

Chapter 1

It was a beautiful evening at the Mount Lavinia beach. Sun is retiring slowly.

The sky is full of sleepy clouds. Kolitha was at the beach, aimlessly looking at the sunset. The amazing daily ritual of the sun appears to have no effect on him.

Kolitha noticed a group of young boys playing cricket on the beach. Their game was interrupted many times by the people walking between the players. Yet they kept on playing gleefully. Apart from the cricket players, Kolitha was surrounded by many other beach patrons who have come for leisure walks along the soft white bed of sand of the beach. He could see parents who have brought their children to play on the seashore. While keeping an eye on their kids, the parents were chatting to each other and having a good time, Kolitha thought. Another group of young children in school uniforms, who must have come on a school excursion, were seemingly giddy with glee. They were walking and posing for photographs, running into the water and making sand castles on the beach. Their uniforms and ties played to the tune of the sea breeze, putting wide smiles on their faces.

“They all look happy,” Kolitha thought somberly.

“Yes they are!” a voice behind him said.

Kolitha was startled by the voice and turned his head. There was a man behind him. “Were you talking to me? Did I speak out loud?”

The gentleman who was looking back at Kolitha had a smile on his face. Although Kolitha was sure that he had never seen this man before, the man had a vague familiarity about him to which Kolitha immediately warmed up.

“Your thoughts were loud enough,” said the man, still smiling. “In fact they were too loud,” he said with a chuckle.

His candid nature took away the awkwardness of the situation instantly. Kolitha found himself with a smile on his face, and was pleasantly surprised about it. This was the first time that he has smiled for a long time.

The man continued to talk as if he was compelled to do so. “Happiness is what you find when you stop worrying. People here are very much immersed in their present moment and have forgotten to worry about issues which are not associated with their immediate present. Their whole body, mind and emotions are responding to the present moment. The beach is one of the many places where you can totally surrender yourself to the nature and to the present moment.”

Kolitha kept on staring at the man. What is coming out of his mouth sounded extremely out-of-context in the midst of screaming children and beach cricket. Yet, Kolitha felt that his entire attention is pulled in by the man’s voice, like the waves are pulled back into the ocean.

“Surrender yourself? What do you mean by that?” Kolitha heard himself ask, before he could stop himself. He is not in the habit of talking to strangers, let alone with those who have philosophical leanings.

The man started responding to Kolitha, without allowing even a single second between Kolitha’s questions and his answer, as if he has been expecting these questions all along.

“We are seemingly in a continuous battle with our outer world. But the real battle often takes place in the inner world. We argue inside our heads, debate with our own thoughts, trying to put everything and everyone around us in order.”

Kolitha looked at the man in disbelief. Being a practical ‘ordinary guy’ all his life, Kolitha rarely indulges himself in philosophical discussions. These are normally what he files under ‘nonsense’ and close tightly with a string, vowing not to open them in the foreseeable future. However, what he hears now seems to make sense. “*Strange*” Kolitha made a mental note about his own thoughts. He is still not entirely certain what the stranger is talking about, but he certainly is not in a hurry to walk away either.

The stranger took a pause; the first one since he started talking, Kolitha noted. Sensing Kolitha’s puzzlement, perhaps from his wide eyes and slightly opened mouth, the stranger smiled and relaxed his stance. But Kolitha could see that the stranger is determined to continue his speech.

“Let me give you a couple of examples. We have standards, principles, and opinions about pretty much everything in our lives. This could be, from what type of milk we should have in our tea, to what economic policy the government should adopt. We constantly disapprove or are unsatisfied about almost all other options. For instance, we believe we can do better than the police officer who is directing the traffic at the junction; we believe we can do better than the boss who is obviously in his position thanks to his influential friends; we believe we can raise our children better than all other parents around us; we believe we can make better decisions about pretty much anything than most people can. Therefore we make too much of a fuss about too many things around us. We demand that other people listen to us and follow-us. We demand change. We desire to have our home, office, country and if possible the whole world run our way! We demand perfection, our way!”

Kolitha felt that his head is involuntarily bobbing up and down. Encouraged by Kolitha’s apparent agreement, the stranger continued with his sentiments.

