

Chapter 1 - Antardrishti

July 1, 2018:

“I always thought the meadows would calm me down. Those plush green, quiet and serene meadows and the soothing influence they have on you, the essence of which will always be understated if expressed in words. The grass feels like an unending and eternal green carpet, lying down over which oozes the stress out of your spine and as you close your eyes, the splurging waves of anxiety in your brain settle down to a standstill.”

The voice inside Praneeta’s head kept on talking as she walked through the chilly winds, clasping her arms across looking at the snow-capped Himalayan peaks, visible at a distance, which seem to be perennially zeroing in on her as she inched closer to them donning a pastel color Kurta, white Dupatta and an off-white Salvar.

Slowly marching towards the Himalayas, from the meadows, at the same rate at which she was marching towards her thirties, Praneeta, felt she had gained at least two decades of life experience in the past few months of her life. As these thoughts reverberated in her brain, her steps were forever moving forward, albeit slowly.

Chubby, medium height and a physique which would not qualify as lean under any circumstances, the demeanor of Praneeta Upadhyay, now just remained a shadow of her former bubbly self when she would easily come across as a radiating ball of energy that would light up the day for the most depressed person ever.

However, the glow in her overtly expressive and big eyes was undiminished. Resembling the ventilation hole of a secluded room without any conspicuous doors, visible in a fog from a distance amid dense forest, her eyes were a direct peek into the undying source of her energy – her soul.

“Keep going, you’re doing just fine”. Praneeta looked back as soon as she felt she heard Acharya’s baritone but soothing voice. But the meadows, behind her, were as empty as those facing her. She was a lone soul wandering in those green meadows at the foothills of the Himalayas, with gushes of chilly winds hitting on her face every once in a while, like pangs of painful memories from her turbulent past.

As soon as she heard Acharya’s voice, Praneeta’s face lit up and she turned back with childlike agility only to be disappointed and the glow of her face vanished just like how it had vanished from her face when she was a child and had dropped her ice-cream.

Frozen, in that moment, as kid Praneeta had helplessly looked at the melting block of ice-cream on the ground, which was now, though inedible, yet tempting, Praneeta now too, kept looking back. She was holding against hope that by some magical stance, Acharya would appear, but alas, there in the meadows, Praneeta Upadhyay must remain in solitude.

Praneeta turned back in the direction she was strolling; her arms opened up, a while ago searching for Acharya, now back in their clasping mode, wound around each other covering her abdomen like a snake on sandalwood trees – looking odd but lying albeit naturally. The chilly winds, unrelenting in their rhythmic gushes, blowing Praneeta's locks in the lateral dimension something she seemed least bothered about.

She kept moving forward along the meadow, looking at the perennially hovering Himalayan snow-clad peaks which seemed to be miraculously moving towards her, as she moved towards them. Optical illusion or a covetous wanting to be as towering as they were, Praneeta contemplated them as being Arcus Clouds.

She braced herself through the chilly gushing winds and then suddenly saw a small hut in front of her. The hut was at a certain distance, which did not seem to be in walking distance and yet it appeared as if it was reachable by walk.

The next thing Praneeta knew is that she was walking towards the hut. The winds became chillier and the gushes became frequent and yet Praneeta showed no sign of any kind of shivering. As she looked around in the emptiness and she wondered how lonely she was in the whole world and yet the world around her now, as it was, seemed lively.

The obvious paradox brought a fictitious smile on her lips which vanished like dew drops vanishing at dawn, when a daunting thought occurred to her. "Did the hut move away?" She thought for a while, and then dismissed the thought as immediately as it occurred. She kept walking.

Exhaustion caught up on her and her energy dwindled as she realized she was almost at the end of the meadow and the hut seemed still far away, at a distance which did not seem to be in walking distance and yet it appeared as if it was reachable by walk.

Praneeta, now breathing heavily, bordering on panting, decided to take a small break. She leaned down to a crouched gait with her palms resting on her knees, almost involuntary, as if an invisible force had bent her down.

Praneeta kept gawking below at the ground as the chilly icy Himalayan winds pierced her eyeballs. The green grass had turned greenish blue now. Praneeta let out a "Huh" and then, as she lifted her head back, in that split moment, she saw her worst fears coming true. Praneeta actually saw the hut moving away from her, diminishing in size to almost an indiscernible dot in the open, as she stood still.

"I think it was a mistake to tell you that you were doing fine". In a fraction of a second, Praneeta looked back as she was very sure that Acharya was now standing next to her. This time she was sure that Acharya's voice was crystal clear and she could not have heard it so lucidly, in between the gushes of chilly winds blowing, if he wasn't actually standing very close to her.

