Matsya and Devi, an aging fish couple, lived in a pond of the Karnali River by the village of Chhipra. Since the pond was by the village crematorium, fishing was not allowed, so the couple was safe and survived into adulthood and beyond. They fed on the bones and mineral-rich ashes of the dead, on smaller fish, and the rice grains that relatives and friends consigned to the river to carry to their loved ones in the afterlife.

Matsya had been very discontent lately. He knew he was aging. Also, being used to the clean, clear waters of the Karnali River all year round except during the monsoon, he was particularly distressed and depressed as our story begins. It was monsoon season and he was weary of the muddy waters of his habitat and of being pelted by rain. The year before they had hardly had a monsoon, and they almost perished from lack of water.

“What is life all about?” he would frequently ask his wife, Devi. “Yes, we have increased the population of Karnali River by our offspring, we have hunted and eaten, and now we are going to die.”

Devi, who had grown happier as she aged, tried to tell her husband about the attitude of gratitude that had enriched her own life in her later years. She reminded him that they were lucky to be alive; that even at this late age they hadn’t been caught and eaten; that while so many other fish starved for lack of food, they had plenty; that they now had a measure of peace and leisure after a lifetime of spawning and rearing.
But nothing affected Matsya’s discontent.

Devi, who knew that her husband had always wanted to travel to newer territory, had an idea to cheer him up.

“Let’s go on a pilgrimage like the humans! Let’s get away from the heat and the constant rain. Let’s go to the Mount Kailas, home of the gods and center and axis of the universe! The place where Lord Shiva dances and sports with his consort, Parvati, and the Ganga River streams out of Lord Vishnu’s big toe,” she said, flapping her fins and looking at her husband with eyes wide in her head.

“Are you mad?” he replied. “We are not young anymore like these other fish that sometimes take the long and arduous path to the source. My digestion is bad. I can’t eat the bones anymore, and sometimes even the smaller fish upset my stomach. The only thing that goes down well is rice, but sometimes even that passes through my body without being digested. Go upstream at this age? It will kill us!”

“We are going to die, anyway,” Devi reasoned. “Everything that is born, dies. We should know that from a lifetime of living by the cremation grounds. Why not die doing something you have always wanted to do? Some Hindus who undertake the sacred journey perform their own funeral rights, kill their fears and desires, and head up to Kailas, source of the many rivers, and the turquoise lake, Manasarovar, the Lake of the Mind. It is a boundless expanse of blue that mirrors the heavens and is the true home of so many fish like us. It is our source, beloved, from which our own home river flows!”

Devi knew the last detail of her description was false. A visiting fish returning downstream had told her the Karnali originates far west of Manasarovar. She forgave herself the lie because she had heard her husband mention the lake before and knew he would be excited about visiting it.

Matsya looked at her skeptically and Devi wondered whether he had seen through her lie.

“Even if we don’t reach it, we could have a glimpse of Mount Kailas, and that alone will be enough, and more than enough! I would be so happy if you agreed!”
Matsya was silent. He felt the stirring of desire in his heart, but his fear subdued it.

“You, Matsya, are named after Vishnu himself, Lord of the Waters,” Devi reminded him.

“Oh, what was that story again?” Matsya asked, almost despite himself.

“In one of his incarnations Vishnu became a huge, horned fish named Matsya.”

“Why did he bother? Wouldn’t it have been better for him to have stayed a god?” Matsya replied cynically.

“Manu, the first man Vishnu created,” Devi began her tale, glad to see that her husband’s eyes had a sparkle of interest, “was bathing in the river one day when he caught a tiny fish. It flopped about in his cupped hands, scattering rainbow reflections from its shimmering scales, and cried, ‘Please don’t eat me! I am not even a morsel for you, and I want to grow up, live and experience my life!’

Manu, feeling his heart opening with love and compassion for this tiny creature with fins, small round eyes, and colorful scales, agreed to release the fish back into the water.

‘Please also protect me from the bigger fish,’ the little fish pleaded.

‘How can I do that?’ Manu asked. ‘If I throw you back in the river so you can live, you will be eaten up unless Vishnu protects you.’

‘Keep me in a jar,’ the little fish advised. ‘When I grow bigger, put me in a small pond. When I become too big for the pond, put me in a bigger pond, and finally, when I am so big no little pond can contain me, put me in the ocean.’

‘The ocean! But you are a freshwater fish.’

‘Never mind the details. In time you will know who I am.’

Manu did as he was told. The fish grew and grew till it became so enormous that Manu – reluctantly, because he had grown to love and adore the fish – had to take it to the ocean and release it. But before the fish swam away with a huge splash, it said to Manu,

‘Let me repay you for your kindness. A great deluge is coming; all land on this planet will become the bed of the sea. Build a ship, and stock it with grains, seeds, all varieties of creatures, and the Vedas,
repository of all the wisdom of the Earth. Call on me when you find yourself in trouble, and I will come and rescue you.’

Manu, who trusted the creatures of the Earth and knew that they knew far more than he did, built himself a ship and stocked it with animals, seeds, grains, and a copy of the Vedas. Just before the deluge came, rending and tearing the skies in a thunderous uproar, Manu climbed aboard. And just in time. Incessant torrents flooded the banks and shores of rivers till the great ocean rolled upon land and swallowed up everything.

