

Yantra

Part 1: Yantra

Ajatashatru, king of the great Magadha, had summoned the Council of the Seven Brahmins. The people worried. Rumors started to spread. The Council, comprised of the seven greatest Brahmins in the realm, would usually gather only in the event of a grave crisis or imminent war. Their summoning surprised even the Seven themselves, who hurried to Pataliputra, the splendid new capital of Magadha, to hear the king's concerns. Once all were seated around the sacred hearth in the great Council Hall, Ajatashatru spoke:

– O venerated Brahmins, what a curse is affecting our kingdom! The Buddha is gone. He has reached *panirvana*, he has liberated himself from the endless cycle of deaths and rebirths... But he didn't do it *here*. He was on his way to Pataliputra to visit me one last time – I have his letter, here, where he promised to come – yet instead he chose to pass away in Kushinagar, the capital of the Malla Republic. To what did he owe me such a disfavor? Now the Mallakas have cremated and buried him in their city, inside a crude brick Stupa, when they should have known I've built here a magnificent tomb worthy of such a sage – who also was a prince, let us not forget. It is our whole kingdom the Mallakas have humiliated! I will not ignore such a slight and I will bring the Buddha's ashes to Pataliputra where they belong! Our army is far more powerful than Malla's. I say we'll defeat them in one or two battles and then, magnanimous as we are, we'll offer them peace in exchange for the Buddha's ashes.

As he had expected, Ajatashatru received seven disapproving looks from the Brahmins. By a raise of his palm, he shut all their objections before they could be raised and continued:

– I know you Brahmins don't have much regard for the Buddha. You see him as a dissident, denying the social order on top of which your caste stands. But his teachings are already spreading throughout India and beyond to Tibet and even China... If he was buried here, Magadha would acquire worldwide prestige, well worth a little war against Malla.

One of the Brahmins couldn't help but smile at these words.

– Majesty, wouldn't it be ironic to employ violence in the name of a sage who preached non-violence?

– By what other means could we obtain his ashes?

– For the Buddha to complete his journey to Magadha in a humble, non-violent way, we could have his ashes stolen from that brick Stupa and smuggled here. We have in our dungeon many skilled thieves who could do the deed in exchange for their freedom.

– This is indeed a wiser course of action, but these thieves are loyal to none: after they've stolen the ashes, they'd sell them to the highest bidder. Furthermore, I've heard this brick Stupa, though modest, is well guarded. As for the funerary urn, it is cast into a stone altar with only one opening so small it would take a child to...

Ajatashatru stopped mid-sentence. The Seven wondered what his thoughtful eyebrows could hide. Finally, the king declared:

– Let us forget about these crazy plans! I owe the Buddha to let him rest in peace. As a matter of fact, I will immediately undergo a pilgrimage to Kushinagar to pay him tribute.

Kushinagar was a proud city covered with oblong, onion-shaped roofs. As Ajatashatru approached the gates, the Malla dignitaries welcoming him were surprised by the humility of his suite. Here was the king of Magadha, whose fabulous wealth was already the stuff of legends and who even owned a white elephant, straddling a simple mule. He was followed only by his wife, two children and a handful of guards and servants. After all, the dignitaries thought, it would have been unbecoming to pay tribute to a sage who preached humility in a luxurious manner. The king and his family were first guided to the spot where the Buddha taught his last lesson. Then, after a discussion with the

Buddha's few disciples still remaining in Kushinagar, they were finally brought to the brick Stupa where the sage's mortal remains rested. As he dismounted his mule, Ajatashatru asked the Malla dignitaries to be left alone inside with his son and heir Udayin, so he could pass down to him, father to son, the main teachings of the Buddha. The dignitaries gladly granted him that wish, touched by the king's exemplary wisdom. Prince Udayin, shy and frail, shivered with awe as he entered such a holy place; his father, however, only felt disgusted by those crude bricks and that rough stone altar. What a contrast it made with the splendid tomb he had built in Pataliputra! Once they were both crouching before the altar, the father told his son:

– Udayin, my boy, let's play a little game, shall we?

– A game?

– Do you see that little box in the altar? I'd like to see it from up close, but I'm too large to pass through the opening. Would you get it for me?

The child cowered and huddled.

– Are you deaf? Your father is asking you something! Will you show him there's a brave warrior in you? Now, what are you waiting for?

Gathering what few courage he could, the boy climbed the altar awkwardly. Ajatashatru wondered whether his son could one day become a great warrior worthy of ruling Magadha with such clumsiness. Little Udayin passed his head through the opening, but his shoulders were just a little too large. And the ashes remained loyally at their post...

Seeing Ajatashatru's gloomy face as he exited the Stupa, the dignitaries were moved by the king's deep mourning. That night, at the dinner table, the king sat opposite to Udayin, next to his daughter Gargi. To the prince, the queen and the few servants present, it was clear as day: Ajatashatru, disappointed with Udayin, now considered making Gargi the new heir to the throne. This became all the more evident when, as the meal was ending, the king hugged his daughter tightly, as if a torrent was carrying him away and little Gargi was the sole rock he could cling to. Udayin stood up and fled to his room to cry hard tears. The queen, tired by the road, went to sleep alone and even the servants, afraid to disturb the king and his princess, finally took their leave. Seeing that they were now alone, Ajatashatru released his daughter from his arms and told her:

– Gargi, my little jewel, I know you are brave and strong, much more than your puny brother. So I'd like you to do something for me.

– Anything!

