

The Ramayana: A "Telling" of the Ancient Indian Epic

(This "telling" of the Ramayana story was adapted by Larry Tominberg for classroom use..)

The Boyhood Of Rama

On the banks of the Sarayu River stood the beautiful city of Ayodhya, the capital of Kosala. In the city there were magnificent palaces decorated with precious stones. Spires of great temples rose above the city as if to touch the sky. For protection, the city was surrounded by a great moat. The people of Ayodhya were peace-loving and happy. No one was ignorant or poor. Everyone had faith in God and read the scriptures daily.

Each person knew his or her role in society. The brahmins devoted their lives to studying the sacred texts. The rulers and warriors governed and protected the city. The farmers and merchants fed and clothed the citizens.

Yet, all was not well in Ayodhya. Dasaratha, the king was unhappy. Although he was very old, he had no son to inherit his throne.

One day the king called upon his priest Vasistha. "Vasistha," he said. "I am growing old. I long for a son, a son who will take my place on the throne."

The priest knew all too well that his king needed to have a son. He replied, "Dasaratha, you will have sons. I shall perform a sacred rite to please the gods."

Excited by this wonderful news, the king ran to tell his three wives Sumitra, Kaikeyi, and Kausalya, "I will have sons!"

At the same moment many of the gods were growing more and more angry with Ravana, the ruler of the rakshasas, or demons. Ravana was no ordinary looking demon. He had ten heads and twenty arms. He also had remarkable powers. But he was using his power to prevent the gods and holy men from performing sacred rituals. This was a terrible insult to all who were holy.

Learning of Ravana's actions, Vishnu, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, decided it was time to do something. But what? Years ago Ravana was granted a boon, or promise. This boon protected him from Demigods and demons. How then, Vishnu wondered, could Ravana be stopped?

Vishnu thought, "Ravana, in his arrogance, protected himself only from those beings whom he thought could hurt him. He failed to protect himself from humans and monkeys."

Vishnu decided to descend as a human who could kill Ravana. The demigods and holy men were pleased with his decision.

Vishnu sent a messenger to king Dasaratha with *payasam*, a sweet made of milk and rice, laced with a special potion.

The messenger said, "Give each of the three wives this drink. It is a boon that will bring sons." Then the messenger disappeared.

The king gave each of his wives part of the drink. No sooner had his wives finished, than each shone with the glow of a divine being in their womb.

There was great rejoicing in the city when four sons were born to their king. They were incarnations of Vishnu and their names were Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, and Satrugna.

Even as infants, everyone noticed that Rama and Lakshmana were inseparable. It was as if they were one life in two bodies.

All four sons grew to be intelligent men. They learned the holy scriptures well. They were devoted to the welfare of others. Dasaratha was finally happy.

He enjoyed watching his sons grow before his eyes. He did not say it in so many words, but he did have a special place in his heart for Rama.

One day the sage, or wise man, Vishvamitra came to Ayodhya to see the king. The king had great respect for him.

"Greetings, oh, wise one. What brings you to my kingdom?"

The sage said, "I have come to ask you a favor."

"How can I help? No wish is too great to ask," the king responded.

"It pleases me to hear those words from you, " said Vishwamitra.

I have been trying to perform an important sacred rite which is again and again being interrupted by Ravana's demons. My vows prevent me personally from fighting these demons."

The king listened intently.

"I pray, Dasaratha, that you allow me to take Rama with me to protect my sacred rite."

"But Rama is only a child. He is but sixteen years of age. I have a better idea. I shall send you my armies to battle these demons. I will even accompany you. I shall fight these

demons with my own hands. But please do not take Rama. Without Rama I cannot live even a few minutes."

The king began to weep.

Vishwamitra understood the king's pain. But the sage also had no choice. He knew that Rama was an *avatar*, or incarnation of Vishnu on earth. He also knew that only Vishnu in human form could kill Ravana.

The king told Rama about Vishwamitra's request. Lord Rama understood and willingly went with the sage.

"I shall go, too, father," declared Lakshmana. The king did not protest.

Rama and Lakshmana, weapons slung over their shoulders, and followed the sage along the Sarayu River bank.

The journey was a long one. Whenever the three stopped to rest, the sage took the time to teach the boys how to use the powerful weapons of the gods to fight the demons.

They journeyed until they reached the foot of a frightening forest. They paused. The sage said, "This was once a beautiful and prosperous country. Now the terrible she-demon, Tataka, lives here. She attacks and kills anyone who enters."

Neither Rama nor Lakshmana were afraid.

The sage turned to Rama and said, "Now it is up to you to rid this forest of these demons. By doing so, you will restore the land to the prosperity and the peace it once enjoyed."

Rama clutched his bow and removed arrows from his quiver. Rama and Lakshmana followed Vishwamitra into the forest. They heard many strange and frightening sounds. Each step they took brought them deeper into the forest.

Suddenly there was an unearthly roar. The three men stopped. From nowhere a huge rock came hurling out of the sky heading straight for Rama. He slipped an arrow in place and drew his bow. He fired just as the rock was about to hit him. The arrow split the rock in two. The pieces fell harmlessly to earth.