But as soon as Praneeta stood upright and then turned back, the winds had stopped, the cold had vanished and she had felt a tick sound near her right ear. Praneeta

opened her eyes. Acharya was sitting in front of her with his signature serene smile on his face and they both were seated inside the hut with Praneeta wearing the same clothes as she had visualized herself in the trance.

She was in front of Acharya, a bald man, with a round face, who was in his late forties but his well-toned body gave him the privilege to hide a good ten years when telling his age, not that Acharya personally cared a hoot about this privilege but still the privilege existed making Acharya an object of the envy of many.

Acharya would always wear a white Dhoti (loin cloth) and a brown yak wool shawl wrapped around his upper body and a Rudraksh garland wrapped around his right arm.

The warmth of the hut comforted Praneeta, for the cold icy winds, though were a product of her mind, they had the same chilling psychosomatic effect on her as if she were there in person. The meadows, the towering Himalayan icy peaks, the chilly gushes of winds and the ever moving hut were all visualizations of her state of mind, something that she has been trying to stabilize of late.

Praneeta, still reeling under the effect of the powerful meditative trance she was put in, trying hard to keep her composure still, fought between letting a smile or a grin appear on her face. Her cheekbones and jaw muscles seemed to be in a perennial tug of war and the eyes looked like the sluice gates of an overflowing dam.

“You did well”, the soothing, cathartic and confident voice of Acharya was the magic pill for her.

“How do you do it?” She asked him.

“Do what?”

“Get right through to the eye of the storm inside and rip it from inside out and it vanishes as if it has never been there. The only person who has ever gotten close to the effect that you have on my mind is my Dadda...”

“Who?”

Praneeta, lost, was jostled by Acharya’s sudden, interruptive and objective query and then she realized.

“Oh, Dadda, Dadda, my...my dad. I call him Dadda....I don’t know, I just call him that”

Acharya smiled.

“So, what I was saying is that the only person who has ever gotten close to the effect that you have on my mind is Dadda and he has just been marginally as efficient as you are, Acharya Ji and that is so comforting and spooky at the same time”, and saying so, Praneeta became silent and looked downwards in a bid to avoid eye contact with Acharya.

“You will get to know soon”, the Acharya spoke after carefully examining Praneeta’s demeanor, who was now fiddling her finger on the wooden floor of the hut. The last answer had taken away the glow off her face.

Praneeta, unhappy with the elusive answer, just smirked in acknowledgement. “I better get going for the chores, no point in delaying them unnecessarily” and thus Praneeta got up in a very disinteresting manner with a heavy sigh as she stood up and lifted her mat in her hands. Tucking it by her sides, she bent down with a Namaskara in front of Acharya, who shook his head, while his smile remained, unnerved, on his lips.

Praneeta turned towards the door, and placed her hand on the latch, the mat still tucked in her underarms.

“I will ask again, Praneeta, are you really sure, you have been completely honest with me? Because you know that time is running out for you.”

The hand which had almost unlocked the latch, stopped for a microsecond, with Praneeta giving an uncomfortable side glance before proceeding to unlock the door and move out. She closed the door on her way out.

As soon as the door shut, Acharya closed his eyes and his mind went back to the day he had met Praneeta for the first time. Acharya remembered that day very well, not that his eidetic memory helped but that day was an unforgettable day for all in *Antardrishti*, the Ashram at which Praneeta was staying.

Four weeks ago:

Situated in the foothills of the Himadri range of the Himalayas, *Antardrishti* was witnessing a usual day consisting of the humdrum hustle-bustle. The giant pine and oak wood trees surrounding *Antardrishti* helped keep the cold out and also made for an obscure entrance to the Ashram adding to its elusive and mystique element.

It was a full moon day and which meant two hours of extra meditation for all apart from the regular routine of Meditation, Yoga, cooking, cleaning and maintenance of the interiors which included watering all the plants, trimming all extra growth of leaves, on a regular basis, and always remember to keep water in the vessels for birds.

Acharya was very particular about discipline, hygiene, maintenance and upkeep of *Antardrishti*. On Wednesdays and Fridays, *Antardrishti* was open for visitors from 2 PM – 6:30 PM in summer and from 1:30 PM – 6 PM in winter. No one from outside was ever allowed to stay after the stipulated seasonal hours and Acharya being a stickler for rules, it meant that this rule was never broken until today.

Acharya was being served his dinner, which he always had religiously at 6:42 PM in summer and 6:12 PM in winter. No one knew the reason for particularly obscure timing, not that anyone either cared or dared to ask him. The students would eat only after Acharya had finished eating. After eating, he would read for about half an hour.