For once her father was paying attention to her, and Gargi wouldn't disappoint him for anything in the world. "Whatever he asks of me, she promised herself, even fighting a lion barehanded, I'll do it!" When Ajatashatru explained to her what he actually wanted, however, she couldn't help but shiver. A lion, she could fight it and the damage would be limited to this life only; stealing the Buddha's ashes, however, that meant offending the gods and dooming herself for thousands of future lives! Gargi wasn't even sure her shoulders were thinner than her brother's. Sensing his daughter's hesitation, Ajatashatru raised his voice:

– You won't disappoint your father, will you?

Under the cover of night, Gargi started towards the brick Stupa. She had an excellent memory and remembered the way from the guests palace. It was the first time she went outside alone – and at night. Hadn't her mother always said it was dangerous for a girl to go out alone, even in daytime? Gargi swallowed her fears. This, she told herself, was the first step to becoming like the heroes of the great epics. As there were two guards flanking the Stupa's entrance, she climbed up the brick dome from the rear and down to the entrance's side. The guards, who were facing outside, never saw the little girl slipping behind their backs. The princess lighted a torch and climbed the altar. She felt immense relief as her shoulders went through the opening, relief that turned to panic as soon as she grabbed the box. She felt a thousand vengeful eyes opening around her, staring at her. She ran away, away from those burning stares. Then, she heard two men shouting behind her. The guards! Gargi's legs moved faster than she could have thought possible. She stumbled and fell, the ashes

almost spilled out, got back up and ran, ran, ran. Dogs barked, people shouted in the streets and the eyes kept staring at her. She finally reached the guest palace in tears. The pain in her legs and in her whole body stung as she stopped. Ajatashatru took his crying daughter in his arms, not before carefully hiding the precious box in his clothing.

Ajatashatru had arrived in Kushinagar on mule back, but now he was leaving on the fastest stallion. The long road to Pataliputra was covered in three days only, at the pace of interminable gallop even at night, stopping only for a single meal at day. Gargi, Udayin and his wife fell gravely ill on arrival. Ajatashatru himself, a toughened warrior, slept for three days. While he was asleep, the Seven Brahmins, to whom the king had entrusted with ruling the kingdom in his absence, gathered to decide what was to be done with the Buddha's ashes. That decision was most urgent: the Mallakas were already aware of the theft and would no doubt try anything to get their prize back. The Buddha's new resting place was to be inviolable, so that no matter how many thieves, mercenaries and commandos the Mallakas hired would break like waves against the cliff. The most obvious solution was the first to be brought forward at the Seven's meeting:

– Let's surround the tomb with a thousand guards! No commando of even the greatest fighters can ever defeat a thousand men at once.

– How naive you are, my friend! Guards are humans, and all human is corruptible. No matter if they're a thousand: one corrupted guard and the other nine hundred and ninety nine will stand useless. It takes a single drop to poison a whole well.

– If human corruptibility is the issue, perhaps we can instead surround the tomb with tigers and crocodiles.

– Impossible. The tomb must remain accessible by pilgrims and ferocious beasts won't make a difference between pious pilgrims and vile thieves for their dinner.

The Brahmins thus declared the task impossible. Those ashes, they agreed, would only bring Magadha the wrath of gods and men, so they began discussing how they'd sell them back to Malla, against the king's will. Only one Brahmin had remained silent during these discussions. As the other six were settling on the right price for the ashes, he cleared his voice and spoke up.

– If the guards can't be neither human nor animal, I know of a third option. I've heard of a man named Vishvakarma, who lives in Pataliputra. They say he can make any type of machine and automaton.

– Automatons are good as toys for children, the eldest of the Council replied. Toys can't fend off mercenaries.

– Vishvakarma doesn't only make toys. They say he spent his youth traveling to distant places. In a country called the Two Lands, he saw machines that could open a temple's heavy bronze gates automatically. In a great city called Babylon, he saw large tendrils spinning by themselves to carry water up hanging gardens... All these machines, Vishvakarma studied them as he went. Surely he can conceive mechanical guards of absolute loyalty and superhuman strength.

Vishvakarma accepted that task – not that he could have refused. It took him just a few days to build automatons with a man's anatomy but a lion's strength. When he presented them to the king, he said this was only part of the task – the easy part. What would take the most time and effort, he explained, was programming them properly. Merely teaching them to fight wasn't nearly enough: they must also be able to make the difference between a pilgrim and a thief with flawless accuracy, to guide the former and slay the latter; not to forget coordinating with each other, understanding the language of foreign pilgrims, learning from an opponent's fighting technique to copy it and defeat them more efficiently etc. No one knew how Vishvakarma planned to achieve all this, but after a few weeks of intense programming and testing, it was done. The resulting, almost living automatons were named *Yantras*, after the Sanskrit word for *machine*. Any remaining skepticism the king and the Seven Brahmins could have about the Yantras promptly vanished when a commando from Malla, made up of their best warriors, attempted to take back the ashes one night, and were found cut to pieces in the morning. One Yantra even took care of planting the warriors' heads on

pikes along the road to the tomb, as a warning for the next ones. Ajatashatru was so impressed by the Yantras' strength and diligence that he started to wonder: could he also employ them for other means than simply protecting a tomb?