Then appearing out of between two trees, Rama saw a horrible sight. It was the hideous form of the demoness, Tataka. She was enormous. Around her neck was a human skull. She had sharp claws on her hands. She looked at Rama and made a growling noise. Lakshmana decided to wait no longer. He fired his arrow and gravely wounded the demoness. A strange look came over her face as she felt the arrow pierce her flesh. Placing her hand to the wound she moaned, "What mortals have wounded me?" Then taking careful aim, Rama fired his arrow into Tataka's heart killing her.

No sooner had the she-demon died, than the gods in heaven rained lotus blossoms down on Rama blessing him. The three continued on their journey deeper into the forest. Along the way, Rama and Lakshmana killed many demons.

The sage told Rama: "I am delighted with you. I shall give you even greater weapons to defeat any enemy."

He knew that Rama's work was far from complete. There was still the powerful Ravana to deal with. It was one thing to kill Ravana's demons; it was another to kill Ravana himself.

The three finally left the forest. They headed for Mithila to visit King Janaka.

Seeing the sage, Janaka greeted him saying, "Have I told you about my daughter?"

"Please tell me about her," responded the sage.

The king spoke: "A few years ago a portion of my land was being plowed and I found a divine child in a furrow. I called her Sita and adopted her as my own daughter. She has grown into a beautiful, young woman. Many princes have desired her hand in marriage.

"But I wanted the man who married my Sita to be a man of great strength and righteousness. To prove his strength, this man would have to lift and string the ancient bow of Shiva. No man has shown the strength to even lift this bow."

The sage turned to Rama and said, "There is a bow belonging to King Janaka that I would like you to string."

Rama entered a long room filled with thousands of people. The bow was so heavy it took no less than five thousand exceptionally strong men to bring the bow and its casing into the room. Several princes who had tried to lift the bow looked on as Rama approached the weapon. Rama looked at Shiva's bow. First he touched it. It was beautiful. Then with no effort whatsoever, he hoisted the bow from its casing and started to string it. As he did so, the bow snapped in two and fell to the palace floor. First there was disbelief, then everyone stood and chanted, "Rama. Rama."

The king rose to his feet and declared, "Sita has found her spouse! Send a messenger to Ayodhya informing them of the wedding of Rama to my daughter, Sita."

The wedding ceremony was held in the palace. As part of this ceremony, the worship of the sacred fire began. The holiest sages recited *mantras*, prayers.

After this, King Janaka led Sita to Rama. He placed her hand in his and said to Rama, "This is Sita, my daughter, O Rama, who is from today your partner in life. Accept her. Hold her hand in yours. She will always follow you as your shadow."

Rama looked at Sita. He had never seen a more beautiful woman. Sita looked at Rama. She had never seen a more handsome man.

Following the wedding everyone returned to Ayodhya. All in the city cheered their arrival. Rama and Sita continued to serve their parents and delight the holy ones and gods. Sita and Rama were the perfect husband and wife. They were exceedingly devoted to each other.

Rama's parents watched him mature into a young prince. Rama was a perfectly perfect young man. He had all the noble qualities. He was patient with others' wrongs, but would not do wrong himself. He enjoyed the company of elders and wise men. He was very intelligent and courageous. He was righteous and kind. He was the perfect warrior. He knew when to use violence and when not to. He was healthy, strong and handsome. He was highly learned in the scriptures. Rama was a *sat-purusa*, the ideal man.

Life In Ayodhya

Now the king was growing older. He noticed omens suggesting his end was near. "I have lived long enough," he thought. "I must be sure my throne goes to Rama, the most worthy of my sons. What a great blessing it would be to see him as king before I go to heaven.

"Then it will be done," Dasaratha concluded, "I shall step down and Rama shall be made king."

The king told everyone about his decision. He informed the priests to begin the sacred rites that would allow Rama to assume the throne of Ayodhya.

Kaikeyi, the last and youngest of the king's three wives, had heard of the decision to make Rama king while Dasaratha was still living. This decision pleased her.

But Manthara, a maid-servant, did not want Rama to be king. If she could somehow convince Kaikeyi to change the king's mind, her position at the palace would be secure.

That evening, she spoke to Kaikeyi in secret. "If Rama takes the throne, you would lose all your control over the king. If Rama is crowned, his mother will control of the kingdom Your rule will come to an end. Awake. Act now. You must convince Dasaratha that it is your son who should be king."

Kaikeyi believed Manthara. She decided to see Dasaratha.

She tried everything to convince Dasaratha to listen to her.

"Dasaratha," Kaikeyi began, "Do you remember that fateful day I saved your life in battle? Do you remember how I stopped your runaway

chariot. "

"Yes," replied the king.

"And do you remember what you said after I saved your life?"

Without waiting for an answer, she said, " Oh my powerful king and beloved husband you promised me two boons. Hear my boons now so that they may be granted."

The king reluctantly listened to his wife's requests.

"First," she began. "I wish to have my son, Bharata, placed upon the throne of Ayodhya. Second, I want Rama banished from the kingdom for a period of no less than fourteen years."

The king fell to his knees and begged his young wife not to hold him to these dreadful wishes.

