

the earth. Indra, the supreme god, rescued those who walk the earth from certain death. Indra, who carries the mighty thunderbolt in his hand, rules all that moves and all that rests, all that is aggressive and all that is peaceful. He alone rules the people of the earth as the king, enclosing them as the rim of a wheel encloses the spokes. Whenever they need him, he comes to their aid.

Introducing The Ramayana

Historical Background

The Ramayana reflects the traditions of two politically powerful peoples, represented by Rama's family and Sita's family, who lived in northern India between 1200 and 1000 B.C. They were the most cultured of many cultured peoples who lived in India at that time. Their kings were as famous for their great learning as for their military skills. Their religious leaders founded universities of such high academic excellence that students came from other countries to attend them.

Scholars believe that *The Ramayana* was composed sometime between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200 with the last chapter added later, possibly as late as A.D. 400. The poet Valmiki, to whom this epic poem is attributed, is almost as vague a figure as Homer. He was probably born a Brahman and probably had some close association with the kings of Ayodhya. He collected the myths, songs, and legends about Rama and shaped them into a connected poetic narrative using meter and style of his own invention. The epic itself states that Valmiki is a contemporary of Rama's and contains an explanation of how Valmiki created *The Ramayana*.

Valmiki provides a window onto the ancient past. Through him we see the culture of the ancient Hindus. We

see something of their political, social, and religious life, and we are introduced to their values. Valmiki viewed the period in which the poem is set as the Golden Age of India. Dasa-ratha is the ideal king of the ideal city. Rama is the ideal prince, and Sita is the ideal wife.

A direct relationship exists between *The Ramayana*, which is a moral epic, and the life and values of the ancient Hindus. Just as Rama spends fourteen years living as a hermit in the forest, so in ancient times, every Hindu boy from a religious home left his parents when he was very young in order to live with his teacher. For a period of twelve, twenty-four, or even thirty-six years, the young man lived a hard, simple life. He wore a garment made of rough cloth, went from door to door begging for food, and served his teacher as a menial servant. Endurance and suffering were as important a part of his training as traditional learning, for devotion to duty was the foundation of a righteous and successful life.

An interesting aspect of *The Ramayana* is the close relationship between human beings and animals. The monkey Hanuman is a great hero without whose help Rama would not have succeeded. Their partnership

reflects the respect that the creators of the Rama myths and legends felt for other living creatures.

Appeal and Value

Like *The Iliad*, *The Ramayana* tells of the rescue of an abducted queen. Like *The Odyssey*, it tells of the adventures of a hero in the course of a long journey. As Odysseus is blown from one land to another during his journey from Troy to Ithaca, so Rama travels from northern to southern India and finally to Ceylon.

Certainly one reason for the lasting appeal of *The Ramayana* is that it is a superb adventure story. Its focus is the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Heroes combat villains, magic adds interest, and humane, intelligent animals lend a very special flavor.

The Ramayana has had a phenomenal impact on its culture. It has molded the values of Indian society by presenting a variety of models for heroic human behavior to countless generations of people. For many centuries *The Ramayana* was a required part of every Indian child's education, since it provided moral instruction as part of an adventure story. The characters in *The Ramayana* have long served as models of proper behavior among Hindus. The person who based his or her actions under stress on what Rama or Sita would do in that situation could be sure of doing the right thing.

The Ramayana is still a living tradition and, for many, it is part of a living religious faith. Indian children are raised with stories from the epic. *The Ramayana*, whole or in part, is celebrated and dramatized in religious festivals and is the subject of books and movies.

Despite the fact that Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, and Bharata are ideal figures, they are still very appealing human beings. The ordeals that Rama and Sita endure so virtuously are exaggerated versions of the trials that ordinary men and women must face. Each serves as a role model for his or her sex and teaches the satisfaction to be found in devotion to one's duty and righteous behavior.