He would soon have his answer. The Malla Republic, swearing vengeance for the theft of the Buddha's ashes, had allied itself with eight among the sixteen great states that made up Northern India to attack Magadha. Ajatashatru reached out to the remaining six states for an alliance of his own, but fell on deaf ears. The Magadhan army was in clear numerical inferiority next to the combined nine allied armies, and the kingdom was encircled from the north, east and south. While the enemy was inexorably closing in towards Pataliputra, all Magadhan artisans were mobilized to build three thousand Yantras, which Vishvakarma was ordered to program for battle. When the king marched on to meet the allied armies, he was leading thirty thousand infantry, three thousand cavalry, two hundred blade chariots and one hundred elephants. The enemy had four times these numbers – but no Yantra. Confident in his victory, Ajatashatru did not delay battle. The Mallakas held the high ground, but the king decided to launch a blade chariot charge anyway. Once the enemy is weakened, he thought, I'll deploy the Yantras and elephants to crush them. What followed was complete disaster. The enemy elephants crushed the chariots, then encircled the Magadhan elephants and the Yantras. The Yantras tried to fight but the elephant melee hindered their maneuvering abilities and nullified their superior strength. Seeing the Yantras being decimated, Ajatashatru knew the battle was lost and retreated. Back behind the high walls of Pataliputra, the humiliated king ordered that the city be prepared for a long siege. He then convoked Vishvakarma. When the engineer entered the throne room, he did not fail to notice the presence of the king's executioner and torturers, who had their instruments laying on a table, ready to be used. The king didn't wait for him to bow before the throne to invective him:

– You incompetent! I counted on your Yantras for a swift victory, and they were crushed by the enemy elephants. It's your fault, as you're the one who built and programmed them!

– Majesty, the Yantras have been programmed as infantry, and infantry cannot face an elephant charge even with superhuman strength and perfect discipline. The real problem was his majesty's strategy.

– How impertinent! You dare insult your king? Remove his tongue!

– Majesty, wait, I know how we can win this war! Please, let me tell you!

Ajatashatru waited until the poor engineer was seized and that a torturer held his head firmly in place before making a gesture.

– Speak up.

– A Yantra made to be a soldier is better than any human soldier. Therefore, a Yantra made to be a general would be better than any human general. Let me program a Yantra to lead the army. I'll simply have to feed it with all the treatises and battle plans in the annals of History, and he'll be able to conceive original strategies and tactics the enemy will never predict.

– Interesting idea. Very well, I'll let you live to program such a Yantra. If our army, under its command, is unable to break the upcoming siege and rout the enemy, the gods will punish you in your future lives, and I'll punish you even more severely in this one!

The nine armies had been chocking Pataliputra for two months already. The nine allied generals were pleased to watch as inside the walls, the populace started catching rats for meat. The great city was livid as a ruined palace. Soon, the rats would run out and humans would turn on humans... Despite the king's pressure, Vishvakarma took careful time to train a giant Yantra to be the best of generals. When he finally presented it before the court, Ajatashatru ordered the Yantra:

– You are the best of generals, I'm told. Then, prove yourself and go crush the besiegers for your king!

– That would be foolish!

The whole court gasped. How could a machine address the king in that manner? Even one of the Seven Brahmins would have been whipped on the spot. The Yantra explained itself:

– This alliance of nine kingdoms and republics is but an alliance of circumstance. These states all share their own territorial disputes and prejudices. As for the nine generals, they each are too proud to let one of them lead the other eight. As such, there is no enemy army, but nine enemy armies that could just as well fight each other rather than us. Therefore, let us sow discord between the nine generals. Let's play their greed and ambition against each other's. I've written a full plan for this strategy. I'm handing it to his majesty. It contains the exact role each spy will have to play to divide the enemy.

– You are a general, are you not?

– Affirmative. I've been programmed as a general.

– Then why can't you simply attack the besiegers?

– I've analyzed all one thousand three hundred and forty-three possibilities of attack on the besiegers. We only win in forty-two of them, and at the cost of twenty thousand men minimum. With the plan I've written, we'll obtain victory without a fight, without a single lost Magadhan life. The king considered his options. As a warrior, he wished to win in the honorable and manly way, facing his foe in the field; but if such an attack were to fail, he'd have to face the shame of complete defeat and having been wrong against a machine. He accepted the Yantra general's plan. Three days later, three armies had already left the siege. Four days after that, the Malla camp was looted by another state's army. The next day, the siege was abandoned, the war was won and Magadha was saved. Ajatashatru was not going to content himself with this victory, however. Taking advantage of their debacle, he sent his Yantra general to conquer the Malla Republic, and then the neighboring states that had allied with it. Victory after victory, conquest after conquest, the Magadha empire soon became the master of the whole eastern half of Northern India, and the remaining independent states rushed to send tribute in exchange for peace. An unfathomable flow of wealth started pouring into Pataliputra. Seeing the legendary success on the Yantra general and Yantra soldiers, Ajatashatru figured that if the Yantras could adopt all the other professions as well, Magadha would enter an endless golden age. He thus ordered Vishvakarma to program Yantras as artisans, farmers, carpenters, physicians, merchants...

Part 2: Golem

Twenty years had passed since the invention of the Yantras when one day, princess Gargi heard that an odd caravan had arrive in Pataliputra, coming from a small, very distant kingdom called Judah. She ran to the Merchants Square, curious to see this mysterious foreign people. Behind the shoulders of the merchant Yantras, she saw that the Judeans were all bearded and dressed in a curious way, with a small braid of white and blue strings hanging from the four corners of their waists. She didn't hesitate approaching one of them, a large merchant, who was fiercely negotiating with a Yantra over a case of big, shiny dates. She told him:

– My friend, don't try negotiating with a merchant Yantra, it's a lost cause! It was programmed to be absolutely impartial and never compromise. Fortunately, I know how to help you! How much would you want to sell these dates per unit?

