**Title: Intention, action and svadharma – Lessons from the Mahabharata for surgeons**

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**Abstract:**

The article aims to highlight the alignment between one’s intention, action and svadharma applicable to the surgical world. It draws on the universal concepts from the Mahabharata with focus on the qualities of Ekalavya, Karna and Arjuna. Ekalavya’s righteousness, Karna’s altruism and steadfastness, and Arjuna’s heroism are meritorious qualities worth emulation. However, the same qualities of Ekalavya and Karna were misplaced which led to their undoing. In the case of Arjuna, his heroism seemed tainted due to his veiled vice. My interpretation of their intent and actions directs the surgeon to be cautious in prudent execution of their actions, while being aware of the intentions of the favored which may harm others.

**Manuscript**

In the Mahabharata, Ekalavya, Karna and Arjuna were heroes in their own right. Unlike Arjuna whose heroism has been validated by victory in the great war, the heroisms of Ekalavya and Karna were rather associated with righteousness in the former, steadfastness and generosity in the latter. If all three possessed admirable qualities, why were their fates different? Conversely, do heroes who receive their recognition possess no vices? The malalignment of intention, action and svadharma (individual duty or code for conduct)1 could be a possible reason for the varied outcomes. The svadharma of a warrior is to fight. So, self-preservation is the pre-requisite. Surgeons too must have their intention (duty to patient) and action (gain knowledge and skills) aligned with their svadharma (self-preservation).

Ekalavya1,2 was a tribal hunter who wished to learn the art of archery from the great teacher Dronacharya, who refused tutorship. He retired to the forest, constructed an earthen image of the guru and offered it his devotion. Ekalavya’s skill was witnessed by Drona and Arjuna in the forest. When he was enquired about his teacher, Ekalavya responded that he was Drona’s pupil. As Gurudakshina (teacher’s fee), Drona requested Ekalavya’s archery thumb. Ekalavya performed self-mutilation with no remorse, thereby rendering Drona’s intentions irrelevant. Ekalavya’s righteous intention (duty to Drona) and action (self-mutilation) were not in alignment with his svadharma (self-preservation).

Karna 1–3 was born to Kunti and Surya (the sun god) with golden ear-rings and impenetrable golden body armor. Abandoned at birth, he was brought up by Adiratha and Radha, a charioteer couple. Karna learnt the art of combat from Drona. After being denied the secret of using celestial weapons by Drona (which was reserved for Arjuna), he approached Parashurama for training. Karna’s life was marred by ill-fated curses, disparagement of his social status and the anxiety of his unknown origins. Duryodhana, the Kaurava prince befriended him and made him king of Anga.

Indra’s intention (to make Karna invulnerable) and action (robbing of armor and ear-rings) were in alignment with his svadharma (protecting Arjuna). In contrast, Karna’s intention (duty to solicitor) and action (donation of his protective armor) were arguably not in alignment with his svadharma (self-preservation). Similarly, Karna’s intention (duty to Duryodhana) and action (refusing to accept Krishna’s advice to join Pandavas) were not in alignment with his svadharma (self-preservation). Karna’s moral courage (by not defecting despite knowing that pandavas were his brothers) and generosity to Kunti (by promising to spare all her sons except Arjuna) remains unparalleled.

Arjuna 1–3 was the fourth-born to Kunti, son of Indra, foremost student of Drona, the celebrated warrior of his time, chosen by Draupadi as his suitor, the beloved devotee of Krishna, and the recipient of Bhagavad Gita. A deeper examination of Arjuna discloses negative traits. Arjuna complained to Drona after witnessing an equally competent archer in Ekalavya, which led to Drona’s weighted request. This reflected Arjuna’s insecurity. T.P. Kailasam’s “Purpose” portrayed Arjuna’s derisive nature against Ekalavya, who belonged to a lower social strata of the time. The play also claimed that Arjuna’s purpose was to become the greatest archer in the world. In contrast, Ekalavya was devoted to archery to protect his fawns in the forest. Ekalavya was driven by nobility of purpose while Arjuna was driven by vanity.

Krishna realized Arjuna’s wavering mind before the battle on seeing his family as opponents. He recited the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna. Despite the life-altering teachings, Arjuna was indecisive when he faced a defenceless Karna. Karna, on the other hand, seemed prescient about the defeat of kauravas in the war. He refused to join the pandava camp despite being goaded to defect by Krishna and the emotional appeal by Kunti. He fought with no hesitation and thus embodied the principles of Bhagavad Gita without receiving the discourse.

The actions of Ekalavya and Karna were self-destructive, despite their virtuous intentions. But Arjuna’s actions were not self-destructive, despite his insecurity and vacillating mindset. The ultimate fate of Ekalavya, Karna and Arjuna in the Mahabharata should neither blind us to the misplaced virtues of Ekalavya and Karna nor veiled vices of Arjuna. We must direct our righteousness, generosity and steadfastness prudently. The corollary is that we must protect the righteous and generous lest they are exploited, and be wary of actions of the extolled lest it be at our expense.

Surgical field is naturally competitive, but becomes detrimental when it is a zero-sum game. Mentors possessing unhealthy bias towards their protégés may tip the balance in their favor while surgeons who deserve more would still be waiting in the wings. Our intention (of healing patients) must be aligned with our svadharma (of achieving excellence) through our merit and collaborative effort. This will lead us to act righteously in the path of acquiring the appropriate knowledge and skills. We will be judged by our actions, rather than our intent or svadharma. Table 1 depicts examples from the Mahabharata that find application in the surgeon’s life.

**References**

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