Contemporary readers can identify with Sita, Rama, and Rama's brothers. We all enjoy seeing people behave at their best under very difficult circumstances, for righteous behavior elevates the person and thus the human race. Like the ancient Hindus, we value love, friendship, loyalty, dedication, and perseverance. We too know how it feels to be jealous, envious, and greedy; we too experience grief and suffering. We are often called upon to act our best in difficult situations.

However, contemporary Western codes of behavior sometimes differ from those portrayed in *The Ramayana*. For example, some readers may find it incomprehensible that Rama renounces Sita because of her abduction by Ravana and that he banishes her for the same reason many years later.

The Ramayana centers on the love between husband and wife, with parental relationships and society's values operating as complicating factors. At the root of almost every incident are the affection and responsibility between two people: husband and wife, parent and child, two brothers, two friends, or, on a larger scale, the king and his subjects.

Because *The Ramayana* is a very personal story about people's emotions as they face their tasks and trials, its appeal is universal. Noble or

peasant, ancient Indian or modern American, we all have the same basic needs and emotional responses.

The Hindu Hero

According to ancient Hindu tradition, each person should be loyal to dharma, or righteous behavior. A prescribed code of behavior exists for each role in life—king, queen, father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, friend. Therefore, each person knows what he or she ought to do in each situation that occurs. Conflicts between loyalties present problems, as always. However, suffering and sorrow are part of the righteous life, and each person must endure whatever life brings.

In ancient Hindu society, a wife's obligation is to dedicate her life to her husband. Her love must be pure and faithful, her devotion complete. The extent to which she can meet the ideal standard despite all trials and temptations determines her self-worth and the worth society accords her. The greater the challenge, the greater the success. If she meets the standards of her society despite a host of adverse circumstances, she is a great heroine.

To the ancient Hindus, a woman should not think of herself or function as an independent human being. Thus, in terms of her own tradition, Sita is one of the greatest females in literature. She represents the highest ideal of female love, devotion, and faithfulness, and Hindu society has loved her throughout the ages.

The obligation of the husband is more complex. He functions in a male-dominated culture and therefore has more responsibilities to fulfill, in society as well as at home. He is expected to remain devoted to duty

while enduring trials and deprivation. Lakshmana is a great hero because he is a loyal brother and friend and an exceptional warrior. Reflecting his primary loyalty, he does not take his wife with him when he goes into exile with Rama. Similarly, Bharata feels a greater obligation to Rama, his brother, than to his father, his mother, or himself.

As the king, Rama has a special obligation to society. Kingship involves putting his responsibilities to his subjects ahead of his personal life. Because he is the model for proper behavior among his subjects, Rama's personal behavior must be beyond criticism. Therefore, to his dismay and grief, he must honor the attitudes of his subjects and obey their wishes—even when they are wrong.

The Rakshasas are the enemy, but they are not evil within their own society. While they feel free to indulge in violence and deception with outsiders, among themselves they have the same values as Rama's people do. They exhibit love and loyalty and are courageous and skillful in battle. Ravana is not a good king, because he puts his personal wishes before the needs of his subjects. Yet he is a great hero. His brother, Vibhishana, will be a good king.

The Role of the Gods

The gods in *The Ramayana* are immortal and powerful, but they are not omnipotent. The Hindu gods can be conquered by a skillful enough adversary. Thus, Ravana is able to wield great power.

Like the Greek and Sumerian gods, the Hindu gods come down to earth and interact with heroes but do not determine their behavior. Human beings bring their misfortunes upon

themselves. In *The Ramayana* it is Sita's attitude that makes her abduction possible.

The heroes of *The Ramayana* are free to choose between proper and improper behavior, between good and evil. Their human natures often lead them to react with the passion of emotion rather than with cool reason, and that always brings unnecessary suffering. The Rakshasas are to be feared because they are evil and devils, and they can transform themselves into creatures of rare beauty. As such, they conquer good people through deception and temptation. Evil often comes disguised as good, and its temptation is always difficult to resist, whether a Rakshasa is at the root of it or not.