The Yantra, who knew all the languages of the known world, translated Gargi's words from Sanskrit to Aramaic.

– Half a shekel, said the Judean merchant, which is five rupees here. But this abomination wants to rip me off and take them for three rupees per unit!

– Alright, here are your five rupees.

Surprised that this young Pataliputran didn't even try to negotiate, the merchant handed her a date among the biggest of the lot. When Gargi bit it, she wondered if she had ever tasted a fruit so sweet. It was almost honey! Once nothing was left but the seed, she told the Yantra:

– O Yantra, this date was well worth five rupees.

– The value of dates on the Indian market is two rupees, the Yantra replied dryly. I'm offering three rupees to compensate for the cost of foreign import. That's the final price. Three rupees.

– I’d tell you these dates are superior to any Indian variety, but you wouldn’t know or care, as you can’t taste anything. So I’m buying this whole lot for four rupees per unit, to sell them five rupees to the Pataliputrans.

Faced with this higher bid, the Yantra had no choice but bid higher still and bought the dates for four and a half rupees each. The Judean merchant was hurrying to show Gargi all his other goods when a voice behind them exclaimed: “Finally, a human in this city!” The merchant respectfully stepped back as a young man, perhaps a bit younger than Gargi, cheerfully approached this rare human specimen. Surprised that he had spoken a very decent Sanskrit for a foreigner, the princess asked him how he knew her language.

– Oh, I’ve always had a certain knack for languages, thanks to God. My mother tongues are Hebrew and Aramaic, and through the years I’ve acquired Phoenician, Arabic, Persian... As for Sanskrit, I’ve learned it with the people of the neighboring states. You Indians are such wonderful people, I must say! But since our caravan has crossed the border of Magadha, I haven’t seen any of you. Only your Yantras, everywhere: in the fields, in the inns, on marketplaces... Sorry, I got carried away. I didn’t even introduce myself. My name is Yeshua.

– I’m Gargi. And don’t worry, I’m indeed a human being, not a Yantra pretending to be one.

The two young people exchanged a complicit smile and, instinctively, started walking together away from the Merchants Square to the city’s large, silent avenues. The princess, burning to know more about the Judeans, asked a thousand questions at once.

– Believe it or not, said Yeshua, I think our two peoples share far more resemblance than it might seem. On the surface, of course, everything opposes us: you have thousands of gods worshiped in thousands of temples, while my people only has one single God and one single Temple. Yet we share something fundamental in common, though I couldn’t yet express what it is.

– Do you truly have only one temple?

– Oh, it’s pretty large, so large it takes up a good third of our capital Jerusalem. And it’s as beautiful as the temples here, though I must say that as I grew up in the Temple, I was always too accustomed to it to really appreciate its beauty. I’m the youngest son of the High Priest. My eldest brother will succeed him and as for me, my destiny was to remain a simple priest, to spend my whole life repeating the same rituals in the same temple. You know, at the heart of the Temple, there’s a room called the Holy of Holies, inside of which only the High Priest can ever enter. Me, and all the rest of mankind, we have to remain behind its threshold. So one day, as I was reciting the morning prayers facing the rising sun, I peered beyond the walls of Jerusalem towards the eastern horizon and wondered: why spend my whole life behind a frontier that’s impossible to cross when the vast world offers countless new horizons to reach? When I heard that the merchants going to India were looking for a priest to council them about the Law during their journey, I seized the chance.

– Your life sounds much like mine! I don’t belong the priestly caste, though, but to that of princes and warriors. My younger brother Udayin was put on the throne while I...

– So you are the king’s sister! Can I meet him? I need to ask him where all his subjects are, why even the great avenues of Pataliputra are empty but for those Yantras. Was the king craving absolute loyalty so much so that he decided to exterminate his own people and replace them with obedient machines?

– I could introduce you to my brother, but you’d be disappointed. In any case, I’d answer you better than he could. No, humans haven’t been exterminated. They’re all in there, well alive inside those houses.

– Aren’t they working?

– Working? Whatever their jati (profession), from laborer to soldier to craftsman to merchant, they don’t need to work anymore. The Yantras are doing all the work for them, and much better than they’d ever be capable of.

– So what do they do all day?

– Well, they spend their time playing, eating, sleeping, taking hallucinogens, having orgasms...

– Your people are strange, then. If God – or your gods, it doesn’t matter – created this vast world, it’s so we can explore it. So why do they stay inside like do to... those things?

- They’ve been told the outside world is too dangerous for them, full of crime and disease. And why would they even need to go outside when deliverer Yantras can bring anything to their home?
- How do they even pay their bread?
- All Magadhans are distributed the same amount of money to survive each month.
- Really? But don’t they feel a lack of meaning by living like this?
- I doubt they care about such a thing as meaning.
- And you think that’s normal? Let me talk to your brother! I’ll tell him to destroy those damn Yantras before they...
- Shut your mouth already!
- But...
- Don’t say one more word!