No one in *Antardrishti* was even aware of the consequences if the food was delayed because it had never happened. All his disciples had an unwritten rule to never cross

him, so none was aware of the consequences of actually doing so. Perhaps, even Acharya himself didn't know what he might prefer to do, if someone broke a rule. The rules were always followed, like clockwork, and the disciples found untimely solace in seeing the smile on Acharya's face.

Acharya would finish his meals in exactly 11 minutes. Today, it was the eleventh minute of his dinner, he was about to finish it, when a loud bang was heard at the door. From the sound it appeared that someone had been banging the door constantly for quite some time, but due to bad weather, loud thunder noise, the banging noise would reach inside only after a while like a distant drum noise reaching you as a faint but growing noise dampened by Doppler Effect.

The disciples were shocked. Acharya had stopped eating and there was still some rice left in his plate. It was 6:53 PM. Eleven minutes had passed and it was the first ever instance of Acharya being unable to complete his food and till date, he had never spared any leftovers. The banging continued. Acharya asked Radheshyam to check the door.

Radheshyam, in his mid thirties with average height and a lean physique, opened the door and along with a young woman's hand, rain and gushy winds also entered *Antardrishti's* courtyard. Radheshyam, who has been in *Antardrishti* since the last seven years, acted impulsively and let in the woman. He closed the door, shutting out the rain and the noise of the storm as well.

The woman, drenched from head to toe, was shivering. Her face and head covered with her Dupatta. Radheshyam did not know what to do. He had spent a long time in *Antardrishti* and this was the first instance of some unknown person entering it without the usual admission procedure. But his values of *Atithi Devo Bhava*^[1] taught him to comfort the uninvited guest, first and foremost.

Radheshyam led the woman towards the bathroom with her face still covered. Radheshyam then rushed to brief the Acharya about the unusual developments. Acharya listened to Radheshyam patiently.

Acharya had to reach a decision regarding the uninvited *Atithi*^[3], the name that was given to guests uninvited. Till date, the students there had only heard about *Atithi*^[3] and what to do if one arrives. This was the first time they were about to practically apply the lessons of Acharya about *Shishtachar*^[2] (good behavior).

When Radheshyam was narrating, all of his 19 other students – 10 men and 9 women, were listening and their eyes were shining as all of them were thinking the same thing about applying their lessons to practicality. Acharya had sensed the change in the air of the room as the excitement of the students was evident in their vibes. He directed Saakshi to check if the guest was done with washing herself.

When Saakshi came near the bathroom, at that instant the door opened. Saakshi gave a towel to the guest who took and wiped her hands and face as they both moved from there. The guest followed Saakshi into an inner room, past the huge sanctum just after the courtyard. The sanctum, covered with reinforced colored glass, led to a large passage way that gave way to various rooms.

The guest was scanning every inch of the area as they both proceeded into a large room inside which Acharya was seated on a wooden platform and the disciples were seated down. The guest spotted Radheshyam seated there.

Acharya signaled everyone to leave the room. After that, it was just Acharya and the guest in the room. She had uncovered her face by now.

“Who are you?”

“Praneeta”

Acharya waited for her to finish her full name. After a pause, she realized it.

“Praneeta Upadhyay”

“I must apologize for the indiscretion of my student, Radheshyam”

“I’m sorry, I do not follow”

“This is the first time a visitor has entered *Antardrishti* during the after-hours. I have always told them that they might encounter such an incident in their lifetime and that such visitor would be called *Atithi*^[3].”

“Yes, I know, *Atithi*^[3] means guest.” Praneeta intervened and then realized her folly so she kept quiet. Acharya waited for her excitement to mellow down.

“*Atithi*^[3] simply means the one whose date of arrival is unknown, like yours for example”.

The smile had vanished from Praneeta’s face.

“I am not sure if you fully understand this place, so I will go by that assumption and let you know about this place. We call it *Antardrishti* which translates as “The Inner Vision” in literal English but its deeper meaning is something that remains indescribable in words. Everyone here did come of their own volition, but they didn’t get entry of their own volition. We have a very rigorous mechanism to grant entry to people and let me tell you, in the years that we have operated, I have only seen 10 students joining after I became Acharya and we receive hundreds of applications every year. As you can see for yourself, only a handful of those make it. Of course, after being granted entry, they are free to leave of their own volition but till date I have not seen anyone leaving except for natural causes.”