“But look at the ocean and the waves lapping against the shore. No two waves are the same size and strength. Some are big and some are small. Some waves come all the way to the shore, whereas some just collapse half way. The whole process is utterly unpredictable and uncontrollable, yet creating perfect harmony and serenity.”

He took a pause and looked at Kolitha. “Look around. Nothing is perfect from our usual point of view, which demands uniformity and predictability. There are too many people doing many different things, occupying the same space on the beach, all at once. It is utterly chaotic. Yet everything is just right and beautifully synchronized. With this many elements at play, you have no control over anything that happens here, regardless of whether you like it or not. You just have to surrender yourself and witness the beauty of the nature and the synchronicity of life on the beach. That is why people feel relaxed and happy around here.”

Kolitha looked around. He had to agree. It is absolute chaos around him. Yet everything looks synchronized to the perfection. He was surprised that the word ‘perfection’ came to mind in this utmost imperfect setting. Kolitha turned his head back and looked at the stranger again. “Yeah, you are right. They all look happy.”

“What about you?” asked the stranger.

“What about me?” Kolitha asked back.

“How do you feel?”

Kolitha turned around to the noise of a loud horn and watched as the Kalutara Colombo- train, making its over packed journey back home. Kolitha looked down at his watch. It is 5.45pm. *‘It is still packed even though it is not a work day,’* thought Kolitha and kept looking at the train until it went passed the Mount Lavinia beach.

When he looked back, the stranger was still expecting an answer for his question. “It does not matter whether I am happy or not, because you cannot do anything about it. Kolitha looked straight into the stranger’s eyes for a moment and said “Nobody can do anything about it.”

“Happiness is a state of mind, my friend. There can be so many factors that contribute to one’s happiness. But at the end, your happiness is produced not by your external life conditions, but merely by your own perceptions and feelings about your life,” the stranger replied.

“It is easier said than done. By the way, I don’t remember seeing you here before?” Kolitha said, not feeling polite to continue without having introductions done between him and this talkative philosophical stranger.

“You can call me Manu,” stranger extended his hand.

“I am Kolitha.” They shook hands.

“No offense, but I don’t feel like talking to anyone. I just came here to have some personal time,” said Kolitha and started walking away from Manu. “I hope to see you around some other time.”

“Watch out, Watch out!” Kolitha heard Manu’s voice and turned around. He could see a rugby ball coming straight at his face. He managed to turn his head away just in time. “That was so close. Thank you my friend”.

“That’s OK,” Manu replied.

“Actually I don’t mind you walking with me, unless you have other plans,” said Kolitha.

“You cannot ask for a better place and time for a walk. Let’s go.” They both started walking along the beach.

“I used to come here to play rugby every weekend,” said Kolitha, still trying to shrug away the image of the rugby ball coming towards his head.

“So, that’s why you didn’t get angry when that ball almost hit your face.”

Kolitha didn’t say anything. His mind was somewhere else completely. *“The friends I used to play with, they all have done well in their lives. I hope I wouldn’t see any one of them here today.”*

They continued to walk in silence for a couple of minutes. “I am little tired and is it OK if we sit?” Kolitha suggested.

“Certainly. But we just started walking and you are tired already? Are you OK?” asked Manu. Kolitha pulled his trouser legs up to sit on a mound of sand at the edge of the upper end of the beach.

“I am not physically tired,” Kolitha sighed. While gazing at the sea, he pulled out a cigarette and a lighter from his shirt pocket. He looked at the cigarette, “the only friend who doesn’t judge me”, and lit it. “Hope you don’t mind,” said Kolitha, not

expecting any real protest from Manu anyway.

“I don’t mind, but what did you just say about people judging you?” asked Manu.

“Oh yeah. Everybody I talk to and everyone I meet judge me from head to toe. I see it on their faces. So, I don’t like to meet any of my friends, relatives or neighbors anymore,” said Kolitha. Although he said it in a pretence of lightheartedness, Kolitha knew his facial expressions are betraying him and that anyone who is even casually looking at his direction can see the bitter sadness in his face.

“Some people have that inbuilt bad habit of judging other people and degrading them. Do you know why they do that? Because they are constantly setting themselves to compete with everyone they come across to overcome their own inner conflict. Just ignore them,” said Manu.