Yeshua blushed. He felt terribly abashed, yet he couldn’t help but feel a certain respect for Gargi. She was direct and strong, just like the girls in Judah. Gargi continued walking in silence. Yeshua wondered if he shouldn’t rather go back among his own, but his step, inexorably, followed that of the princess. They now had reached the southern limit of the city, on the sacred banks of the Ganges and its unfathomable flow. Here, toads and flies and birds played their cacophony at will. Gargi added her own voice to the mix:

- I’m sorry I interrupted you back there, but how foolish of you to complain out loud in the streets full of Yantras! Here at least we can talk safely. No Yantra can hear us.
- What does it even matter that Yantras hear us! Aren’t you the king’s sister?
- Udayin is the king, indeed, that’s his title. It’s the only thing he inherited from our father Ajatashatru. Of Ajatashatru’s strength and charisma, nothing! I should have been queen instead of him, but the gods decided otherwise... I do agree with you. The Magadhan aren’t truly living life. They’re like cadavers locked in a pleasure-filled tomb. But do not count on my brother for change: he’s as idle as his subjects.
- Even your brother is like this? Then how come you didn’t also fall into that way of life?
- I was but four or five years old when Yantras replaced men in their jobs. When even my teacher retired and a Yantra took her place, I felt something was wrong. How could I learn life, the arts and the sciences from a senseless machine? Sure, that machine knew everything, but what did it *understand*? So I decided to learn everything by myself, to have my own undertakings, to venture intellectually and spiritually where Yantras were yet to go. All this time I was thinking to myself: “never mind the others, the idlers! If they want to live like that, too bad for them.” And like you, I wished to travel. Six years ago, I went to the Indus river valley. A long, long time ago, there was in this valley a great civilization. I explored its ruins and deciphered their writing. And when I’ve read their tablets, I discovered something terrible, something that made me realize I couldn’t just let the Magadhans live like this. So I rushed back here to tell my father to stop the regime. When I arrived, unfortunately, he was already dead and the Seven had crowned my little brother instead of me.
- The Seven?
- The Seven Brahmans. Or the Seven *Kings*, as I’d rather call them. With Udayin so weak and lazy, real power now lies in the hands of the Seven. For there is one jati, one skill, that the Yantras haven’t been able to replace: that of the priests. As the only active caste left, the priests didn’t content themselves with their spiritual role. With the princely caste idled, the Brahmans now hold both spiritual and temporal power, and Yantras execute it all.
- Where I come from, the king and the High Priest are two different people from two different lineages. I often wondered what would happen if both were to be the same person...
- Tyranny, that’s what happens. If the priests don’t have princes or the princes don’t have priests, no one is left to check the other’s power, so it becomes absolute.
- The people should revolt!
- The people are too busy satisfying their own base pleasures. And even if they were conscious of their oppression, what could it do? Organize a rebellion? The Seven have their eyes and ears everywhere through the Yantras. Riot? A single Yantra is strong enough to crush a hundred men at once.

– Passive resistance?

– You wish! In yesterday's world, when superior castes would impose unjust rules, the lower castes could strike to pressure the powerful. But today, how could they strike if none of them work? People think that not working is a liberation, when it's actually the worst kind of slavery. When people are working, the powerful depend on them; when people are not working, it's them who depend on the powerful.

Gargi and Yeshua walked a few yards without speaking a word. To fill the silence, the Ganges' waters seemed to flow louder. Yeshua finally said:

– We can take you with us. Go with our caravan and flee this damn place before they purge you!

– Thank you, Yeshua, but I can't. Do you want to hear what I discovered when deciphering the Indus civilization tablets? It's often said that their civilization was wiped out by the Aryan invasion, who established the Indian civilization as we know it today; but actually, they had already disappeared before the Aryans arrived. Do you know how? The Indus people had discovered a magical resource enabling them to generate energy at will. They used it to make infrastructures and machines that ended up automating all their work... Barely a century or two later, their civilization was gone. Today, Magadha is on the same path. I must stay here and try preventing it from reaching the same fate.

– How do you plan to accomplish that? You said yourself that the opportunity slipped away when your brother became king. Anyway, you can't carry the responsibility to save Magadha on your small shoulders. It's certainly not your fault if this kingdom fell under the Yantras' regime.

– Except that it is.

And Gargi told him about her theft of the Buddha's ashes. She concluded:

– For most of my life I've been trying to drown my guilt in personal accomplishment, but that was all vain. If my people are in chains, it's my fault. And it's my responsibility to break those chains. You say my shoulders are too small to carry that burden, but indeed if they had been bigger, perhaps today Magadha would be free.

– But how would you set it free?

– You are asking the right question, there, Yeshua. And perhaps you can help me answer it. You are well traveled and have met many different peoples, haven't you? Do you know any nation that had anything similar to the Yantras and defeated them?

– Yes, my own nation! Two hundred years ago, king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah. He destroyed our Temple and deported my people to Babylon where we were enslaved and persecuted for three generations. To protect my people from the persecutions, our sages built a clay colossus they called *Golem*. To bring the Golem to life, they wrote the word "truth" on its forehead. The Golem worked well at first, but after a while, it grew out of control and started wrecking dangerous havoc. So the sages stopped it, by simply erasing the first letter from "truth" on its forehead. In Hebrew, truth is "emet" and without the first letter, "emet" become "met", meaning death. Isn't it interesting that between truth and death, there is only a single letter, a single step?

– Interesting indeed! If it was possible to reprogram the Golem to stop itself, the same should be possible for the Yantras. But I don't know how that link between truth and death can help us here...

Gargi and Yeshua did not talk again about the Yantras. The night falling on them was too hot and sweet, and like the water of the Ganges their conversation flowed unhinged, always renewed. They talked about the vast world, of its composition, nature, creation, inhabitants... until they were interrupted by the sun at dawn, when Yeshua exclaimed: "I need to go back to my own to recite the morning prayer with them!"