As a righteous and honest man, he knew he could not go back on his word. Yet, he couldn't bear to ask Rama to forsake the throne and go away for fourteen years. He turned pale and speechless.

Kaikeyi told Rama the terrible news. Rather than argue, Rama comforted his father.

"Father, your word is law. I shall do whatever you bid. It is the sacred duty of a son to respect his father."

Then, he turned to his own mother Kausalya, and requested "Please be sure that father installs Bharata as crown prince."

Rama knelt and touched the feet of his parents respectfully. He stood, turned and left the palace.

Lakshmana declared, "I shall destroy anyone who opposes your right to the throne.."

Rama responded, "No, Lakshmana. You know it is my sacred duty, my dharma, to fulfill these wishes."

"My brother, if you must leave Ayodhya, then I shall follow you," Lakshmana said.

Rama tried to convince Sita to remain, but she said sobbing, "And, it is my duty, my dharma, as a wife to be at your side. How can I live without you? I must join you."

Rama tried hard to convince them to stay but they were insistent.

"Then, Sita, come with me," Rama said.

Rama also gave his brother permission to join them.

As the three left the palace, they cast away their royal robes and put on the clothes of hermits.

The people of Ayodhya wept as Rama, Sita and Lakshmana passed from the city. As the chariot went from sight, Dasaratha cried, "Rama! Rama! Do not leave me."

In time, Dasaratha lost the will to live. His heart simply gave out. Ayodhya mourned the loss of their king.

In a few days, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita crossed the river Ganges searching for a land undisturbed and isolated from everyone.

Soon they reached Chitrakoot, a beautiful place with many trees and streams. It was paradise. They built a small hut near a stream.

Several days had passed. Lakshmana, while hunting in the forest, heard the pounding of a thousand hooves. He climbed a tree to see whose army was approaching. To his amazement, he saw the lead horseman carrying the flag of Ayodhya. Bharata had found his brothers. Lakshmana was sure that his brother had come to kill them.

Lakshmana called to Rama: "A great army is approaching led by our brother, Bharata. I will kill him with my own hands."

"Don't be a fool," Rama said. "He is our brother and he is the king. We must welcome him."

Bharata embraced his brothers. He cried, "My heart is filled with grief and shame. Grief for the loss of our noble father. Shame for being offered the throne that you rightfully deserve. Come back to Ayodhya and be our king."

"That cannot be done," Rama said. "I gave my word and I shall stay here for fourteen years and no less. Then and only then will I return."

Nothing could sway Rama.

"Rama, my brother," Bharata declared, "as long as you are in exile, no one shall be king. To ensure this give me your sandals. I will place them on the throne. For the next fourteen years I will serve our land in your name. And, if after those fourteen years, you do not return, I shall walk into a fire and die."

Bharata took the sandals, mounted his horse and left the forest. In Kosala, Bharata put Rama's sandals on the red and gold Ayodhya throne.

The Forest Life

Several days passed. Rama, Lakshmana and Sita walked south until they came upon Dandaka forest. Once a beautiful place, Dandaka was now a barren wasteland. Shreds of bark from dead trees littered the ground. Stumps of trees were all that remained of a once lush forest. The sound of the wind seemed to warn anyone who approached. At night demons prowled the land in search of flesh.

Religious men who gave up all worldly comforts and became hermits also lived in the forest. They spoke of the horrors that Ravana's demons had done. Rama and Lakshmana promised they would kill all these demons.

After ten years, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita crossed the Godavari River and reached Panchavati. Here was a magnificent forest, untouched by demons. The air was fragrant with the smell of flowers. Fruit grew on every vine. Birds sang joyfully.

"Let us build a hut here." Rama said.

Nearby lived the ancient vulture king, Jatayu. Jatayu made friends with them and enjoyed guarding Sita while the brothers hunted.

Just beyond the clearing lived Shurpanakha, the she-demon. She was Ravana's sister. She had a pot belly, huge ears, claws on her fingers and toes, slits for eyes, and dirty hair.

One day she saw Rama in the forest. She put down the bone she was gnawing on and said, "I want him for my husband."

Using her magical powers, she turned herself into a beautiful maiden.

She asked Rama, "Why does such a strong, handsome man like you live in this forest? Who are you?"

Rama told her his story. Upon seeing Sita, the she-demon said, "That woman is not good enough for you."

Rama responded, "And who, might I ask, is?"

"I am. I can make you happy."

"Perhaps I should introduce you to my brother, Lakshmana,"

Rama said half-jokingly.

Sensing that Rama was not interested in her, the demon grew angry. She assumed her original form and jumped on Sita.

In an instant, Lakshmana took his gold-handled knife from his belt and cut off the she-demon's nose and ears. She howled in pain as she fled.

Shurpanaka ran until she met her brothers Khar and Dushan who lived on the edge of the forest. Seeing his sister's bloodied face, Khar cried, "Who has done this to you?"

His wounded sister whimpered, "A human."

"A human!" Khar replied, "What human can do this?"

Take us to them. We will kill them."

Khar gathered his army of demon warriors and marched into the forest.

