

## The Ramayana

*The Ramayana is one of the great Indian epics, a story that incorporates the themes of love, courage, trust, loyalty, and, most importantly, the rules of dharma, or duty. The main characters, Rama and his beautiful wife Sita, embody the ideals of dutiful beings and are considered by Indians to be the ultimate heroic characters. Rama is the incarnation of the god Vishnu, who is returning as Rama because he knows that in this form he will be able to defeat the evil Ravana.*

*Following the rules of dharma, Rama grows up an intelligent and honest man, defeats evil demons despite a 14-year banishment from his kingdom, manages to fight for and win the hand of Sita when no other man can, and finally conquers evil and comes to take his rightful place as king.*

### The Story So Far

The retiring King Dasaratha of Ayodha chooses his son Rama as his heir, but his wife Kaikeyi asks that he appoint her son, Bharata, instead. Against his own heart, he crowns Bharata king and banishes Rama to the forest for 14 years. Following his *dharma*, Rama willingly leaves with his beautiful wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana.

### Bharata's Dharma

...After Rama's brother Bharata is chosen to be king, Rama willingly leaves and enters the forest with his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana. Suddenly, Lakshmana hears Bharata approaching and is terrified that Bharata will try to kill Rama in order to keep the kingship forever, but Rama calms him. Lakshmana has no reason to fear; Bharata is not coming to destroy Rama, but to bring the news of their father's death. Bharata feels awful for accepting a throne that he feels is not rightly his, as though he has broken the laws of *dharma*. But Rama refuses to return to the kingdom until his 14 years of banishment are completed. Bharata respects his wishes and declares that no one shall be king until Rama returns. To prove his point he takes Rama's sandals off, promising to set them on the throne to physically hold his place until he returns.

### The Great War Begins

In the forest, the Rama, his wife and sister meet the demoness Surpanakha. She falls in love with Rama who refuses her, and in a fury she runs to her brother, Ravana, the ruler of the island kingdom of Lanka. Surpanakha tells her story. Ravana focuses on taking the beautiful Sita for his own as a way of revenge, and successfully captures her.

But Sita remains faithful to Rama during her captivity, while Rama and Lakshmana search for someone to help them fight Ravana and rescue her. They find Hanuman, the monkey king, who is able to change size. He magically takes a giant step to the Island of Lanka and finds Sita. He brings with him Rama's ring to prove to Sita that he is Rama's messenger and leaves her with a promise to rescue her.

Ravana is angry that his plans are not working. His brother, Vibhishana, warns him that Rama is the incarnation of Vishnu, sent to earth to destroy all that is unholy, and that he should surrender to him and set Sita free. Ravana refuses, however, stating he fears no living thing on the earth. "Then," Vibhishana says, "I can no longer remain in Lanka. Good luck, Brother."

"Go," shouts Ravana. "There is no place here for weakness."

A great battle begins, and this time Rama and Lakshmana have the help of the powerful monkey army. Vibhishana leaves his brother's palace, magically flying to Rama. When he finds Rama, Vibhishana declares, "Ravana is my brother. I tried to convince him to return your wife. He refused and I left. I wish to join you."

Rama says, "Vibhishana, because you rejected evil for good you are welcome here."

### **The Bridge**

Rama stands on the shoreline of the great ocean and speaks to the ocean god. "I am Rama. I have weapons that are beyond imagination. I can take all your water. If you wish to save yourself, show me how to reach Lanka."

The ocean replies, "Rama, here is Nala who will build you a bridge across these waters. I will be the bridge's support." Then with the help of the monkey army, Nala puts up a bridge made of wood, rocks, and stones. It takes five days to complete the bridge to Lanka.

Meanwhile, Ravana tries magic and trickery to get information about Rama's plans, but fails. He is so enraged by his inability to learn about Rama's plans that he calls upon one of his demons.

"I want an exact copy of Rama's head," he says and takes the false head to Sita. Hiding the head at first, "Listen," he says, "Rama failed in his attempt to rescue you. His army has been destroyed, there is no hope, and you will now be my queen."

Sita merely replies, "The head is false."

Ravana smiles, "I thought you might say that. So I brought the head of your husband, soaked in blood and sand, to prove my words."

Sita bursts into tears, "Rama, your *dharma* has killed you and widowed me—a tragedy for a woman of *dharma*. I feel like I am the terrible woman who has brought all this upon you. Take me too. Take me with you, my love."

Angered, again, by Sita's devotion to Rama, Ravana storms from the garden.

### **The Great Battle**

This is the beginning of the great battle. Each side suffers terrible losses. Blood fills the streets of Lanka. Bodies of fallen warriors are everywhere. Rama and Lakshmana fight gallantly. Thousands of monkeys are killed, and even Rama and Lakshmana eventually begin to despair. Just when Rama is considering defeat, Jambuvan, one of the leaders of the army, says, "there is a way we can defeat Ravana. Have Hanuman go to Kailasa Mountain where there is a blazing hill of medicinal herbs. Have him bring these herbs back before sunrise and our army will be saved." Immediately, Hanuman rises above the earth and flies off with great speed.

He finds the mountain but not the miracle herb. In a panic, he increases his size, picks up the entire mountain in one hand, and flies it back to the scene of the battle. As the warriors inhale the healing air drifting down from the mountain, they begin to stand and fight again.

Hanuman returns the hill to its rightful place and hurries back to the fighting. The battle is won. Rama embraces Hanuman, saying, "I know no one who shows your valor and devotion." With that, Hanuman cries out, "Victory to Rama!"

Rama performs a salute to the sun and finds the energy with which to kill Ravana. He reaches for his most powerful weapon, the Brahma-missile. He picks it up and as he does so, the earth trembles. All the warriors are terrified. Rama stands ready, aims the weapon at the on-rushing Ravana, and fires. The missile strikes Ravana's chest and explodes. Ravana falls dead.

"Victory to Rama!" shout his men.

Vibhishana goes to the body of his dead brother, crying, "Why didn't you listen to me? Why did you only listen to your love of Sita, your love of power?"

Rama touches Vibhishana's shoulder, "We still have work to do."

Vibhishana prepares the funeral rites for his brother. "My brother was so evil; people will try to keep me from giving him an honorable funeral."

Rama is firm, "No one will stop this funeral. Our fighting ends with this death. He is your brother and mine too. This rite must be!"

Following the funeral rite, Rama makes Vibhishana the new king of Lanka.

Vibhishana's wife and maidens take Sita from the garden and place a beautiful sari with sparkling jewels around her. They put a scarlet spot on her forehead.

Sita cannot wait to see her victorious husband.

Rama enters the palace and Sita bows at his feet. Feeling both love and sorrow for his wife, he says, "Now, we go home."