“I don’t blame anyone for looking down on me. Who in their right mind would want to associate with someone like me anyway?” Kolitha sounded every bit as sad and bitter as he felt. “Everyone has left me. My wife, friends, colleagues, clients, relatives and even my neighbors. They all have left me.”

“What about you?” asked Manu.

“What about me? What do you mean?” asked Kolitha, annoyed by the odd question.

“You said everyone has left you. Have you left yourself? Have you given up on you?” The sideways glance of Manu pierced Kolitha’s already clouded eyes. Kolitha continued to focus on the countless grains of sand on the beach.

“You may have seen how the Indian fans cheer their cricketers when they are playing well. What you also see is how the same fans boo and harass their cricket heroes when they fail, sometimes even going to the length of burning their houses. My point is that people may support you, and even idolize you. But in the same breath, the tide can turn and they can be your biggest critic. Similarly those who promise to be with you for life, may change their minds half way through. Those who lift you up with their encouragements now may try to pull you down later on. The bottom line is that you have no control over other people’s reaction towards you. To think that you do, is a sure way to misery and anxiety. What matters at the end is how you feel about the situations and yourself in them,” said Manu.

“I don’t know what to feel Manu,” Kolitha said, still keeping his head down. “Most of the times, I don’t feel anything. I simply feel numb. I must have done loads of bad karma in my past life,” said Kolitha, with a sad smile on his face.

“You must have also done lots of good karma my friend,” said Manu, arguing along the same line of thoughts. But he could see that Kolitha is looking deeper and deeper into the white sand, and slowly shaking his head from side to side, instantly disagreeing with Manu.

“No respectable job, no family, no savings, no decent place to live and no one to talk to. Where is my good karma?” Kolitha could sense the forced smile he had on his face is seething with bitterness and mock for Manu’s overly positive outlook. But he knew he did not have the energy to suppress it. Kolitha looked away from Manu, not wanting to hurt the feelings of this kind stranger.

“Kolitha, we have 39 million blind people in the world who would happily give up many things to be able to see. There are 40 million deaf people who miss the voices of their loved ones and 650 million people with various disabilities who wish for everyday activities we take for granted. I am sure you would see where some of your good karma had been at work. Whether you acknowledge it or not, the world has been very kind to you. This is the same world where nearly one in four people live on less than one dollar a day. By looking at you, I can see you have access to at least two meals a day. But there are millions who endure hunger on daily basis. In fact, one person dies in hunger in every 5 seconds that pass,” Manu continued. He could see that Kolitha is pulling himself together and is trying to straighten his shoulders back.

“Look at those children playing on the beach, re-building their sand castle after the first one was destroyed by a wave. Did you see any of them crying or complaining? No. Because that’s what you expect when you build a sand castle on the beach. It is a matter of time that it will be washed away by the sea. Instead of getting upset, what they are doing is dancing around and making another one.”

Manu looked straight at Kolitha. “You may have gone through pretty bad experiences my friend, but that is life. Life is where you face unexpected circumstances. Life is where you meet challenges, one after the other. Life is where you learn how to handle uncertainty.” When Manu took a pause after his speech, Kolitha could sense that some form of a response is expected from him. But he felt paralyzed by the weight of the thoughts thrown at him. He felt exhausted like a leaf thrown around by giant waves.

“Could you take a picture of us?” Kolitha was startled by the strong voice. When he looked up, he saw a foreigner looking at him and waiting for his response. Kolitha looked at Manu but realized that Manu has no intention of getting up. “Sure, no problem.” Kolitha got up and took a few photos of the man and his wife, and handed the camera back.

“Thank you very much. Your country is very beautiful and this beach is one of the most beautiful beaches we have ever seen,” said the lady while taking her camera back.

“You are welcome,” said Kolitha. When he sat back on the beach he looked around in perplex. “There are many tourists on the beach. How come I didn’t notice them before?”

“Because you were not looking for them,” said Manu.

“What do you mean?” Kolitha asked with a frown on his forehead.

“Let’s do something. Just look around the beach. Try to note the foreigners on the beach” said Manu.

Kolitha first noticed few foreigners close to where he was sitting. Some were walking; some were swimming; some were playing in the water. Kolitha looked back and noticed there were more foreigners walking on the sand behind him.

“Now close your eyes,” said Manu.

Kolitha closed his eyes.

