

## Catharsis

1.

I did not become distraught on hearing of the death of my only son. I did not cry. My residence was full of people coming to commiserate with and console me, but no one saw me perturbed. I talked coolly with everyone and told them that I was all right and they should instead go and console the boy's mother (the mother of whom, now?). The boy's mother had gone out of her mind, beating her chest and lamenting; she could not understand that death was the rule and none of us were an exception to that rule. God gave us our only son, and God has now taken him back; maybe He will give again if he wants to. I coolly went through the condolence messages and the telegrams; I felt grateful and replied in a restrained and grateful manner to the messages from all our relatives and intimate friends. As for the rest, I expressed my heartfelt gratitude collectively through newspapers. The things belonging to my son were reorganised, the furniture in the house was relocated, and the walls of our house started echoing many diverse sounds other than the voice of my son ---, like the sound of crying, sighs and lamentations, advice and suggestions from many people, the din of our relatives' children running around the house. At last, the rules of life took over, and the boy's mother slowly became normal, accepting everything as destiny. Then, one day, my house finally resonated with the chanting of holy *mantras*. The last rites for the dead, including the *Shraddha* ceremony, were also completed. I supervised everything with a calm, composed mind. But once in a while, a thought suddenly

sprang to my mind: why did this happen? What sin did we commit? We had sent him out for studies with much hope, though we were unhappy having to send him out of sight. He did not want to come home this time, as his exams would commence immediately after the holidays, but we could not agree. His mother and I wrote emphatically to him to come home for at least a couple of days. On the way, his bus met with an accident, and he never reached home. That day, I excitedly went to the market myself and brought home the head of a *Rahu* fish and varieties of leafy and other vegetables that his mother wanted to cook with. She had prepared a good spread and was waiting for his arrival... No, we did not commit any sin. But we felt a strong attachment for him, almost a proprietary attachment and both attachment and greed are wrong. Maybe attachment is also a kind of enticement that might have resulted in a sin.

2.

I did not give up my livelihood and my work. I did not abandon family life and did not become an ascetic. With a walking stick, I went for walks as before, chatted with our neighbours, and received friends and guests when they called on us. Once in a while, I fasted. Fasting purifies the mind and purifies the inner self. I tried to control my mind. The boy's mother also fasted occasionally, but unlike me, she did not do it to control her mind. I did not confide in anyone the reasons for my fasting. Sometimes, the boy's mother became quite pensive and kept staring unblinkingly at me and broke down in sobs after that. When asked, she said she was missing her son. I was not convinced, nor did I understand. Anyway, I took it quite coolly and presumed that such bouts of sorrow would occasionally assault

the mother, and I again immersed myself in my own thoughts. I realised that fasting only for a day or two would not yield any results. After fasting only for a day, my mind became weaker and more rigid than before, but the boy's mother would not allow me to go on fast for more than a day at a time. But as luck would have it, my mother-in-law became severely ill before barely two and half months were over after my son's death, and she was so sick that it was all touch and go. I accompanied my son's mother and left her at my in-law's place for a few days. Only the boy who cooked for us stayed with me, making it easier for me to fast for prolonged periods. That boy did not create any difficulty for me. I thus stayed without touching even a drop of water for five days and five nights at a stretch. On the sixth day, I had become so weak that I did not have the strength even to raise my hand; the powers to think were gone, and then I remembered that if the body is subjected to unbearable hardship, the mind stops functioning and the ability to think coherently is significantly reduced. This realisation made even the Buddha take a break from his meditations and go out in search of food. I called the boy who cooked for me and sent him to the market to fetch various vegetables and fish. I then made him cook a variety of dishes under my direction. After cooking, I made him lay out the dishes for me, and I bathed. After bathing, I chanted a small prayer and sat before the plate. I sent the cook-boy out of the house on an errand and told him that he might take his time and he could wash my plate and other utensils after his return. After he left, I looked at the dishes before me as if I had never seen anything like that. Pangs of hunger made my stomach churn, and the alluring aroma of the food made my mouth drool with saliva. But I sat more squarely and, taking both my hands behind my back, I pressed one with the other with all my strength. The aroma coming from the food gradually petered out and

then vanished altogether. A thin film formed over the soup-like dishes, cockroaches started scurrying over the rice on the plate, and ants began pulling away the fish. Hours passed, and I kept sitting in front of the plate, firmly pressing my hands behind my back and thinking, hey, you mind, I am offering you more enticement. Hey, mind, I know you want me to eat, but I will not allow you to satisfy your wish; I will defeat you. Let me see how you can make me eat.

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