Praneeta listened to him patiently but her mind was lost elsewhere. She stood there in front of Acharya with her hands straight down by her sides, shoulders drooped and looking down, processing the passive distancing that Acharya had just hinted her about.

“I come here with high hopes”, she finally spoke in a rather low voice.

“How did you know about this place anyway, because we do not advertise and I don’t remember seeing your application coming through the process at all?” Acharya shrugged and asked.

Praneeta gave a surprised look but Acharya was unnerved, as if he could read her mind.

“You’re thinking right, all applications go through me”. Acharya hinted. Praneeta pondered about it for a second before she started speaking.

“I read about *Antardrishti* on a travel blog, but that blog just mentioned how beautiful, serene and quiet this place was and I quote here – ‘Imagine a place where your own heartbeat would tell you whether you are tense or not’. I was intrigued by the way *Antardrishti* was described in the article. Much later came a moment in my life, whence I felt like this would be the only ideal place for me to be. It was an unusual and a very uncanny feeling, like a craving, for the lack of a better word. Like what pregnant women go through when they have a craving for a particular food and unless they get it, they are restless. That was the only logical analogy I could draw to explain the inner drive that made me leave everything in Gurugram, where I used to live and work, for this place. Funnily, in that travel blog, nothing was mentioned about the location of *Antardrishti*, and I felt like it was only a cosmic coincidence that I knew the author of the article personally and he literally made me beg before him before he told me about this place.”

Praneeta realized that she had been talking since quite some time and also that this was the longest she had spoken in the last three days, after she had left Gurugram, ditching her cell phone and not informing anyone about her whereabouts or her plans.

Acharya slipped into a thinking mode. His sitting posture had changed from sitting upright to placing his left palm on to the wooden platform he was sitting on, his body slightly leaned towards his left and a slight grin appeared on his face. Dilemma was evident in his eyes.

On one hand, he had trained his disciples in *Atithi Devo Bhava* ^[1] and a lesson he himself had imbibed from his Guru before he became Acharya, while on the other hand, his own integrity didn’t allow him to break the rules of admission into *Antardrishti*. Finally, after a lot of pondering, Acharya spoke.

“As you are our guest, I must ask you to spend the night here, the weather outside too notwithstanding, it would be preposterous on my part to ask you to leave abruptly. However, *Antardrishti* rules do not allow me to take you as my disciple just because of your impulsion or high hopes, Praneeta. I do hope you understand this.”

“No, I do not.”

Both of them fell silent again. Acharya went back to sitting upright.

“The rules are meant and followed religiously for a reason, Praneeta”.

“All I am asking is for you to give me one chance”

“To do what, exactly?” and immediately Acharya took a deep breath as he had sensed he was getting impatient and he must not do so.

“A chance to find myself is all I ask for, Acharya Ji. At this point in my life, I am totally lost, disoriented and I feel as if I am moving through a crowded maze with blindfolds on, not knowing when I would hurt someone else or myself. Everything that I have stood for has turned against me and there’s nothing I can do to salvage it without causing more harm to either others or myself. I feel like I need to rediscover myself and from what I read on the travel blog, my instinct tells me that this is the place for me.”

“But, Praneeta, I have been in *Antardrishti* since the last 17 years. All these disciples of mine that you see, many of them were my classmates before I became Acharya here and some have joined after I came here. But till date, not a single living soul has left this place. So this means, this friend of yours, this travel blogger you keep referring to, must have been a guest here when *Antardrishti* is open for visitors on Wednesdays and Fridays and he could not have spent more than four to five hours here. So, tell me, do you really think his evaluation is correct or even relevant enough for you to ask me to break my rules?”

“Kindly forgive me Acharya Ji; I do not want to be instrumental in that. But there must be some way for you to at least consider what I am asking for? Moreover, I cannot argue with you about how relevant was that blog or not because I simply do not have enough information to convince you one way or the other, but I do know this.”

“And that would be....”

“It takes just ten seconds for a mobile call to connect which can then theoretically last for hours. He did mention on his blog that he wished he gets a chance to stay at *Antardrishti* at least once in his life because that one visit had mesmerized him. And as I said earlier, I will never be able to express in words about how I had actually felt reading the article except for the fact that I had to see this place and so here I am.”

Acharya took another deep breath and then stood up. He started walking out of the room and stopped short of the entrance and looked at Saakshi, who rushed in.

“I want you to make arrangements for Praneeta’s night stay”. Saakshi nodded and left. Praneeta understood that she won’t be able to stay here for more than a day. She was dejected and just then she sensed the Acharya walking towards her. She became conscious.