“Now tell me roughly how many foreigners on the beach and what were they doing?”

“There are around forty to fifty tourists. Most of them are walking while there were a few swimming. I also noticed that there was a group of foreigners on my left, practicing yoga,” replied Kolitha.

“Very good. Now tell me, were there any Sri Lankan young couples on the beach?” asked Manu.

“What?” Kolitha got annoyed instantly. Then he was quiet for a moment before he replied. “I didn’t see any couples. I don’t think there were any. I saw few families but no couples.”

“Open your eyes and see,” said Manu.

Kolitha opened his eyes and turned his head to his left, to his right and then looked back. He couldn’t believe his eyes. There were many local young couples. He started adding numbers

and the total went past twenty. “This is unbelievable. Where were they a minute before? How come I didn’t see them before?” demanded the annoyed and puzzled Kolitha.

“You didn’t see them because you didn’t pay attention to them; you were not looking for them.”

“This is similar to all other experiences in our lives Kolitha,” Manu said with a wide grin on his face. “If we wish to focus on our misfortunes, mistakes, or bad karma, we can find enough of them in our lives, simply because that is what we are looking for. Similarly, if you consciously look for opportunities and blessings, you would be amazed by the count,” said Manu.

Kolitha’s eyes were literary wide as he looked at Manu. It was clear that the message has got home.

“This is very interesting,” said Kolitha, trying to hide his amusement and trying hard to keep his side of the argument strong. “But with the amount of bad experiences that I have gone through, I don’t think anyone will blame me for not finding it easy to find blessings,” he said bitterly. “There was a time when I was in control of my life. Everybody welcomed my ideas. People listened to me. I used to be very proud of my work. I was very happy at the office and therefore I was very happy at home. I never felt tired when I came home after work. Look at me now” Kolitha said with a self-disappointed downward curve on his mouth, “I feel so old suddenly. I don’t have much energy left. I am sick every other day. I hate this life.” His voice is gradually losing its strength and volume, but

the strength of the feelings behind it was impossible to miss. Taking a deep breath in, Kolitha looked at the horizon in front of him. “A decade back everything was so wonderful.” His words are whispers now. However, Kolitha was certain that Manu is listening keenly, sitting close beside him.

Manu started talking after allowing Kolitha’s words have sunk in. When he spoke, his tone was much gentler. “We do experiments with our lives. Life itself is a learning process. It is challenging to do the right thing all the time. You need to allow space to fail too. So many people have bounced back from their grievances and turned their lives around. I truly believe you can do the same, if you wish,” Manu said. Kolitha was touched by the words of this stranger. He could feel his eyes welling up. Kolitha took a long breath and tried to bring a smile to his face before turning towards Manu.

“Manu, although I met you just today, I feel very comfortable talking to you. I haven’t spoken to anyone like this for a long time.”

Still deep in thought, Kolitha reached down to his pocket, pulled out a cigarette from a pack and lit it. He continued, with the cigarette between his lips. The slight pout and angling of the mouth seem to disguise the quiver that is fighting to come out with the sadness in Kolitha’s words. “I no longer have ambitions Manu. Being a failure has been the highlight of my life for a while now,” said Kolitha. It was a statement he has practiced many times in his head before.

“I have no one to talk to, because the people who were in my life hate me now, just as much I hate myself.”

Kolitha dangled what is left of the cigarette between his fingers and watched the ashes been carried away by the winds. “I don’t know who you are and how you did it, but talking to you for the last half an hour has given me enough energy to get up tomorrow.” The smile on Kolitha’s face was sad yet sincere.

“Thank you Kolitha. As you said, you probably feel that you are losing control of your life. I am not blaming you. It is very similar to a surgeon losing control at the operation table. As you can assume, a lot of things can go wrong during an operation, from equipment failures to human errors. But at the end, the final outcome of the operation depends on how well the surgeon manages to keep his cool and control of the situation. Similarly, no one is presented with a life where they can walk a perfectly organized and smooth path.” Kolitha was listening keenly.

“The greatest and the most influential people in the world have gone through dramatic, deeply depressing times before they have achieved authentic successes. It’s never too late to try to regain control of your life. But the only path from chaos to success is a self-made one with inner focus and determination. It is just like a surgeon keeping his cool during challenges on the operating table so he could save a life and save his career,” Manu said.