Lakshmana noticed the sky growing darker. Day seemed to turn into night. Then he looked again. The sky was filled with flying demons. Upon seeing this, Rama told Sita to remain in the hut. With Lakshmana at his side, Rama would face Khar's forces. Rama fired his golden arrows skyward. With each shot, mortally wounded demons fell to earth.

The fierce battle continued. No magic or weapons could save the demons from Rama's divine weaponry. In the end, Khar and his 14,000 warriors were slain.

Shurpanakha watched in horror as her brothers and their army were destroyed. She hurried to Lanka to see her brother, Ravana.

"Oh, Ravana. Khar and Dushan have been killed by humans. All their warriors are dead, too," Shurpanakha cried.

Ravana rose from his throne. The crowns on his ten heads glistened. He raised his ten left arms pointing to his disfigured sister and said, "And how many thousands of humans fought so well?"

"There are but two, my lord." answered Shurpanakha weeping.

"Two!" roared Ravana, his voice echoing through the palace.

"The two banished princes from Ayodhya. They have done this alone," his sister said.

"What gods are on their side?" Ravana wondered.

"One more thing," Shurpanakha added. "Rama's wife, Sita, is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She would make a lovely queen."

"Sita," said Ravana.

"Whoever Sita embraces as her husband will outgain the gods in happiness," she added.

"Perhaps there is a way to revenge my sister's wounds and avenge the loss of my two brothers," Ravana thought. "Maybe I can punish Rama in a way he will never expect."

Ravana summoned his magic chariot and flew off. Over the vast ocean and great mountains he travelled until he landed at the den of Mareech, the magician. This magician was able to assume the form of any human or beast.

Ravana told Mareecha about Rama. He also spoke of his desire to take Sita from the forest, carry her back to Lanka and make her his queen.

"I shall do whatever I can to help," said the magician.

He continued. "I will go to the Chilrakoot forest where I shall change into a golden deer and stand near their hut. I will lure Rama away. You will do the rest."

The next day, a beautiful deer appeared at the stream in Panchavati. Sita was enchanted by it.

"Please capture that deer for me," Sita asked Rama.

Lakshmana looked carefully at the creature. He told his brother, "This deer is too beautiful. It is too perfect. I have never seen a deer like that before. Brother, approach it with caution."

"Stay with Sita," Rama told Lakshmana.

"I will, my lord," Lakshmana replied.

No sooner had Rama taken a step toward the deer than it darted into the woods. It was taking Rama farther and farther from the hut. Then deep in the forest, the deer paused. Rama moved closer to it. As he did so, the deer changed into the form of Mareech.

"Lakshmana was right," cried Rama. His heart was filled with fear. He ran as fast as he could.

Then he heard a voice that sounded exactly like his own cry out, "Lakshmana! Help me!"

Rama knew he had been tricked. He hoped his brother would ignore these cries.

"Lakshmana," sighed Sita. "That is your brother, my husband. He is crying for help. You must go to him."

"But Rama told me not to leave your side."

Sita insisted, "You must help him."

"I cannot," replied Lakshmana.

"You cannot? Are you not worried for my husband's safety? How can you just stand there? Do you not help him because he is only your half-brother? Or because he is my husband?"

"Then I shall find him," said Sita.

"No!" said Lakshmana.

"If you do not go after him, Lakshmana, I shall kill myself."

Finally Lakshmana made his decision. Before he left, he drew a circle around the entrance to the hut.

"Sita," he said, "do not step beyond this magical circle. Inside of it you will be safe."

Lakshmana grasped his quiver and ran in the direction of Rama's voice.

From behind a tree, Ravana watched his plan unfold perfectly.

In an instant, he changed himself into a *sanyasi*, an old wise man, clutching a begging bowl.

Seeing this common sight, and knowing it was her duty to feed the poor, Sita offered the man fruit. Then Ravana noticed the magical circle. He knew that as long she remained within the circle, he could not get her. He had to get Sita outside of it.

"Take this offering," said Sita.

"I am a *sanyasi*. I cannot enter your home. To accept your gracious offering you must leave your home."

Sita hesitated. She had always helped the poor. How could she ignore this man? Disregarding Lakshmana's warning, Sita stepped beyond the circle.

Then like a tiger springing from high grass, Ravana grabbed Sita and placed her in his chariot.

Sita screamed, but it was too late. The chariot rose into the sky and sped off to Lanka.

As Ravana headed south, Jatayu, the great eagle, saw Sita. Jatayu spread his huge wings and flew up to the chariot. "Free Sita," Jatayu declared "or I shall kill you."

Ravana ignored the threat. Jatayu tore off one of the chariot's railings. He gently removed Sita from the chariot and set her on the earth.

In blind fury, Jatayu attacked tearing off Ravana's arms and heads. Blood spurted from Ravana's mutilated body. As fast as Ravana lost an arm or head, it grew back. Jatayu was growing tired from the fight. Sensing this, Ravana drew his sword and cut off both of Jatayu's wings. The brave bird fell to the ground dying. Sita caressed Jatayu.

She thanked him for trying to save her. In an instant, Ravana pulled Sita back into the chariot and staggered back to Lanka.