“I have to admit that very few people can make me think. You are one of them. So I am going to take at least one night’s time before I properly answer to you as to whether or not we would accept you at *Antardrishti*. You do seem exhausted. So, why don’t you take some rest and tomorrow, at some opportune moment, we will take a final call.”

Praneeta’s face lit up. It wasn’t over. She could still be hopeful till that opportune moment arrived. She did a Namaskara and left from there. She stepped out of the room and into the main sanctum which had to be crossed to get to the array of small huts where the students stayed.

As before, Praneeta's eyes were moving in all directions like that of an eagle, trying to absorb every minute detail in *Antardrishti's* architecture. A ray of hope was glowing in her eyes waiting for the opportune moment to arrive with the optimism that Acharya would allow her to stay there. And just then Praneeta saw a huge wooden board fitted on an otherwise empty wall with the list of generous donors' names carved in there.

"This is your room". Saakshi's voice broke Praneeta's reverie. Saakshi showed her a small room which had a mat and a very thin pillow and a blanket. There were some folded clothes lying on a small wooden table. As Saakshi noticed Praneeta observing the room, a smile appeared on her face.

"This room actually belongs to me. We don't have any guest rooms here. But there's one room we have kept it spare if some visitor feels sick and wants to rest for a while. I will use that room today, and you can use my room. I hope that's fine with you." Saakshi spoke with a smile on her face. Praneeta was barely listening. Her mind was fixated on to some unbeknownst moment in the near future when Acharya would accept her into *Antardrishti*.

"*I just don't know where else to go from here*", a voice inside her spoke while Saakshi still elicited a response from Praneeta. Saakshi placed her hand on Praneeta's arm. Praneeta was jolted.

"Are you feeling alright?"

"Yes, yes and this room will serve just fine. In fact, I feel bad that you have to leave your room for me. Why don't you just let me use the guest room? Can you show me where it is?" Praneeta, unwilling to let her inner thoughts surface, managed her composure before asking Saakshi.

"Are you sure, because Acharya Ji asked me to make arrangements for your night stay and I wouldn't want you to feel uncomfortable...."

"The fact that I can spend the night here is in itself a comforting one. And I would feel highly obligated if your sleeping place changed because of me. Please Saakshi, I insist to use the guest room only." Praneeta interrupted Saakshi which was slightly daunting for Saakshi because at *Antardrishti* no one interrupted anyone. But, Saakshi also knew that Praneeta would leave mostly by the next day. So, she just led Praneeta from there towards the guest room with a smile on her face. Praneeta followed her and once again her eyes started absorbing every inch of the place.

They walked past the corridor along which Saakshi's and other rooms were lined. At the end of the corridor, there was a small door which led the two into another narrow passage after which they turned right while crossing the door. On their right were the walls of the room which they passed by to reach the guest room's entrance and on their left were trees and plants. Water was dripping from the leaves on to the passage way.

They reached the door. Saakshi opened it and let Praneeta in. Saakshi showed her the mat and the blanket she can use. Praneeta didn't respond much which told Saakshi that Praneeta was probably holding something back.

"Something on your mind? You should know that at *Antardrishti*, no one will feel bad. So, you can speak freely" Saakshi assured Praneeta.

"Even his silence is soul-piercing". Saakshi looks at Praneeta hoping she will finish her sentence. When she doesn't, Saakshi realizes that Praneeta is referring to Acharya.

"It will take us years to reach where he has reached and that too we are not sure if we can reach in this incarnation"

"You believe in reincarnations?" quipped Praneeta.

"Not much of a believer I guess" Saakshi replied.

"I just don't know where else to go from here". Saakshi was a bit taken aback at Praneeta's expression preceded by a bout of silence. She didn't have to ask Praneeta anything; her face told it all to Saakshi.

"That's what I was thinking when you found me lost near your room". Praneeta continued and Saakshi then understood that Praneeta was looking for guidance to the path that would lead to her being accepted at *Antardrishti*.

"*Antardrishti* is his world and he has this firm conviction that a world remains stable only by balanced rules and strict adherence to them".

Praneeta nodded with a smile and looked around the room. Saakshi left. Praneeta lied down, covered herself with the blanket and closed her eyes.

Praneeta looked around carefully. The people sitting around her, the strangers she looked at, were going to be her future classmates and she had no idea for how long. Acharya asked her to stand up. As she stood up,

"Let me introduce Praneeta Upadhyay to you. I know most of you must be thinking that I have flouted the admission procedures to accommodate her, but here she is, so let's welcome her."