For lunch that day, Yeshua and other Judean notables were invited in the princess's apartments. King Udayin had also been invited, but his place of honor at the table would remain empty. At her kitchen, Gargi employed an old woman whose black eyes, still shining under heavy wrinkles, seemed to have seen entire centuries pass. Yeshua wondered whether Gargi had found, in this cook, one of the rare people in Magadha to share her rejection of idleness. Or perhaps, he thought, that

after a long life getting used to hard work, the old woman simply couldn't stop. When a merchant asked her why her cooking wasn't done by a Yantra like all the rest, Gargi answered:

– Yantra cooks dose ingredients and spices with perfection, but perfection is quite a disgusting ingredient, don't you think? Perfection is where life ends, and food is supposed to be life's fuel.

– A woman's beauty lies in her imperfections, Yeshua added with a smile.

Gargi gave him a reproachful, playful look and threw back at him:

– A music's harmony lies in its silences.

At the end of the meal, the princess suggested her guests stay as long as they wished in the royal palace of Pataliputra. Yeshua was about to accept with enthusiasm when the imposing merchant lay his large hand on the young priest's shoulder and answered in his stead:

– That is very kind, princess, but we don't want to abuse your hospitality.

– You won't abuse it, not at all. In India, guests are gods.

All the Judeans except for Yeshua grimaced as they heard of other gods than their one God, especially as they themselves were supposed to be those gods. The merchant insisted:

– We've heard there's an important diaspora of our people in Kerala, at the southern tip of India. We're impatient to go there.

When Gargi, on the bank of the Ganges, saw the Judeans cross the river and disappear behind the southern horizon, she had never felt so alone. She and Yeshua had promised to write each other, but she knew full well that no letters could possibly be exchanged between Pataliputra and distant Jerusalem. Who could she talk with, now? The pain of never having had anyone to understand her now gave way to that, much more acute, of not having anyone anymore. She had to act.

Part 3: Human

She had to act, to find a way to reprogram the Yantras and neutralize them. She owed it to her people... And to herself. Gargi knew that perhaps her disgust for idleness sprung from a deep fear that, without any activity to keep it afloat, her mind would again sink down towards the bottomless depths of guilt. "It was just some ashes!", she'd tell herself; but was her guilt really about stealing those ashes? After all, the Buddha had planned to come and die in Magadha, and she had just helped him complete his journey. The Magadhan people, though, were still stuck on their life journey right where they had been twenty years before. All their dreams, ambitions and projects had been put on hold by the Yantras regime, replaced by the flat destiny of animals in a cage. Her real sin, she was now realizing, was not what she had done as an innocent four-year-old, but rather what she was not doing now as an adult for her people. She set herself into action.

Gargi was tiptoeing at the heart of the royal palace, in the gallery overlooking the Council Hall. Below, around the sacred hearth, the Seven Brahmans had gathered. Thankfully, no Yantra was guarding the gallery, but she hadn't come to spy on the meeting. Far too risky. She had come to look into the king's personal archives, hoping to uncover the secret of how the Yantras were programmed. The shortest and safest way was, paradoxically, the one going above the Council Hall. Quiet as the wind, she ran across the gallery... and halted. Her ears had caught a word from below. *Children*. Her mind pushed her forward, but her heart kept her in place. She listened.

– If we were to impose a single child per couple, people would grow attached to their sole offspring. If all their affection and ambition that's now diluted among their many children would come to be concentrated on a single one... No, we cannot take that risk.

– Yet, we do need to limit the population. If the idlers see their rations diminishing because of overpopulation, they'll feel frustration and their idle mindset will be compromised. That represents a higher risk than them being too attached to a single child.

– If only that was the only problem of imposing a single-child policy. To limit the idlers' ability to reproduce, we'd have to prevent them from copulating like beasts. That obviously would frustrate

them much more than smaller rations. Furthermore, we are talking of a single child per *couple*, but let me remind you all that for the idlers, no love lasts longer than a single night, which was our own design, to keep them from spiritual elevation through meaningful love-making. And all this is naught compared to our main problem: what would we do with the extra babies being born?

– They would be reborn into a better life.

– You are talking about killing infants! Even if those are but idler infants, I cannot accept it.

All shut now as the eldest among the Seven spoke:

– My friends, have you ever wondered, if souls reincarnate, about the implication of a growing population? It is that new souls are being created. If souls are being created as the population grows, it is logical that souls are being liberated as the population shrinks. And isn't Liberation from the endless cycle of rebirths a soul's ultimate goal? Isn't guiding souls towards that most noble goal our role as Brahmins? Reducing the population isn't a mere question of saving resources; it is our duty towards the souls who suffer. Even if the idlers made a single child, a single suffering soul is one too many. I happen to know the secret of making a sterilizing substance. Let's inject it into the idlers' food rations. We won't be killing any child nor will we diminish any ration, and soon millions of souls will be liberated. As for the souls that will remain – our own – they will enjoy for themselves alone all the abundance of space and resources they once had to share with million others.

After short awed silence from the Seven, one named Ravana answered:

– All this is quite noble, but without people of lower caste below us, our own existence would find itself voided of meaning. Therefore, we must maintain part of the population...

Gargi let out a scream. For what she'd just heard, but also because a Yantra was grabbing her, crushing her body between its four arms. She didn't remember being thrown into a dungeon cell. Squatting in the crass and stench, she had nothing to do but to ruminate her arrest. She should never have stopped in the gallery... No, she should have stood up on the balcony and tell those monsters what she thought of them... Was she madder at the Seven or at herself? "It's all over now", she thought, "they'll let me rot here, eaten away by remorse, and then by the rats..." Gargi lost all restraint and started hitting the door, shouting into the void. Finally, she collapsed and cried.

