Karma & Diamonds

Sneak Previews from

Book 2 - Web of Karma

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The Digital Monk

Several years had passed since I visited Santa Fe and uncovered past lives from which flowed threads of *karma* that still entwined with my current life.

I now found myself in the ancient Indian town of Rishikesh once again, in the foothills of the Himalayas, right in the magical spot where the sacred river known as Mother Ganga or Ganges emerges from the mountain valleys and bursts onto the great Indian Plains. I went into the treasure trove of a bookshop called the Ganga Bookstore, an appropriate name, since it was directly on the banks of the River Ganga. The shop was laden, floor to ceiling, often with double and triple rows of books lining the crammed bookshelves. Piles of books were stacked everywhere on the floor, so that you could barely move around.

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All kinds of contemporary and ancient books could be found here, on subjects ranging from ancient mathematics to astronomy, to Vedic astrology to tantric yoga of the Middle Ages, to biographies of saints and holy people. Whenever I had walked into such bookshops in India on previous trips, I had always found unusual or rare books to delight the mind and that were no longer in print. Though I had no idea what I was looking for, I hoped to stumble across little-known books on fascinating subjects. The driver who'd accompanied me to the world-renowned Parmarth Niketan Ashram on the Ganges riverbank, said that I would not be disappointed with the Ganga Bookstore. He said that it was not far from Lakshman Jhula, where we would have to cross the River Ganges to get to the *ashram*.

Once at the ashram, it was my intention to meet with a swami whose smiling face I had seen in a dream some months before coming to Rishikesh, though I did not then know who he was. The day after that dream, I went as usual to drop off some groceries at my mother's. Right there, on her living-room table, was the well known monthly British-Gujarati magazine, Garvi Gujarat. She had just received it that day and, from its front page, a photo of this very same swami stared up at me. His name, I learnt, was Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati, who my mum said was known across India simply as 'Muniji'. Parmarth Niketan was his ashram.

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Something about this synchronicity had pulled me to return to Rishikesh, some ten years after a trip on which I had assisted Swami Shivananda there at the medical eye camp.

As it happened, I would develop a special relationship with Muniji over time, but there was something else too that seemed to have called me to Rishikesh.

"You must have a bigger than average interest in Indian astrology if you're interested in books about divisional *varga* charts and *dasha* time periods?" A man with a beard, in white renunciate's garb, stood behind me. His eyes twinkled as he smiled. He helped me with the pile of little-known esoteric books, mostly on technicalities of Vedic astrology and old mathematics, in my arms, as I struggled to not drop them all on the floor.

Yes, Sherlock, I thought, but smiled and said. "That's true. I do have a bit of a fascination with it." I was polite but somewhat cynical, as I walked towards the cashier to pay for my purchases. I'd come across many such renunciates, *sadhus*, and so-called *swamis*, much like this man, and was less than impressed with most, least of all where knowledge of Indian astrology was concerned. Most, according to me, were superstitious flake-heads. The few I had met just did not have the

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breadth and depth of knowledge of this vast science. Most were plain-and-simple lazy, not bothering to do the homework to do justice to reading a birth-chart in depth enough to make any real difference.

The man in the white garb left as I waited for the owner to finish putting my books in a bag. I still had another couple of hours to kill before heading to the *ashram* and I was eager to dive into one of the books I had just bought. Immediately outside the bookshop, facing the Ganges, was the German Bakery. I looked around for somewhere to sit but the place was heaving, full of Western and Indian tourists alike. A waiter took me to the only seat that was available on the balcony, overlooking the holy river, and it was right next to the white robed man I had just spoken to in the shop. He nodded and smiled at me. When I noticed that he was busy flicking through the screen of his Blackberry, while powering up his latest Windows computer, I couldn't help smiling to myself.

"Would you mind if I take a picture of you?" I asked, grinning.

"Er, sure. But why do you want a picture of *me*?" he asked, puzzled. He spoke with an accent that sounded much like that of my colleagues' from Bangalore, in the south.

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"Because you're the icon of the Digital Monk," I replied, laughing. "The perfect anachronism."

He laughed and I took a snap of the laughing Digital Monk.

"Why do you need a computer?" I asked, cheekily. "Aren't you supposed to be all white robes and sandals and renounce the evil of all things material?"

The Digital Monk laughed again. "Oh, because I write a lot and there's all kinds of software on there, including a superb astrology software that I like to use from time to time," he replied. "It's a fascination of mine, too."

"That's why you recognised the books I just bought," I said. The waiter came over and hovered about for our order. The white-robed man seemed to have something genuine about him and the air of someone learned.

"I'll have an English breakfast tea with slices of lemon. How about you?" I said, turning to the monk.

He glanced through the German Bakery's extensive menu and replied, "I'll have a yak cheese sandwich."

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A yak cheese sandwich! Was that a joke? I scanned the menu. Sure enough, a caprese sandwich of yak cheese seemed to be something of a speciality at the German Bakery.

"Oh, they call me Balanand Baba," he introduced himself.

"Hi, I'm Smita. Pleased to meet you."

"Where are you from?" he asked.

I told him that I was from London and he asked me a few more questions about my trip to India.

"Are you based in Rishikesh? Have you always been a renunciate?" I asked.

"Oh no, I used to be a computer engineer. I worked for thirty-five years in banks and information technology companies and, now that my dear wife has passed away and I have no children, I have devoted my life to serving God," he said. "I'm here for some social work in Rishikesh with some fellow renunciates, but my home, if you can call it that, is in the Himalayas."

It's true there were so many men like Balanand Baba walking around in Rishikesh, barefoot or in sandals,

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that I wouldn't indulge in engaging in a conversation with most of them, but something told me to stay and hear what this guy had to say.

"So, where did you learn Vedic astrology?" I asked.

"Ha! Vedic astrology—I believe only a Westerner could have given it that term. In India, so much stems from that Vedic era and these things are the basis of our everyday lives here," he said. I smiled in agreement. "My father was an engineer too, and he was an insightful astrologer. I grew up around him giving readings to friends and family, and so I absorbed it from a very young age."

"It's true that in India, science and spirituality co-exist so casually," I remarked. "You just never know what gifts people carry. It never ceases to amaze me the number of times I've come across a person sitting next to me, someone who looks so normal, and yet they turn out to be highly gifted in an area you would least expect."

The Digital Monk smiled. "Now, can I ask you a question? It might sound strange, and you can decline to tell me if you don't wish to."

Now I was curious. What could he possibly want to know from me? "No worries," I replied. "Fire away."

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He shuffled in his seat. "When I was standing behind you in the bookshop, I had a sudden flash of images, like snapshots, of something from the past and I'm sure something in your energy triggered me seeing those things. I mean, I think those snapshots are somehow related to you." He looked at me, not quite sure whether to take the conversation further. I smiled at him, conveying that I was willing to hear what he had to say.

"Have you ever seen any of your past lives?" He looked a little awkward. "It's just that, something tells me that you have." He hesitated then said, "It's just that, I can see a man on the high seas, in a decorated naval officer's uniform..."

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