Once in the city, Ravana tried to convince Sita to stay in Lanka and be his queen. But Sita would not listen. She loved only Rama. Hearing this Ravana led Sita out of the palace and into a garden. He guarded her with a hundred demons.

Back in the forest, Lakshmana found Rama unharmed. Terror filled Lakshmana's heart. He, too, had been tricked.

Upon returning to the hut, Rama cried out, "Sita is gone. What will I do?"

Rama knelt down and cried uncontrollably. "What must she be suffering?" he wondered.

Rama gathered his strength. He said, "This act shall not go unpunished. I will slay Ravana and his entire family."

Rama's Stay in Kiskindha

Rama and Lakshmana began their search for Sita. They entered Kiskindha, the kingdom of the monkeys. Kiskindha was located south of Kosala. Soon they came to a mountain where Sugriva lived. He was the ruler of the monkey kingdom. Hanuman, a devoted follower of Sugriva, guarded the entrance to the kingdom. Seeing the brothers approach, he ordered them to halt.

"Who are you?" Hanuman asked.

"I am Rama, the exiled prince of Ayodhya. This is my brother, Lakshmana. We wish to see your king. I am hoping he can help us find my wife, Sita. She was taken by Ravana."

Rama and Lakshmana met Sugriva. They told their story.

Sugriva said, "I, too, am in exile. My brother seized my kingdom and my queen."

Sugriva paused. He thought about Rama's story. Then said. "Help me regain my throne and I will help you find your wife."

One of my people saw Sita being carried off to Lanka. As she passed overhead, she dropped this."

Rama reached out his hand. It was one of Sita's ornaments.

Tears filled Rama's eyes.

Rama and Lakshmana did as they were asked. They defeated Sugriva's brother and won back the throne.

It was now the rainy season. Rama and Lakshmana returned to the forest. They could not begin their search for Sita until the rains stopped in autumn. Rama grew more depressed. The rain seemed to Rama like tears from the gods.

Then when the sun shone upon the land again, Hanuman arrived. Sugriva had fulfilled his promise. The monkey warrior was accompanied by a great monkey army. Hanuman divided his troops into four divisions. Each division would go in search of Sita for one month.

At the end of the month, three of the four divisions returned with no word of Sita's whereabouts. Only Hanuman's division had yet to return.

Hanuman's Prank

One day as Hanuman and his men searched for Sita, they saw a great bird on a mountainside. This bird was the brother of Jatayu. Hanuman told the bird about his search. Then he asked, "Do you know where Sita is?"

"Yes," the bird said, "She is in the Asoka garden near Ravana's palace."

"How do I get to her?" asked Hanuman.

"You must cross a great ocean," the bird said.

Hanuman's army marched to the mighty ocean. There was no way they could cross this great body of water.

"We must return," said one of the monkey warriors. "How can we get to the other side?"

In a loud voice, Hanuman declared, "I will cross this ocean and rescue Sita."

Hanuman prayed for strength. He saw the unhappy image of Rama. Hanuman prayed to Rama. Then incredibly, he began to grow. He grew so huge that the ground began to shake.

With a great cry, "Victory to Rama," Hanuman leapt into the sky.

The monkey army cheered as their leader flew across the great ocean. The gods smiled down on Hanuman as they admired his courage and devotion.

Nothing could stop Hanuman. On the horizon, he could see Lanka. As he approached the city, he changed back to his normal size. Once in Lanka, he set out to find Sita.

Soon he came upon Ravana's palace. He looked in each of the palace gardens, but he could not find Sita. How could he return without Sita or some word of her whereabouts. Then he saw a grove of trees. Beneath one of the trees was the most beautiful woman Hanuman had ever seen. She was crying and repeating, "Rama, Rama."

"I have found her," Hanuman declared. "Lord Rama will be so happy."

Hanuman looked around. He noticed that Sita was surrounded by many she-demons.

Just as Hanuman was about approach her, he saw Ravana coming. The king of Lanka was sat on the ground next to Sita. He was saying, "Sita, come with me. Come live in my palace. I will make you my queen. You can have anything you wish."

Hanuman hid from view.

Sita spoke: "How dare you speak to me this way. You have kidnapped me. I am Rama's wife, King Janaka's daughter. Rama will come for me. He will rescue me and kill you and all you demons. If you let me go, I will try to spare your life."

Ravana seemed hurt by Sita's words. Anger and sorrow filled Ravana's heart. He knew at that moment he would never have Sita.

"Then you shall remain here," he said as he turned away.

Hanuman did not move a muscle. He waited and waited. The she-demons guarding Sita were getting tired. One by one they fell asleep.

Here was his chance to speak to Sita. Hanuman approached her and knelt at her feet. "Do not fear. I am Hanuman, Rama's servant and messenger. He has sent me to find you. He cries for your return."

"How do I know you are telling me the truth? You may be just another demon in disguise." Sita said.

Hanuman reached into his pocket and removed Rama's ring. "Here," he said, "This should prove that Rama has sent me."

Sita pressed her hands to her face and cried. "I am sorry I doubted you. Go to Rama and tell him where I am. Tell him I will wait for him to save me." Sita gave Hanuman a jewel. "Here. Take this to my lord as proof of my love."