Manu felt safe and in his mind thanked the fish for saving him. But he didn’t know what danger lay ahead. Huge waves and swells rose all around him, wide vortices appeared before him that threatened to suck his little ship down to the dark depths and destroy the very seed of all life. Manu was dreadfully afraid.

Just then he heard the fish’s words in his head: ‘Call on me. I will save you.’

‘Oh Fish, great Fish, come, please come and rescue me!’

A huge hump obscured the horizon as the Great Horned Fish, grown so large that Manu couldn’t see the end of it in any direction, appeared before him. It dived beneath the ship, rose till the ship rested safely on its back, and began to swim with great muscular force towards the North in a journey that took a long time. It swam till Manu saw on the horizon a huge round peak covered with snow, standing tall and majestic above the waters. The Fish, which as you know, was Vishnu himself in his incarnation as Matsya, threw a great thick rope around the peak and moored the ship to it so it was safe till the flood receded. That peak, my beloved husband, was Kailas!”

Matsya was silent. He had to admit to himself that Devi’s story had cheered him up and calmed him down. Yet his mind kept interfering with his peace.

“Why did you tell me that story? What relevance does it have to what we were talking about? I don’t believe these stories. They are just stories,” Matsya grumbled in his habitual way.

“Don’t you see? Remember, we both have a spark of Vishnu in us! He will protect us! We both have a purpose to our lives.”
“Yes, he’ll protect us like he protects all the fish that get eaten up by other fish. Purpose! There is no purpose!”

“Let us not fear and doubt, dear husband. Take courage, and let us begin our quest!”

Matsya grumbled and was quiet. But his wife’s words and descriptions stayed with him all night, entering his dreams and his fantasies. In the morning he said to her,

“Oh, alright! Let’s give it a try. But will I find rice on the way? It is the only thing I can digest now.”

“We know that humans always burn their dead by rivers and many cast grains into the water together with bones and ashes.”

“Why?” asked Matsya.

“Rivers are symbols of life, dear, the energy stream that generates all life, that brings, gives, takes away, and brings again.”

Matsya looked uneasy, and Devi reassured him, “We can keep an easy pace, and when we get tired, we can stop and rest.”

Because fish don’t have to pack anything when they go on long journeys – they are luckier than humans that way – and because they were refreshed by a night of sleep, they started right away after Matsya had had his fill of rice. While Devi was much more excited than her husband about the adventure ahead, Matsya prided himself on being realistic, and said over and over, “We will die before we get to the lake.”

They swam upstream, a little bit at a time, pausing to catch and eat smaller fish and nibble at the grasses and moss on the many boulders in the river, avoiding and dodging bigger fish, resting and sleeping when they needed to. Fortunately, because it was harvest season in the lowlands, there were always, in addition to other fish, some grains of rice for sustenance in the shallows around cremation grounds. And as they swam further, their stamina and excitement grew, for the holy journey they were on fueled their quest.

But though their hearts were aflame to reach their goal, their bodies were wearing out.

Midway through their journey, it was evident that their life force was ebbing. They spent more and more time trying to recoup their
energy, resting instead of swimming upstream. They knew their end was near. When they reached Kholsi, Matsya’s guts gave out, and Devi’s body, too, was spent. Though she was, through a long practice of acceptance of all life brings and takes away, reconciled to her fate, Matsya, his eye dimming in the dawn, looked at this wife and whispered,

“Purpose?”

With one final burst of energy, Devi leapt out of the river, landed on the shore, flip-flopped her way further inland, and looked around her.

“Look,” she said to her husband. Matsya, too, wanting to die within sight of his wife, sprang out of the water and onto land. He followed her gaze as she looked north at the banks of the Karnali. A clump of rich, emerald green swam into his dimming eyes.

“Rice,” whispered Devi, with her fading breath. “You, my beloved, have brought rice where it has never grown before! You have performed a great deed in your life! How glad humans will be when they see this!”

“What about Manasarovar? What about Kailas? We have . . . failed,” he gasped.

“Manasarovar means the ‘Lake of the Mind,’ my husband. It exists within us. And wherever we, sparks of Vishnu, are, is the axis of the world.”

Matsya looked at the Karnali River, in which he had lived all his life. Now that he was out of it, he could truly see it for the first time, bouncing, leaping, dancing and shimmering downstream in the morning light, lovely beyond description; he could see, too, how every little pebble changed the flowing pattern of the river.

“What a lovely river was given to us as our home, my wife,” he said, looking at his mate with eyes full of love for her and everything he saw around him.

As the light began to fade in his eyes, his inner vision sharpened. Matsya closed his eyes for the last time. As he did so, he found himself leaping with a rainbow flash into a boundless turquoise lake so tranquil that he knew he had arrived at his source in Paradise.
Matsya and Devi’s bodies began to harden into stone at the arrival of day; in time the rock bodies of Matsya and Devi grew larger, like Vishnu morphing from a tiny fish to a huge horned fish. In time, the sprouts of rice, too, grew to maturity, the wind scattering the seeds far and wide till there grew entire fields and terraces of it; in time humans migrated to the blessed rice fields. Worshipped by the villagers for bringing them rice from the lowlands, the fish couple can still be seen today, side by side, standing tall, firm, majestic in Dharapori, the habitation that sprang up around the fields of rice, that rich and delicious source of sustenance.