

PARABLE OF THE ARCHER

Aashish Kaul

Gravity is the root of lightness;
stillness, the ruler of movement.

Lao-Tzu

The story was vouchsafed me by a friend who was leaving for Lhasa the next day. I hadn't heard from him in nearly a year, and here we were, taking shelter in a coffeehouse from the sudden rain that was falling in gusts over the empty streets, making the trees shine like chenille and choking the drains and gutters with muddy water. A spell of silence had come over us, a silence in which thought either collects itself or swiftly melts away. He took a sip from his cup, glanced at the mirror on the far side in which was reflected the blowup of a girl in an alley between yellow walls, and said, 'I have told you about the parable of the archer, haven't I? It's an old Tao fable. At any rate, I'll tell you again. I can never tire of it.' And he spoke thus:

In China of ancient times, there lived an archer, who was the ablest among the emperor's great warriors, having won many a battle for the sovereign, annexing one province upon another and extending the empire to hitherto unknown lands. During a prolonged spell of peace, and for want of a better distraction, he made a formal declaration that any subject of the empire who could prove himself the more skillful in a direct contest could take his place in the royal court and enjoy all the emperor's favors that were earlier his. The contest, the archer announced, would remain open for ten days. Now the archer's fame had travelled far and wide, and

as was expected, no match took place; the archer waited in the arena each day only to return at sundown to his palatial quarters and his many wives, filled with a mixed sense of pride and boredom. However, the dawn of the last day brought a visitor who wanted to briefly confer with him. At last a challenger, thought the archer, dressing hurriedly. But what was this, it couldn't be: this submissive, pale faced, poor villager – emptyhanded, too!

The villager bowed with unusual grace. When he looked up a smile flickered on his lip. This troubled the archer. He asked his guest after the purpose of his visit: surely, he wasn't here to take the challenge? Oh, no! Certainly not sire, answered the villager. There is one, however, who can, he continued, one who is beyond contest, and from what I know I will advise you not to confront him (as he will not confront you), for you are no match for him, you will be defeated before you lift your bow. The visitor's words filled the archer with rage, though a curious suspicion was beginning to gnaw at him. Tell me, at once, who he is, and where will I find him, the archer demanded.

Astride his favorite horse that very morning, the archer headed towards the forest which lay at a two-day trot from the capital. Silence gradually came to fill his hours and the unending clickety-clack of the horse's hooves made him soporific. Nights were cold and dark and full of falling stars. He ate frugally and slept huddled close to the small fire he had built with his own hands. For the first time in life, he came to feel the magic of simple things. Yet his resolve remained unshaken.

On the third day his eyes saw the ebony mass of the forest covering the horizon, and beyond it rising, distant and elemental, the mist-draped mountains. He gave a tug to the horse's reins and dug his heels deeper into its belly forcing the beast into a gallop. His pride was starting to run in his blood with a renewed vigour, and, momentarily, his grip tightened on his bow. Once inside, he forded first a broad and in time a narrow river to find a trail leading to a hut at some distance. The villager had been exact with directions. The archer secured his horse to a tree and continued on foot. Near the hut a man was busy chopping wood. The archer quickly hid behind a tree to observe. Could he be the one? It was inconceivable! Yet there was a certain grace in the axe's movement that betrayed a skilled hand. The archer decided to take a small test. Still concealed from the

woodcutter's view, he released an arrow with a gentle pull on the bow-string. But just as the arrow was about to graze the woodcutter's shoulder, it somehow turned back on its course, and in the next instant pierced the tree-trunk behind which the archer stood hiding. The woodcutter's movements had been so swift as to be invisible; indeed he was no match to this man's skill. Without even being aware of his adversary, he had defeated him. Free of any desire for a contest, the archer emerged into the clearing and begged the woodcutter to take him as a disciple. The other informed him that whatever he knew about archery he had long since forgotten. The archer was persistent, and at last the woodcutter acquiesced.

For many months the archer remained the woodcutter's pupil, and for many months he did not touch his bow. There were other things he learnt instead; to chop wood free of all effort, aided by the wind, and to catch fish with bare hands, without looking. And little by little awareness of life's movement grew in him. Then one day the woodcutter bade him near and told him he was free to leave; there was nothing more he could offer as a teacher. The archer was astonished to hear this. He had learnt nothing of the only skill that mattered to him! The woodcutter read his thoughts, and said, you learn most when you do not learn at all. An arrow is but an arrow; now if you so wish, time itself will turn back on its course. The archer understood, and in that same instant he was aware of the movement of every leaf of every tree, of every bird in the sky, of the fish in water, of earth itself. He knelt before the woodcutter and answered, O Master, your wisdom flows to me, and through your blessing I have become the greatest archer of all.

Can it be? inquired the woodcutter, when the old man of the mountains is still alive. Compared to him, my wisdom is but a lark in the sky. These words altered the archer's course; instead of returning to the capital, he slipped deeper into the forest and having walked for a week reached the mountains. Another day's climb brought him to a tarn where he refreshed himself and rested for the night. Continuing his ascent into the mountains next morning, he presently saw a frail old man, something of a hunchback, slowly descending towards him with an urn balanced on one shoulder. The archer asked him for directions and was shown the way to the cave near the summit. The archer thanked him and resumed his journey.