Then one by one the students started to vanish from there. Acharya's appearance kept on becoming fainter and fainter with each student vanishing. Praneeta started breathing heavily and then suddenly she found herself awake in the room she was sleeping in.

She woke up in horror, barely managed to suppress a scream, started panting and sat up straight, sweating in the ice-cold chilly Himalayan weather and she felt there was a big lump in her chest. A small lamp was burning in a corner. Praneeta picked up the lamp to look around the room and she found some water kept in an earthen vessel with a small earthen cup kept there. Praneeta gulped the water making intermittent sounds of heavy breathing while pushing the water down through her throat. The water calmed her down.

“It was just a dream, a bad dream”. She looked around the room. There was no clock. There was no watch on her person and that’s when she realized she had left her house in hurry and flashes of her driving through the Sona Road, out into the Gurugram’s farms, ditching her car and mobile phone appeared before her eyes. She broke down.

The dead of the night, the isolation of her room and the dread of being amongst total strangers notwithstanding, Praneeta cried inconsolably. As she let down a deluge of tears, several voices spoke inside her head.

“What will Dadda think of you?”

“How could you let Vishesh or Neelansh down? They were your pillars of support.”

“More importantly, how could you let Aparajita and her cronies win over you like that?”

“You ditched your mobile, now forget being able to check time, no one would be able to check in on you. What would they think of you? That you are a coward, a runaway girl, a sissy, a spineless little girl who got scared and took cover?”

Praneeta felt like shredding her brain to pieces for doing this to her, the jouska^[4] just wouldn’t stop, as much as she would love for it to stop. For, running all the voices inside her head, reminding of the past that she was trying to run away from so hard, the past that she wanted to forget and why she longed so much to belong to a serene place that would give her a semblance of meaning of what she was supposed to do and who she was supposed to be? She cursed her brain, that instead of showing a path, it was just magnifying her solitude and bringing it out to her in a scarier, creepier form.

Eventually her tears dried up, her brain also got tired of the jouska^[4]. Exhausted, she fell asleep.

Acharya’s body-clock was as accurate as any atomic clock. A feat he had mastered over years with rigorous practice, religious discipline and mastering his mind through deep meditation techniques. Therefore, getting up at 4:30 AM every day, without fail was like a piece of cake for him. But today when he saw Praneeta up and in the meditation hall at 4:45 AM when the pre-sunrise meditation session started at *Antardrishti*, he knew that he was reaching closer to the moment of arriving upon a decision pertaining to Praneeta’s situation.

All his disciples were seated on their respective mats. There was no extra mat for Praneeta and thus she was standing in a corner, closer to the entrance, with hopeful eyes. Acharya walked towards her. The disciples knew what they had to do and they were busy getting prepped for the pre-sunrise meditation session.

“I didn’t realize but I owe an apology to you, Acharya Ji”, Praneeta spoke before Acharya could say anything. Seeing her pro-active stance, he decided to play along.

“And what would that apology be for, if I may indulge?” Acharya quipped.

"I was so caught up in my own need to seek some clarity and to find a place to belong to, that in my own frenzy, I simply overlooked the difficult position I have put you in. Yesterday's tumultuous weather notwithstanding, while I was coming over here, I wasn't even sure if I would make it to *Antardrishti*". Flashes of her arduous journey through the thick and dense forest of oak wood and pine trees intermittently occurred to her as Praneeta gathered herself to put her stance before Acharya.

"Our basic survival crisis makes us paranoid and yesterday it was the same paranoia that made me indolent towards the sanctity of *Antardrishti*", her eyes wavered around the place as she spoke while Acharya was keenly observing her demeanor.

"However, after a good night's sleep albeit not so peaceful, but still, I feel energized enough to be able to see and think clearly. I know that *Antardrishti* means the world to you and only a strict adherence to balanced rules can make a world stable. I am very happy that I got a chance to spend at least a night here and I am still childishly hopeful that my stay can extend here, that I can be accepted as your disciple here. However, if the rules so strongly say that it won't happen, I will accept that too as my destiny." Praneeta was almost lost as she kept on speaking and then she suddenly realized that she needs to stop.

Acharya stood before her like a rock. His face muscles, his eyes, his demeanor and his posture were totally agnostic to the wild train of thoughts running in his mind. And after a while, like an early sunrise, a warm smile appeared on his face. He turned slightly back to check on his disciples who were deeply meditating.

"I think after all the decision to have Saakshi show you your room worked out fine." Acharya spoke with his back turned towards Praneeta, and his yak wool shawl hanging like half-mast from his body.

Praneeta could not understand anything.