The Ramayana expresses the Hindu idea that a person's behavior in one life determines what happens to him or her in the next life. Thus, Sita wonders what evil she committed in a previous life to reap such suffering and sorrow in this life. The scene in which Rama and his brothers renounce life on earth and ascend to heaven reflects Hindu beliefs about the death of the righteous.

Principal Characters

DASA-RATHA: king of Kosala; father of Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Satrughna

RAMA: one earthly form of Vishnu; eldest and favorite son of Dasa-ratha; brother of Bharata, Lakshmana, and Satrughna; husband of Sita

BHARATA: second earthly form of Vishnu; second son of Dasa-ratha; brother of Rama, Lakshmana, and Satrughna

LAKSHMANA: third earthly form of Vishnu; third son of Dasa-ratha; brother and companion of Rama; brother of Bharata and Satrughna

SATRUGHNA: fourth earthly form of Vishnu; youngest son of Dasa-ratha; brother and companion of Bharata; brother of Rama and Lakshmana

JANAKA: king of the Videhas; husband of Mother Earth; father of Sita

SITA: earthly form of Lakshmi, Vishnu's wife; daughter of Mother Earth and Janaka; wife of Rama

RAVANA: demon king of Lanka and the Rakshasas; enemy of both gods and mortals

MARICHA: Ravana's adviser; a Rakshasa demon

KUMBHA-KARNA: giant brother of Ravana; greatest Rakshasa warrior

VIBHISHANA: youngest and good brother of Ravana; king of Lanka and the Rakshasas after Ravana's death

SUGRIVA: monkey king who helps Rama fight Ravana

HANUMAN: son of the wind; great monkey hero who helps Rama

NARADA: great wise man who tells Valmiki the story of Rama's life

VALMIKI: hermit; poet who composes *The Ramayana*; teacher of Rama's twin sons

Principal Gods

INDRA: king of the gods; god of rain

VISHNU: preserver of life on earth

BRAHMA: Vishnu in the form of creator of life on earth

SHIVA: Vishnu in the form of destroyer of life on earth

LAKSHMI: goddess of beauty and good fortune; wife of Vishnu

MOTHER EARTH: mother of Sita

YAMA: lord of the dead

AGNI: god of fire

The Ramayana

Chapter 1

The god Vishnu, preserver of life on earth, descends to earth in order to kill Ravana, a monster who is an enemy of both gods and humans. Vishnu is reborn as the four sons of King Dasa-ratha: Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Satrughna. Rama wins the hand of Sita, daughter of Mother Earth.

We sing of the way of Rama, the great hero. We sing of kings and queens, of humans and animals, of heroes and monsters who lived long ago. One wanted power and would do anything to acquire it. Others, when power was given to them, chose to reject it. We sing of love and loyalty and of courage and kindness in the face of jealousy, greed, and violence. We sing of trials and temptations and of sorrow and suffering, for these are part of devotion to duty and righteous behavior. Listen to our words and become wise, for this tale will reveal what is good, what is true, and what is beautiful.

In time of old a great king, Dasa-ratha, ruled his kingdom of Kosala from the capital city of Ayodhya. He had been born into the ancient Solar Race. As a human being and as a leader of his people, King Dasa-ratha outshone other men as the full moon outshines the stars. His city was known far and wide for the intelligence, righteousness, loyalty, generosity, self-restraint, piety, and happiness of its citizens. Dasa-ratha lacked only one thing: a son to rule the kingdom after his death.

The king had made many sacrifices, hoping that the gods would hear his fervent prayers and grant him a son. But all his prayers had been in vain. Finally he told his priests, "Sacrifice a horse to the gods above. Perhaps they will accept this greatest of all offerings and give me the son I long for."

So the priests set free for one year a magnificent horse, one that was lithe, graceful, and strong. When the horse returned, the wise men announced that King Dasa-ratha would become the father of four sons. These words fell sweetly upon the king's ears. His three wives beamed with delight, their faces shining like

lotus flowers when they first open to the warmth of the sun's rays after many months of winter cold.