“How can I do that? You don’t know half of my story,” said Kolitha.

The sun has hidden behind the horizon completely now. The beach has become virtually empty. Against the dim light of the lamp post few meters away, Kolitha could see only the outline of the kind stranger sitting beside him.

“The expression on your face and the tone of your voice tell me the story of your life. I can support and guide you, but there is one important thing you have to remember if you really want to bounce back,” said Manu.

“What is that?” This time there was hope in Kolitha’s voice.

“You need to walk this path YOURSELF! Nobody is responsible for your success but you.”

“You have dug yourself into a dark hole, and now it is time for you to come up,” said Manu. His voice, full of conviction, was lifted by the strong winds around them. Kolitha felt the strength of Manu’s message circling him and taking some of his habitual negativity away.

“But do you really believe that I can do it; that I can turn myself around; that I can get my life back?” asked Kolitha, turning himself to face Manu.

“It depends,” said Manu, shrugging his shoulders with a devious smile on his face.

“Depends on what?” Kolitha wanted to know.

“OK. Just let me share a little story with you,” said Manu, slowly getting up and wiping the sand off his pants. Taking a cue from Manu, Kolitha started to get up, while keeping his ears open for the story that Manu is about to tell.

“There were two small boys. They were running around and playing in a forest close to their village. Suddenly one boy fell into an abandoned well. The other boy was really frightened. His friend was struggling to keep his head above the water. He started screaming for help without much hope. He knew they are too far from the village for anyone to hear him. Without giving up, he reached out to his friend with his hands. But his friend, struggling to stay above the water, was too far away. The boy on the ground looked around and saw a tree in the distance. He quickly ran and climbed up the tree. He broke a long dry branch from the tree. He ran back to the mouth of the well with the branch and reached out for his friend again. By this time, the boy in the well managed to grab hold of the branch and bring his head up above the water. They patiently waited, calling for help, until the farmers who were working in the nearby paddy fields came and rescued the boy. The villagers who gathered around were curious to know how this tiny little boy managed to climb up a tree, break a huge tree branch, drag it all the way to the well and save his friend. The whole scenario seemed impossible to them. Then an old man who was there with them said “I think I know how the boy did it.” “How?” 18

asked the people around him. The old man answered - **“He did it because there was nobody to tell him that he couldn’t.”** Manu finished with a grin on his face. He seemed to be pleased with his own story-telling and its punch line.

Kolitha’s facial expression did not mirror Manu’s. He seemed puzzled. “Interesting story, but why are you telling this to me?” Kolitha asked.

“When someone has been through too many negative experiences in life, he is at risk of losing faith in himself. He would no longer trust his instincts. He could lose confidence in his own capacities and, worst of all, he would not invest in himself anymore. In our story, as that wise man correctly pointed out, **the boy could do that because he had no self doubt.** When someone’s intention is clear of fear, hesitation, apprehension and doubt, when that intention consists of trust, belief and persistence, it orchestrates infinite possibilities,” said Manu and continued.

“That is why, when you asked whether you can bring your scattered life together and turn it around, I said it depends. It depends on how powerful your intentions are. This is because it is not going to be easy and you will be continuously challenged. Unless your determination is very strong, you can easily succumb to the forces that are there to drag you down.”

Kolitha didn’t say anything for the next thirty seconds. When his voice came back, it was more like a plea than a suggestion. “Can we meet again?” 19

“Sure we can. I’ll meet you tomorrow morning at the train station,” Manu said.

“That would be great. Thank you Manu,” said Kolitha. He sounded relieved.

Manu smiled and said “you are welcome Kolitha. I better start going now. See you tomorrow.”

With that, Manu simply walked away. The hustle and the bustle of the streets hid his image within seconds.

Kolitha stood still. He felt drained. But he stood light years away from how he felt just one hour ago. He came to the beach because he couldn’t stay home anymore. He thought everyone was mocking his failure. He felt sorry for himself. But that feeling has started to be replaced by a lively feeling that Kolitha hadn’t felt for a very long time, **hope**.

”Wait a minute. How did Manu know that I travel by train?” Kolitha said out loud in a startled voice, quite involuntarily. “Very interesting” Kolitha said to himself as he started to walk away, with a smile on his face.