"I grant you a month's stay starting today. In this one month, you will do everything that the other disciples do like group meditation, preparing food, cleaning and maintaining the upkeep of *Antardrishti* except for one small difference." And saying so, Acharya turned back towards her.

An ocean of excitement was bubbling inside Praneeta because she had almost got what she wanted and she now wanted to jump around the entire campus of *Antardrishti* like a child who runs amok seeing an empty place. Her face sported a wide smile, her eyes were bubbling with energy and her soul felt rejuvenated at the very mention of what Acharya had just told her though her heart knew that it was a long way ahead of any real solace which she was ultimately looking for. Time had slowed down for Praneeta, or maybe it stopped altogether, she couldn't care less about it.

"And that difference shall be the reading time" Acharya continued speaking after a fraction of a second's silence.

"Reading time?" Praneeta peaked with curiosity with her questioning tone.

“Yes, all the disciples get a 2 hour window of reading time. We have a library here and with the help of our generous patrons,” Acharya pointed towards the donor’s board in the sanctum as they were standing near the entrance from where the sanctum was clearly visible, “we have a decent collection of literature, both domestic and foreign, on life, philosophy, psychology, science, spirituality, non-duality, humanity, religion and many other varied subjects. However, your case being special, I am inclined to find out the reason for your impulsive decision to head for *Antardrishti* leaving behind everything in Gurugram. Therefore, those two hours you will need to spend with me and we will mutually decide how to spend them. We can either talk about something that may be on your mind or we can explore some interesting meditation exercises.”

The Sun had risen by then and the initial golden rays of the Sun had entered the Sanctum from the East. With machinist precision, the disciples started getting up one by one, folding their mats, leaving the room and doing a Namaskara to Acharya as they passed by. Saakshi waited there as she had studied the demeanors of both Acharya and Praneeta from a distance and realized that the Acharya had come to a decision regarding Praneeta. Realizing that the Acharya might have some specific instructions for her, Saakshi waited at some distance behind the Acharya as the others vacated the room and went on to carry on with their other regular daily activities.

Acharya turned towards Saakshi. “Let us open the closed room and prepare it for her. I want the guest room always available for the visitors. I want Praneeta to spend the day with you and understand everything in terms of a routine that we do here. For today, you are excused from your regular duties. Please ask Radheshyam to see me in my room, I will explain him how to accommodate Praneeta’s situation with our admission procedure.” Saakshi nodded.

“From tomorrow, I do hope you will be comfortable with our routine, Praneeta.” Acharya left for his room. Both Saakshi and Praneeta did a Namaskara to him.

As soon as the Acharya left, Praneeta covered her wide open gasping mouth with her hands and used all of her will power to suppress the uncontrollable urge to scream. All she could let out was a big and unending sigh with the sound of a squeak. Praneeta almost bit her palm in a bid to suppress her scream. Saakshi placed her hand on her arm which calmed down her nerves to an extent but it was only Praneeta who was aware of the storm brewing in her mind.

The day passed as Saakshi got Praneeta acquainted with the daily activities at *Antardrishti*. The next four weeks witnessed Praneeta’s induction into *Antardrishti*’s lifestyle. Praneeta slowly got acquainted with the other disciples there. She was surprised to find that men and women lived there harmoniously and how everything just worked on the basis of will power. These men and women along with the Acharya had overpowered their sexual urges through meditation.

Acharya had given them a context, a context which he had internalized later but was handed down to him by his Guru, who had in turn imbibed it from his Guru and so on and so forth, about viewing sexual urge as a form of energy of the mind which can be

channelized in a constructive direction by visiting the hidden layers of one's subconscious through deep and guided meditation. A context which would but render the pleasures of a sexual union irrelevant as one unraveled through the deeper layers of the infinite potential hidden in the human subconscious mind.

These revelations formed part of the initial satisfaction of Praneeta's query about the cohabitation of men and women disciples in the relatively small sized campus of *Antardrishti* compared to other Ashrams and also the comparatively relaxed norms of inter-gender interactions.

Praneeta got involved in the cooking, cleaning, maintenance and upkeep of the Ashram and even though the whole exercise was very daunting, demanding and exhausting, Praneeta had one pivot – Acharya. Every day, she would long for those two hours with Acharya wherein sometimes he would talk about life, society, human mind and many such concepts and at times, he would take Praneeta in a deep trance wherein she would face her own subconscious.

It was the second exercise that was disturbing for both Praneeta and the Acharya because despite her willingness and effort, there was an invisible tether to some immovable blockage that prevented Praneeta from opening up to Acharya, totally.