Meanwhile, the gods above were complaining to Brahma. "Ravana, the wicked Rakshasa king, is destroying us with his tyranny!" they exclaimed. "He wields unlimited power. You are to blame for our troubles, for you made Ravana immune to attack by either the gods or his own people. If you do not want this monster to control both heaven and earth, you had better devise some way to destroy him. Unless you act quickly, evil will triumph over good, and we will be ruined!"

Brahma, the grandfather and creator, replied, "It is true that Ravana asked me for protection from his own people and from every creature who lives above and below the earth, and that I gave him that gift. However, he very foolishly did not ask for protection from either humans or animals because he saw no threat from them. Therefore, by human and animal he will be killed. Just be patient, and you will see for yourselves!"

No sooner had Brahma spoken than the great god Vishnu, preserver of life on earth, joined the assembly. The gods honored and respected Vishnu as their great defense in time of need, so they pleaded with him for help. "Ravana, king of the Rakshasas, is terrorizing both heaven and earth!" they cried. "His evil ways know no end. Yet we are powerless to stop him. Only you can help us! Descend to the kingdom of Kosala and accept birth as King Dasa-ratha's four sons. As one man, you can destroy Ravana."

"This I will do," Vishnu replied. "My goddess-wife, Lakshmi, will accompany me and become my mortal wife on earth."

Vishnu changed himself into the form of a tiger and appeared to Dasa-ratha in the midst of the king's sacrificial fire. "King Dasa-ratha, tiger among men," Vishnu called from within the flames. "Brahma, the grandfather and creator, has sent me to you with this sacred rice and milk. Give it to your wives, and they will bear you sons."

So it came to pass that King Dasa-ratha's three wives gave birth to four sons, each of whom embodied Vishnu, preserver of life on earth. Rama was born first, Bharata second, then Lakshmana and Satrugna. The gods also created a band of monkeys whose courage, strength, and wisdom would help Vishnu destroy the wicked Ravana and the Rakshasas who supported him.

Rama and his three brothers became known for their virtue and their courage. Lakshmana was Rama's constant companion, while Satrugna always accompanied Bharata. In their sixteenth year, one of the great wise men said to King Dasa-ratha, "Most honored king, I request a gift from you."

"Ask whatever you wish, and it will be yours!" the king replied.

"Most honored king," the wise man replied, "I need your son Rama's help to fight Ravana and the Rakshasas. Without his aid, we cannot make our sacrifices. We have no hope of stopping the destructive acts of this monstrous creature and his demons!"

"Why do you ask for my Rama, when the gods can help you?" King Dasa-ratha asked.

"Unfortunately for all of us," the wise man exclaimed, "the gods are powerless against Ravana! He has already subdued all who live above and below the earth.

Only the best of men can destroy him, and Rama is that man. Do not worry. Your son will be successful!"

So Rama and Lakshmana set out to accompany the wise man with their father's blessing. Indra, king of the gods, smiled upon the young men as they set out with their bows in one hand and their swords at their sides. He poured down upon them a shower of blossoms, a great rain of flowers from the heavens.

When Rama had easily destroyed the troublesome Rakshasas, the wise man said to him, "Now accompany me, lion among men, to the sacrifice to be held by King Janaka. This great king is married to Mother Earth, and he possesses a marvelous bow, which the god Shiva, destroyer of life on earth, gave to his ancestor long ago. None of the gods above, none of the Rakshasas, and none of the kings and princes of the earth has been able to string it. I would like you to try it!"

When the king had told Rama and Lakshmana the history of the bow, he announced, "Whoever can bend and string my mighty bow of war, long prized by kings of this land, will win my daughter Sita, child of Mother Earth. This child, the light of my life, arose from the soil one day as I plowed and blessed my field. Many men of fame have tried to conquer the bow and win my daughter, but in vain. Rama, I now offer that trial to you. If you succeed, Sita, the most fair and virtuous of women, will become your wife."