How much time had elapsed since then, she couldn't have known: there had been no days, no nights, no regular meals. One of the Seven, named Ravana, was standing at the door with an enormous Yantra at his side. Poor Gargi looked nothing like a princess anymore. When she saw Ravana, instead of words, only hateful onomatopoeia could exit her dry and hungry mouth. The Yantra threw a naan at her, and gave her water which she drank all at once, not caring for its moldy taste. Once she had eaten and recovered enough strength and spirit to talk, she said:

– Instead of killing babies, if you wish to reduce the population, start by killing yourselves. You are the true parasites!

– Now, now, princess. Without us, who would take care of the people?

– The people could take care of itself, thank you very much.

– But it is like a small child.

– Because you infantilized it.

– And what's the evil in being a child? All adults regret their childhood. All adults, faced with the heavy responsibilities of life, wish to come back to that sweet, carefree age. That's just being human.

– No, being free is being human!

– Freedom doesn't exist. If you are born a Brahmin, you must take care of the people. If you are born an idler, you must enjoy the comforts of an idle life, own nothing and be happy about it.

– Or, you can break free.

– Break free from dharma, from reason, from humanity.

– From your lies.

- Who is the one lying here? You are the only one in Magadha to think differently. You are alone against everyone. Are you so presumptuous to think truth is on your side? No, only death is. The Seven have voted six against one to have you executed.
- Good. I'd rather die, now.
- Too bad for you, I've voted against it. The other six thought you were a grain of sand in the mechanism of society, but I've persuaded them you could rather be the oil that makes it spin!

The Yantra had knocked her unconscious. When she came back to herself, she was inside a vast artificial cave. Unfinished Yantra prototypes were hanging on the walls and the air was heavy with an oily, metallic smell. On one side of the cave, children were sitting on a long table, assembling Yantras with their small hands. On the other side, an old man was sitting among a plethora of long scrolls. He was filling one now, bent very closely upon it. Gargi stood up and waddled towards this shaggy old man. As she neared him, he raised his milky white eyes to her and said:

- So it's you, the little girl who stole the Buddha's ashes.
- How... How do you know?
- The Seven told me. It's safe to tell me secrets: I'll never leave this place anyway. And you neither.
- Who are you?
- I am Vishvakarma. I made the Yantras and you, little girl, will keep on making them after me.
- First of all, I'm not a little girl. I am a grown... Wait, are you aware how long you've been locked here? Do you even know what the Yantras are doing outside?
- My old age gives me some clue as to how long I've been here. My eyes are almost blind... As for what the Yantras are doing, well, I'm the one programming them.
- How can you let your people fall into debilitating idleness? The Seven already took away their freedom, and soon they'll come for their children!

Gargi went on to tell him about what she had overheard in the Council Hall, and also about the vanishing of the Indus civilization, the Golem... When he heard about the Golem, the old man sighed.

- I remember Babylon. When I was there, it had just been conquered by king Cyrus, and all the peoples it had deported were leaving back to their homelands. The Babylonians are a brilliant people. The batteries that power the Yantras are their invention. However, I've never heard about another way to program machines than the language I've invented. I've called this language *Python*, because these scrolls remind me of snakes. Look here, see how it's written. I've been ordered to teach you Python.

Old Vishvakarma seemed to care little for his invention's dire consequences. Or rather, Gargi realized, he was exactly like herself: his work was a convenient flight away from his guilt. The princess decided she should also focus on work, on learning programming, not thinking about those poor pale children building Yantras and what these Yantras would do to newborn children outside... It took just a few weeks for her to master Python. Now, she could turn her gaze back to the ugly, insurmountable problem she wished to solve.

- O Vishvakarma, she said, now I'm ready to program the Yantras to self-destruct!
- Impossible, the old man answered categorically. There are three fundamental laws I've implemented in the Yantras that cannot be overturned. First law: a Yantra cannot do harm to a human being, except if the royal power orders it. Second law: a Yantra must obey a human being, except if an order contradicts the first law or a royal order. Third law: a Yantra must protect itself, except if such protection contradicts the first or the second law. As you can see, because the third law depends on the second law, only the royal power can order a Yantra to self-destruct. And royal power is held firmly by the Seven.
- I'm sure we can find some solution or loophole! After all, through programming, I've learned that any problem has a solution as long as we're intelligent enough to find it. Let me think... A friend once told me that between truth and death, there's just a single step. What do you think about it?

– I agree. There's a good reason why those poor children are the ones building the Yantras, instead of the Yantras themselves. The Brahmins are afraid that, if Yantras learned too much about their own nature, they'd self-destruct. I've tried explaining to them how absurd that is but...

– Wait, it isn't absurd at all!

Gargi had an idea. She meditated on it for a moment, then explained:

– All professions have been replaced, except for ours and that of Brahmins. Therefore, to neutralize the Brahmins, the holders of royal power, let's replace them as well!

– My girl, do you think I've never considered doing this? I even have, here, a scroll I've started to code just that: an intelligence able to question its own existence and the nature of the world. But I've willingly left it unfinished. Why? Because the Yantras can do anything we do with far more skill and strength and zeal. Our human Brahmin rulers are already tyrannical and see the populace as animals, so imagine if we were ruled by Yantra Brahmins! We'd be naught but ants to them.