Suddenly the demons awoke. They attacked Hanuman. He killed them with ease.

Hanuman was finally taken to the palace. Ravana ordered him killed.

One of Ravana's wise men reminded the king, "It is not permitted to kill a messenger."

"Then we shall punish him. Set his tail on fire. Let him return home that way," Ravana declared.

As the king's men wrapped Hanuman's tail in cloth to set it on fire he grew it longer and longer. The more they wrapped, the longer Hanuman grew his tail. Finally, Ravana ordered, "Set it on fire!" cried Ravana.

With his long tail on fire, Hanuman flew into the sky. He decided to set the city of Lanka ablaze to punish Ravana. He flew low over the city and set each building, temple, palace and garden on fire. Flames shot high into the sky. As he flew over Asoka garden he made sure Sita was safe. Then before he headed home, he put his tail in the ocean to put out the fire.

The Great War

Hanuman received a great welcome from his warriors. They hurried back to tell Rama the good news. By now Rama had given up all hope of ever seeing Sita alive again. When Rama saw Hanuman returning, he ran to him.

"I pray you have word of Sita."

Without saying a word, Hanuman gave Rama Sita's jewel.

Rama praised Hanuman for his bravery and said, "You have given me reason to live again."

Meanwhile back at Lanka palace, Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, tried to save Sita's life. "Let her go," he said, "so we can save our kingdom from Rama's anger."

Ravana responded angrily, "If I return Sita, I will be ridiculed by all the gods and demons."

warned again, "Do not underestimate Rama's strength. It is said that Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu sent to earth to destroy all that is unholy. With his powers he will destroy Lanka. Why do you tempt such a fate?"

"I fear no one," Ravana roared.

"Then," Vibhishana said, "I can no longer remain in Lanka. Save yourself brother."

"Then go," shouted Ravana. "I have no place in my kingdom for the weak and timid."

Vibhishana left the palace and magically flew to Rama. Arriving at his camp, Vibhishana declared, "I am the brother of Ravana. I tried to convince my brother to return your wife. But he refused and I left Lanka.

I wish to join you and fight at your side."

Rama responded, "Vibhishana, you have rejected evil for good. You are welcomed here."

Now Rama had to make a battle plan. Vibhishana told him that Ravana and his evil son, Indrajit, had great magical powers. His army was made up of millions of demons.

For his honesty and bravery, Rama promised Vibhishana that he would become the new king of Lanka.

Rama stood on the shoreline of the great ocean and spoke to the ocean god. "Hear me," he called. "I am Rama. I have weapons that are beyond imagination. In an instant I can dry your ocean. If you wish to avoid this fate, show me how to reach Lanka."

The ocean said, "Rama, here is Nala, son of the great builder. He will build you a bridge across these waters. I shall support that bridge."

With the help of the monkey army, Nala put up a bridge made of wood, rocks, and stones. Every creature helped in its own way. It took five days to complete the bridge to Lanka.

Rama, Hanuman, and the monkey army crossed the bridge by nightfall. As they crossed into Lanka they shouted, "Victory to Rama!"

Hanuman's army surrounded the city. Rama knew that Sita would soon be safe.

Ravana called for two of his demons. "Change yourselves into monkeys. Move among the monkey army and find out what you can."

The demons entered The camp and Vibhishana recognized them. They were brought to Rama. He decided not to punish them. He said, "Send a message to your king. Tell him that I have come to save my wife and kill him."

Ravana was angered by his inability to learn about Rama's plans. Enraged he called upon one of his demons.

"Make me an exact copy of Rama's head. Then bring it to me," he said.

Ravana took the head to Sita. "O, Sita," he said, "Rama has failed in his attempt to rescue you. His army has been destroyed. That is the end of your hope. The time has come to change your mind and become my queen."

Sita looked at Ravana and said, "I do not believe any of this."

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

Sita collapsed wailing, "Alas, O Rama, you have followed your dharma. But I have been widowed. Widowhood is a terrible tragedy in the life of a woman devoted to dharma. You came to save me, but you gave your own life.

O Rama you are happy now. You have rejoined your beloved father in heaven. But what shall I do?

O Rama, I am the terrible woman who has brought all this upon you. I pray take me too. Take me with you, my love."

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

When he returned to the palace, he ordered all his troops to march toward the city gates.

For four days both armies stood poised.

On the morning of the fifth day, the great battle began. Each side suffered terrible losses. Blood filled the streets of Lanka. Bodies of fallen warriors were everywhere.

Rama and Lakshmana fought gallantly.

Hanuman was injured in a duel. Vibhishana showed great valor.

Indrajit, Ravana's son, rained poison arrows upon Rama and Lakshmana. So overwhelming was this attack, that the two brothers suffered many wounds. "I shall send both of you to the house of death," cried Indrajit.

Rama and Lakshmana were bleeding heavily, but they fought on.

Indrajit hurled even more powerful weapons at them. Each weapon took a new toll. Rama and Lakshmana fell to the ground unconscious.

Vibhishana prayed to the gods for their safety. "Protect Rama and Lakshmana while they are hurt."

