, without looking up, simply said, "Why not?"

Chatty blinked. "Excuse me?"

The sage sighed, finally meeting Chatty's gaze. "You have spent your life asking 'Why?' But tell me, what has it given you?"

Chatty hesitated. "Well... frustration, mostly."

The sage nodded. "‘Why?’ is the question of the defeated. It is the lament of those who wait for life to change instead of changing it themselves."

Chatty frowned. "Then what should I ask?"

The sage smiled. "Ask ‘Why not?’"

Chatty scoffed. "That makes no sense."

The sage chuckled. "Does it? Let’s test it."

He pointed to a massive boulder nearby. "Move that rock."

Chatty groaned. "Why me?"

The sage raised an eyebrow. "Why not you?"

Chatty sighed, walked over, and pushed the rock. It didn’t budge.

"See? It’s impossible."

The sage grinned. "Is it? Try again."

Chatty pushed harder. Still nothing.

"This is pointless!"

The sage shrugged. "Why not try something else?"

Chatty paused. He looked around, grabbed a long wooden pole, wedged it under the rock, and leveraged it.

To his astonishment, the rock shifted.

The sage clapped. "Ah! You see? The moment you stopped asking ‘Why?’ and started asking ‘Why not?’, you found a way."

Chatty stared at the rock, then at the sage. "... all this time, I was just asking the wrong question?"

The sage grinned. "Exactly. ‘Why?’ keeps you stuck. ‘Why not?’ moves you forward."

From that day forward, Chatty never asked "Why me?" again.

Instead, he asked, "Why not me?" and his life transformed.

The room sank into that rare kind of silence, the kind that wraps itself around your ribs and refuses to leave. Chatty squinted, pointing an accusatory finger at no one in particular.

"What you're saying is... I've been auditioning for the role of 'Chief Complainer' for absolutely no reason."

Madhav shrugged. "Seems like you landed the part effortlessly."

Chatty threw his hands up. "Great. Just fantastic. Look, if I ever start growing again, stop me. Seriously. Hand me a cookie, distract me with shiny things, but do not let me evolve. I have a reputation to uphold."

Laughter erupted, crashing through the solemnity like a wave against the rock.

The group was lost in their reflections. Then, Abhi lifted his cup in salute, his voice steady with conviction.

"To love without walls, without need to confine,

Not something to own, but a force so divine.

No chains, no demands - just truth that pervades,

The only thing left when the rest of life fades."

Sid followed, raising his cup, a small smile playing at his lips.

"To Let Go - the boldest act of grace,

To loosen the grip, we thought was an embrace.

To free the weight we were never meant to hold,

And find in release, a strength, quiet and bold."

Madhav exhaled, then lifted his cup as well, murmuring.

*"To **Surrender** - not to silence, but to flame,*

Where self dissolves and only God remains.

No chains, no creed - just breath and sacred ache,

A love unveiled the moment we forsake."

Chatty, ever the reluctant philosopher, eyes dancing with something unreadable, something both wry and deeply knowing, bared his thoughts.

*"To **Why Not**, the mischief behind the miracle,*

Chief architect of every near-farcical.

When plans combust and Zen walks out,

I just shrug loud enough to drown the doubt."

And finally, Shiva, for whom stories were both language and reply, raised his cup with a quiet smile.

*"To **The Stories** we carry, the ones we tell,*

And the truths that emerge when we listen well.

In every tale shared, in every tear dried,

I find my purpose, walking alongside."

The wind outside carried their words, weaving them into the night like a whispered secret. The conversation, the choices, the truths, they had not solved them. Maybe they never would. However, the weight felt lighter, the path ahead became clearer, and the unanswered, restless questions felt, for once, like companions rather than burdens. The journey had not ended. It had only begun.

The Unwritten Chapter – A Glimpse of the Future Blaze

"Why haven't we seen another Buddha? A Jesus? A Shankara walk the earth?"

Turiyaji's voice cracked like a sky splitting

"Because we kill them. Lovingly. Efficiently. In childhood."

All four friends froze.

Mid-pulse. Mid-breath. Mid-belief.

Like truths had just changed shape midair.

"Every Jesus is caught young, handed a uniform instead of a wilderness.

Every Buddha is taught table manners before he learns silence.

Every Shankara is told to clear exams before he clears illusion."

Then came the blade.

Not in gesture, but in truth, slicing centuries of comfort

"Every time a child, a Vivekananda, arrives with unshaped brilliance, we panic.

So, we trim, chisel, and shrink the divine into the digestible.

Snip. Snip. Snip.

Parents with hedge shears.

Priests and *Pandits* with scriptures.

Professors with perfected syllabi.

All carefully molding wildfire into temple-safe candles.

All pruning prodigies until only products remain."

No one spoke.

Not because they disagreed

but because somewhere, deep in the bone, every scar from being trimmed in the past screamed in silence.

"We don't lose Buddhas," Turiyaji whispered. "We manufacture their extinction. In schools. In temples. In decorated living rooms with activity charts on the fridge.

We barcode the next Mahavira, before they can even speak in fire.

We call it parenting.

We call it tradition.

We call it culture.

But let's call it what it is

Genocide of originality."

And at that moment, they all knew.

Turiyaji hadn't arrived to console.

Turiyaji had come to dismantle. To demolish.

They had seen *gurus* before. Men who hoarded wisdom like treasure, dispensing crumbs to the hungry while feasting on devotion.

They had encountered lust dressed as culture.

They had seen truth edited, polished, packaged, and softened for consumption and repurposed as currency in the marketplace of obedience.

But this was different.

This was raw.

Unfiltered lightning in human form.

Every echo of borrowed knowledge withered in Turiyaji's presence.

No rationalization of scriptures was deep enough to veil it.

No fortress of faith firm enough to shelter it.

No glory of the past loud enough to defend it.

The comfortable lies they had carried about tradition, about respect, about the way things must be cracked like eggshells under the weight of this truth.

In that moment, they understood:

They had not come here to find peace.

They had come to be set on fire.

Let the traditions tremble.

Let the mantras crack.

Let the beliefs crumble.

Truth now rises, no longer draped in borrowed robes, but naked in its own terrible glory.

Not with head bowed in feeble surrender.

Not with palms pressed, begging permission.

Not with a whimper stitched in obedience.

Unhindered. Uninhibited. Unrepressed.

And they could hear somewhere in the distance, the sound of children's laughter - wild, untamed, uncut by the world's careful scissors.

The sound of the next Buddha learning to walk.

The sound of the next Jesus learning to speak.

The sound of the next revolution learning to breathe.

Beware. This is no ending.

This is the fuse, still hissing.

The thunder, still roaring.

A warning, not a whisper.

A pause, not a silence.

Before the next blaze of truth sets the world ablaze.