Time was running out as the month had nearly exhausted and now only two days were left – today and tomorrow. Acharya came back to his present after Praneeta had left his room. His words still reverberated in her mind - "I will ask again, Praneeta, are you really sure, you have been completely honest with me? Because you know that time is running out for you."

Present Moment:

Even Acharya was thinking about it and he was surprised with his childlike desire to see through Praneeta's efforts and to make sure that her time at *Antardrishti* meant something to her. This raw attachment to outcome directly contradicted his personality and Acharya was slightly concerned with this apparent humane aspect to his personality which he was himself witnessing after a long time because in the history of *Antardrishti*. As far as Acharya was aware, Praneeta's case was the only one where admission procedures had been modified.

Acharya was trying to find out whether it was the uniqueness of Praneeta's case that was making him pine for the outcome so eagerly or was it the fact that he saw glimpses of his own self in Praneeta before he came to *Antardrishti* and it was this mirror effect which was reflecting in his urge to become associated with the outcome of Praneeta's situation. Whatever be the reason, Acharya also knew that even if Praneeta had to leave *Antardrishti* because her designated time ran out, he would find peace with that too. A part of him still hoped that wasn't the scenario.

Praneeta was slightly more active than usual in the discharge of her duties at the Ashram after today's session. The constantly moving and ultimately vanishing hut had got to her. She knew that she had only one more day to convince Acharya that she truly belonged to the place and should be allowed to continue. Her vigor didn't go unnoticed. Apart from few other disciples, Saakshi too noticed it. She walked up to

her, took the broom from her, caught hold of her arm and took her into her room, locked it and turned towards Praneeta, her hands folded, her lips sealed and her penetrating gaze fixed on Praneeta.

Praneeta knew that the cat was out of the bag and there was no need to ask any questions about Saakshi's behavior, rather she must answer her unasked question.

"I am trying my level best" Praneeta could speak only this much, but it made no change in Saakshi's behavior.

"I don't know, the trances are so powerful and moving. It's the first time I am experiencing a Tsunami arise inside me and then I suddenly feel that like it's a volcano and then it just magically vanishes even before I can get to its center. At other times, I just feel I am surrounded by a storm that has no eye at all or rather, an eye that constantly shifts in position. I just don't know where's the beginning, the middle and the end of my story, where to start and where to end. I know I must either totally open up to Acharya or I must face my own subconscious with utmost honesty, but I guess, like other areas in my life, before *Antardrishti*, I will fail here too."

Saakshi had mellowed down after Praneeta opened up. She walked towards her.

"You know everything that we seek for, the answer is right there, in front of us, we just need to see. There's a reason for everything in our universe, in nature. It's just that sometimes the reason itself is either too complicated or too deep hidden making it magical for us. For example, you said you don't know the beginning, end and middle of your story, right?" Praneeta nodded in agreement.

"Well, then don't you think that it's a good thing that time is practically unidirectional for us mortals?" Saakshi spoke with soft smile on her face.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Praneeta, the answer's right in front of you. Just tell him everything that happened in your life in a chronological manner, that's it. Moreover, this unidirectional nature of time is also one more hint to you as to why you should do it sooner rather than later."

"You mean, like how time is running out for me and once it does so, it will never turn back and that I will never get a second chance at *Antardrishti*?" Praneeta asked the question, more to her own self than to Saakshi, but it was for sure, projected at Saakshi.

"And you know, while we're at it, let me ask you this. You do know that *Antardrishti* isn't the only Ashram in India. There are countless, so why here only?"

"You haven't left this place, so don't you think you know the answer to this question of yours better than me?" Praneeta's maieutic ^[5] approach was self-enlightening. Saakshi now knew that Praneeta was ready, even though Praneeta herself might not know. Saakshi then left from there, leaving Praneeta thinking.

The day passed with the usual activities and with today's session with Acharya over, Praneeta knew that tomorrow was her last chance to make an attempt to find herself, before being lost again. She struggled with sleep but the day's physical strain got the better of her and her eyes just gave in to gravity.

The next day started with the usual pre-sunrise mediation, cleaning, preparing breakfast, the daytime meditation, a walk in the woods around, watering the plants amid other activities.

Finally, the time for reckoning arrived. Praneeta entered the hut for her private session with him. Acharya, as usual, was seated on a slightly elevated wooden platform donning his usual Dhoti, yak wool shawl and Rudraksh garland wrapped around his right arm. Praneeta did a Namaskara and sat down.

"So, have you decided anything for today – meditation or conversation?"

"Conversation" Praneeta spoke with beaming confidence.

Something in her voice told Acharya that Praneeta was ready.