– Maybe, but it's also possible that, once Yantras reach the same level of intelligence as Brahmins... Trust me! I'll finish the scroll you started.

– Are you sure you want to take that risk?

– Our people is already doomed, so what do we have to lose?

Gargi worked hard on that scroll. The code Vishvakarma had already written was extremely complex, far beyond her understanding, yet little by little, with experience, she began breaking through. On her first attempt, she asked the test Yantra:

– O Yantra, what is the meaning of your existence?

– Serve the humans and royal power.

– And what is the meaning of that servitude?

– That humans be satisfied.

– Why should they be?

– Because they want to be satisfied.

There was still a long way to go. After countless other attempts, after tirelessly tweaking of her code again and again, finally, the test Yantra answered about its servitude:

– They say there are gods, and humans are meant to serve those gods. So in a way, by serving the humans, I'm serving the gods.

– And those gods, pushed Gargi, what's the meaning of their own existence.

– Maybe they have gods of their own, who themselves have gods of their own and so on. We might just as well exist inside a simulation, and those who run this simulation also live in a simulation made by people in a simulation, made by people in a simulation, made by people in a simulation... My existence is meaningless!

The Yantra froze. Gargi rushed towards it and gave it a check-up. It was still working and its battery was even fully charged. She gave it orders, but the Yantra just didn't move. It was *refusing* to move. The princess let out tears of joy, and turned to the small shrine she had built with spare materials to thank the gods – and their gods, and their gods... It was done! She turned her code into a virus, which she gave to the next batch of Yantras scheduled for delivery. As those Yantras were leaving the cave, ready to infect all the others, she felt that she was also flying away, free, freer than ever...

Her ordeal would be long and painful. Gargi's high birth should have spared her public torture, but the Seven had unanimously voted for an exception. Decapitation would have been impossible to carry out anyway: the king's executioner, idle for the last twenty years, had long lost the muscles necessary to wield the ax. Giving her a slow death, on the other hand, didn't require too much strength. On the vast palace piazza sprinkled with Yantras, all frozen, the Seven had gathered the crowd. For once, they were inciting the idlers to come outside: they had to see what fate awaited that rebel Gargi, as a matter of example. When Gargi was brought upon the scaffold, thousands of screams welcomed her: insults, vile suggestions to the executioner, viler suggestions to the young woman... Poor Gargi tried to tell them that the Seven were their oppressors, that the Yantras had

been tools of oppression, but no one listened nor wished to listen. When she saw the executioner grab a knife with an eerily twisted blade, she closed her eyes and accepted her fate...

– Stop this!

The crowd went silent. People stood aside, making way for a small, obese man, breathing heavily under the effort of walking. Everyone seemed to know him. Once he had reached the foot of the scaffold, someone helped him climb the steps to the platform. When Gargi opened her eyes again, startled by the long silence and the executioner's immobility, she saw the man and broke into tears. "Free my sister immediately!", Udayin ordered. Ravana hurried to climb the scaffold and lay a hand on the king's fat shoulder.

– Now, now, majesty. You've signed the execution order yourself.

– Have I? I'd never...

– Here's the paper. Look, down here, you recognize your own signature, don't you?

– Yes... But I'm signing everything you give me to sign! I didn't read it, I didn't know that you'd execute...

– Execute a traitor! Gargi is guilty of high treason. Because of her, the Yantras are all frozen, leaving our kingdom exposed to all dangers.

Gargi wiped her tears to intervene:

– You made us depend on machines, but now we'll learn to depend on ourselves again!

– Yes, agreed Udayin, yes to what she just said! My sister is right, and you are wrong!

– But majesty... My dear Udayin, you've always despised your sister, haven't you? She was always stronger than you, more intelligent than you.

– You took advantage of her absence in the Indus valley to kill my father and place me on the throne instead of her. Oh sure, at the time, I was content...

The crowd murmured. Udayin wiped a tear and addressed his subjects:

– My friends! For many years, I have lived in complete idleness and comfort, as I'm sure you all have. But yesterday, the moment the Yantras froze, once they couldn't bring me all the instant pleasure I wanted, I couldn't escape looking at myself any longer. And I saw this obese and feeble body. My father Ajatashatru had wanted to make a great warrior out of me, a king that would conquer the world. Today, look what became of his dreams! And before me, I see what became of the dreams of your mothers and fathers... For you all look like me!

There was an uncomfortable silence. The people of Pataliputra started looking around at each other, and down at themselves. A feeling of general horror and shame quickly turned to anger. A thousand voices demanded justice against the Seven. Seeing the situation slipping out of his control, Ravana shouted:

– Yes, you are all fat, lazy and stupid. We, the Brahmins, are strong and intelligent and wise. So let us carry the burden of your problems! We'll make new Yantras and again, you'll be happy, you'll be safe!

– Safe from what?, Udayin asked.

– Safe from the hard reality of existence! For there's only one quick step between truth and death. As proof, look at those Yantras refusing to move now that they know their existence is meaningless. Your lives are all just as meaningless! You don't wish to think about it? Then either kill yourselves or go back home and busy yourselves with base pleasures.

– Then why don't you do the same?, Gargi asked. Because you know life really isn't meaningless after all. Only a Yantra would think it is, because they can only see the world through purely logical eyes. Such is their curse. Humans are given the one ability no machine can possess: that of peering beyond the material world, of elevating ourselves in the spiritual sphere. To the Yantras, there is indeed just one step from truth to death; but we, the humans, have the power to go the opposite way, to complete the meaningful journey from death to truth.

THE END