"Most honored king," Rama replied, "it is my pleasure to accept your invitation and to try my hands upon your mighty bow. To win your glorious daughter would be the greatest of honors!"

Word quickly spread far and wide that the great prince Rama had agreed to test himself against King Janaka's mighty bow. Kings, chiefs, famous warriors, noble suitors, and ordinary people from many nations gathered at Janaka's palace to witness the event.

Janaka's mighty bow was indeed great. It took the king's strongest lords and warriors, working together, to pull the weapon slowly forth on an eight-wheeled iron chariot.

Rama lifted the cover of the bow case and admired the awesome weapon of war. "With your permission," he said to the wise man, "I will place my hands upon this bow. Then I will lift and bend this greatest of weapons."

The wise man and King Janaka replied, "May it be so!"

Rama lifted the great bow from its case with ease and grace. He bent and strung it as if it were as supple as a leaf. Then he took the stance of the archer and drew the bow, but the strain was more than the wood could bear. It snapped in two with a clag like the roar of thunder. The earth quaked, and the hills resounded. So terrifying was this sudden sound that kings, and warriors — everyone except Rama, Lakshmana, Janaka, and the wise man — fell cowering to the ground.

King Janaka said to the wise man, "My old eyes have seen Rama perform this marvelous deed. It brings me special pleasure to know that my peerless daughter will wed the godlike son of King Dasa-ratha. It will be true to my promise, for Sita has been fairly won by a man whom no one can surpass in valor and in worth."

As Rama and Sita stood together to take the sacred marriage vows, King Janaka said, "Rama, this is my child, Sita, who is dearer than life to me. From

this moment on she will be your faithful wife. She will share your virtue, your prosperity, and your sorrow. Cherish her in joy and in grief. No matter where life takes you, she will follow like your shadow, and she will be with you in death as in life." The king, tearful in his joy, sprinkled holy water upon the bridal couple.

Then King Janaka married Lakshmana to Sita's sister and Bharata and Satrugna to two other beautiful maidens. Indra, king of the gods, smiled as the four couples walked around the sacred fire celebrating their weddings. He poured down upon them a shower of blossoms, a great rain of flowers from the heavens.

So Rama married Sita, queen of beauty, who was as faithful and devoted as she was beautiful.

Chapter 2

King Dasa-ratha plans to give his kingdom to Rama, but Bharata's mother forces him to give it to her son instead. Rama is banished from Ayodhya for fourteen years. Sita and Lakshmana accompany him on his journey.

Of King Dasa-Ratha's four sons, Rama was the dearest to his father and to all the people of Ayodhya. He was the ideal male figure: loyal, devoted, even-tempered, trained in all the arts of peace and war, and kind to all. When the king sent his gentle second son, Bharata, to live with his grandfather for a year, Satrugna, the king's youngest son, accompanied him.

During their absence, Dasa-ratha thought, "I will give up my throne to Rama, for I am old and no longer possess the strength I had in my younger days. What is best for me is surely best for my subjects as well. I will end my days in ease, and since Rama is unmatched in virtue and valor, Ayodhya and the kingdom of Kosala will prosper under his rule."

The king then called the leaders of his country to council: chiefs, princes, and leaders of the army. His voice pealed like thunder as he announced, "I have cared for my people as a father cares for his children, without excessive pride and without anger. Now, in the evening of my life, I am very tired. Honoring royal obligations and carrying out the laws of our land require more strength and skill than I now possess. I hope that you will accept my son Rama in my place. Rama combines the courage of Indra, king of the gods, with the knowledge of sacred lore of a wise priest. Among those who walk the earth, he has no equal!"

The king's subjects applauded his announcement with such enthusiasm that the sky above and the ground below trembled with their joyous acclaim. "We would see Rama seated on your revered throne, for his heart is blessed with valor, his words and deeds show virtue, his love of truth and loyalty to dharma are unsurpassed. He is our father in time of peace and our protector in time of war. He towers above those who walk the earth as Indra towers above the gods in the heavens. He is as forgiving as Mother Earth."