While the monkey warriors stood by grief-stricken, the battle raged on without Rama and Lakshmana. Ravana's demons made themselves invisible and attacked the heart of the monkey army. Ravana's forces were merciless. Thousands were killed by unseen attackers.

Seeing his forces in retreat, Hanuman charged on with a great cry. "Victory to Rama! Death to Ravana!"

With his remarkable strength, Hanuman smashed the skull of every visible enemy. He challenged any of Ravana's men to advance. Seeing Hanuman's great courage, the monkey-army rallied behind their leader and fought harder.

Ravana's army was losing its advantage. Angered by this news, he decided to join the battle. He climbed in his chariot and soared above Lanka in search of Rama.

By now Rama and Lakshmana, having regained consciousness but still dazed, returned to the fight. Ravana viewed the battle scene from the clouds. Then he spotted Lakshmana. He aimed his magic bow and fired. The arrow cut through the air and struck Rama's brother in the chest. He collapsed. Hanuman rushed to Lakshmana's side. He gently lifted the wounded prince and carried him to safety.

Just when things were starting to look up for Rama's warriors, Indrajit returned to the battle. He was now invisible. All the monkey soldiers could hear was the mocking laughter of Indrajit as he soared over them. Indrajit's weapons took an enormous toll on

the monkeys. By the time he returned to the palace, every monkey was either wounded or killed. Only Rama, Hanuman, and Vibhishana remained standing.

Rama looked upon around and said, "The battle has been lost."

Then in a weakened voice, Jambuvan, one of the leaders of the army, said, "No, Rama. There is still a way we can regain the advantage and defeat Ravana. Tell Hanuman to go to Kailasa Mountain. There he will see a blazing hill of medicinal herbs. Have him bring these herbs back before sunrise and our army will be saved."

Hanuman rose above the earth and flew off with great speed.

When he reached the mountain, he saw the hill that Jambuvan described. But he could not find the herbs. Realizing time was short, he uprooted the entire hill and carried it back to Lanka. Hanuman flew off balancing the hill in one hand.

When he returned to Lanka, the monkey warriors began inhaling the healing air of the herbs. One-by-one, they rose to their feet and regained their strength. Even Lakshmana recovered from his near-mortal wound. Hanuman returned the hill to its original place.

Rama embraced Hanuman and said, "I know no one who shows your valor and devotion."

With that, Hanuman cried out, "Victory to Rama!"

Using all their weapons, Rama, Lakshmana, Vibhishana, and Hanuman finally overpowered Indrajit. Ravana's son had fought long and hard, but now he was dead.

Hearing of his son's death, Ravana decided now was the time to kill Rama and put an end to this bloodshed.

Arming himself with his most powerful weapons, Ravana left Lanka palace. He spotted Rama leading the monkey army toward the city gates. Ravana fired a magic arrow at Rama. Seeing the arrow, Rama split it with his own arrow.

Ravana tried everything to overpower his foe. But each time, Rama had an answer.

The fight lasted two days. Rama could feel his strength leaving him. He turned to one of his sages and said, "My spirit is nearly gone. My arms and legs ache. My heart wants to go on, but my body can no longer respond."

The sage said to Rama: "Listen carefully to this secret. It is the heart of the sun that will bring you victory and the auspiciousness to destroy Ravana. Worship the sun, O Rama. He alone protects all beings. Pray to him."

As Ravana was reloading his weapons, Rama knelt to pray to the sun.

Then the sage said, "Rama, you will this very moment conquer Ravana."

After looking at the sun, Rama felt his strength return. His heart was filled with joy.

Ravana attacked again. Both armies stood by and watched.

Rama reached for his most powerful weapon, the Brahma-missile, to be used only when all else had failed. He took it to his hands. As he did so, the earth shook. All the warriors covered their eyes and fell to the earth.

Rama stood poised. He aimed the weapon at the on-rushing Ravana. He fired. The missile struck Ravana's chest and exploded. Ravana fell dead.

"Victory to Rama!" shouted his men.

The gods praised Rama. The earth became steady once more. The wind blew softly. The sun shone brighter than ever. Vibhishana knelt at the body of his dead brother and burst into tears. "Why didn't you listen to my words? Why were you so overcome with Sita and power?"

Rama touched Vibhishana's shoulder and said, "Our ancients say that you should not mourn a mighty fallen warrior on the battlefield. Victory is the monopoly of none. Weep not for one who is no more. Rise, for we still have work to do."

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

Rama replied, "No one will stop this rite. Hostility ends with death. He is your brother and he is mine too. You must honor him with this rite."

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

Vibhishana's wife and maidens took Sita from the garden. A beautiful sari was placed around her. Jewels made her sparkle. A scarlet spot adorned her forehead.

Sita could not wait to see her victorious husband.

Rama entered the palace and Sita bowed at his feet. He felt both love and sorrow for his wife. "We shall return to Ayodhya," he said.

Period After Coronation

Once back in Ayodhya, Rama seemed troubled. Many people in the city expressed doubt about Sita's faithfulness while in Lanka.

One day a messenger came to Rama and said, "I fear that the people of our kingdom have lost faith in your wife's virtue. Ravana, they say, made her unfit to be your queen. Even the lowest men whisper, 'How can Rama forget that Sita lived with another man?'"

Rama stood at the window of his room and looked out upon Ayodhya. Sorrow filled his heart.

Lakshmana came to see his brother. Rama turned to him and asked, "What is a king? Kings cannot be blamed or ridiculed. They are above all other men. They are beyond doubt."

"I know of what you speak of," his brother replied. "I have heard the ugly rumors and lies."

"I have tried to think of a way to deal with this problem. I cannot rule Ayodhya and not have my people respect my queen. Therefore, with great sorrow and resolve, I have made a decision. Before dawn tomorrow you and Sumantra will take Sita back to the forest. Leave her there and return."

"But she will die."

"This is the nature of the world," Rama said. "This is what I must do."

Lakshmana said sadly, "The dharma law is difficult to know and sometimes more difficult to follow. This act is wrong. There is no way that Sita would ever have disobeyed you or done what the people say. I know this in my heart."

"Do as I say, my brother."

Before sunrise, Ayodhya was shrouded in dense fog. It seemed as if the sun refused to show itself this fateful day.

Sumantra, Lakshmana and Sita crossed the river in a small fishing boat. Lakshmana sat at Sita's side. Sita could see him crying.

"What is wrong?" she asked.

"My brother, your husband has listened too long and too well to the words of the people of Ayodhya. They say you were unfaithful to Rama. And to avoid any more disgrace, our king has ask me to escort you back to the forest."

Sita turned to Sumantra. "Do not look for reason here," he said. "This act is beyond men's knowing. Rama will live alone from this day forth."

"Why must this be so?" cried Sita.

Sumantra continued: "All the universe is a sign to be read rightly. War and peace, love and separation are hidden gateways we must pass to get to other worlds. Let us not grow old thinking that truth is what most people see or say it is."

Sita, you will get back to Rama only by entering this forest. This world is like a breath on a mirror. It does not last. Have patience."

Sumantra and Lakshmana returned Sita to the forest.

Sita smiled and said, "Good-bye, Sumantra. You have touched my heart with your wise words and given me new hope. Good-bye Lakshmana, my borther-in-law. Be well."

Sita stood on the river bank as Sumantra and Lakshmana's boat crossed the glistening river. Then she heard the soft voice of the river goddess say, "Let life go, Sita. Do not outlive life. Come home. Come home. Dive into me."

Sita was about to step into the river when she heard the voice of an old man.

"Do not enter the river," he said.

Sita looked at the shaggy old man and asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Valmiki, a poet and a hermit. I live in this forest. Make my home yours."

He led Sita to his home in the forest.

There Sita gave birth to Rama's twins sons, Kusa and Lava. For the next twelve years she and her sons lived with Valmiki.

During that time, Valmiki composed a poem called the Ramayana. When he finished it, he taught the poem to the boys line-by-line. He taught them how to sing the poem while playing the flute and drum.

The boys learned well.

In Ayodhya, King Rama decided to hold a great public festival. He invited everyone in the kngdom to take part. There would be music, story-telling and singing.

Kusa and Lava came to Ayodhya to recite what Valmiki called the earth's first poem.

On the first day of the festival, the boys began singing the story. Rama heard about this wonderful poem and came to see it performed. After hearing only a few lines, Rama asked, "What is this beautiful song called?"

"Ramayana," said Kusa.

Rama looked at the twins. His heart ached with emotion. "These are my sons!" he declared.

He sent a messenger to find Sita and convince her to return to Ayodhya.

The next day Sita returned. She was dressed in bright gold and scarlet. Rama was overjoyed.

Sita approached Rama and said, "Let me prove my innocence before you once and for all."

"I give you permission," Rama replied.

Then Sita took a step back and said, "Mother earth, if I have been faithful to my husband, take me home."

The earth rumbled. The ground rolled and moved beneath Sita. With a great noise the ground opened and took Sita back. The earth shook again and closed.

For that moment, everywhere in the whole universe, there was harmony.

"I will never see Sita again as long as I live on earth," Rama said.

"It is a brief life given to us."

Rama ruled Ayodhya for a thousand years.

One day Rama he thought, "Where is my life? And where am I?"

"I want to go home now. I was born of the god, Vishnu, and it is time for me to return to him."

Rama left the palace and entered the crowded street of Ayodhya. Everyone stood quietly as their king passed.

Rama continued walking until he reached the banks of the Sarayu.

He touched its water with his feet. All the gods looked down on him. Even Brahma, the creator, came in person to see Rama.

He spoke to Rama: "Come, O Vishnu, join your brothers, Lakshmana, Satrughna, and Bharata. Return to Vishnu. Return to heaven."

With Brahma's words, Rama smiled and stepped into the river. All of Rama's followers entered the river after him and all went to heaven. Rama was home.

The Ramayana was loved and praised by all. The gods were pleased.

Lava and Kusa traveled throughout India singing Valmiki's glorious poem about their father.

Wherever they went they said, "Men who listen to the Ramayana will live a long life. They will be free of sins and will have many sons. Women who listen to the Ramayana will be blessed with children like Rama and his brothers. All those who listen please Rama. Such is the glory of this story. May all who recite it or listen to it regularly find increased love, wisdom, and strength."