So the city of Ayodhya prepared to celebrate Rama's coronation. Flags and banners proclaimed the event. Actors, dancers, and musicians entertained the gathered throngs of citizens from all parts of the kingdom.

Rama entered the assembly as beautiful as a full moon in the autumn sky. King Dasa-ratha seated him on his throne and counseled, "Rama, dearest and most honored of my sons, tomorrow you will be crowned king. You must be even more dedicated and virtuous than you already are. You must practice restraint in all things. You must be just to everyone. You must maintain the military might and the wealth of our nation. My heart is content knowing that I am leaving my subjects and my kingdom in your hands."

Rama returned to Sita and Lakshmana. To Sita he said, "We must prepare for our sacred fast." To Lakshmana he said, "Prepare to rule Mother Earth with me, for my good fortune is always yours as well. I value my life and my kingdom only because of you."

Not everyone, however, was happy with King Dasa-ratha's decision. Bharata's mother was watching the festivities with a mother's joy when her nursemaid placed deep and deadly thoughts in her heart.

"Why are you so happy when this is your time of greatest sorrow?" the nursemaid asked. "Another queen's son has won the throne, not your son. Yet your son is the better of the two, being unmatched in merit and in fame. Because Rama fears Bharata's virtue and valor, he will spring upon his brother like a wolf and tear him to pieces! And Rama's mother and his wife will treat you and Bharata's wife as bond-slaves!"

Bharata's mother replied, "You speak wicked words, woman! Rama is as dear as Bharata to me. He loves his brothers as he loves himself, and he will protect them as a father protects his sons. King Dasa-ratha is obligated by ancient custom and the law of the land to leave his throne to the oldest and best of his sons, and that son is Rama. My Bharata will rule after Rama because he is younger."

"You must be blinded by madness, my fair queen!" the nursemaid responded. "Rama's son, not Bharata, will inherit the throne. Brothers do not divide their reign. In fact, once Rama is king, he will force your son to wander from land to land, alone and friendless. Bharata will be a man without a home and without a country!"

"Trust your old nurse!" she continued. "I have lived long years, and I have seen many dark deeds performed in the most noble of palaces. Rama's allegiance is to Lakshmana, not to Bharata. Your son has already been ordered to leave the kingdom. You must save his life! Speak to your husband before it is too late. Otherwise, Rama will force Bharata to serve him and will hate Bharata if he refuses."

The nursemaid's words seeped into Bharata's mother's heart like a serpent's deadly poison, awakening her jealousy and her fears for her child. She entered the room reserved for mourning the death of loved ones, and there she lay upon the cold ground and wept. The old king found her lying there like a blossoming vine that has been uprooted. The sight of such sadness sorely distressed him, for he loved his young wife more than his own life.

"Why do you lie here in tears?" he asked. "Are you suffering from some sickness? Has someone insulted you? Speak, and your words will dissolve your anger as the sun's rays melt the winter snows. My great love for you gives you great power. I promise you that my court and I will obey your wishes, whatever they may be!"

The love-blinded king thus gave his sacred oath to the jealous queen. The sun, moon, and stars, the earth, and the household gods heard King Dasa-ratha's words. As he was an honorable man, his promise was unbreakable.

His wife began, "Years ago, when the Rakshasas sorely wounded you, I cared for you and saved your life. In gratitude, you granted me two rewards. I did not ask for them then, but I do now. If you will not honor them, I will die! First, let Bharata be crowned king in place of Rama. Second, make Rama live as a hermit in the wild forestlands for fourteen years. These are the rewards I now claim from you. I will be satisfied with nothing less!"

The aged king could not believe his ears. "This must be a monstrous dream!" he exclaimed. Then anger dried his tears, and he said to his young wife, "You are a traitor to me and to your family! What cause can you possibly have to hate a son who loves you as a mother? I feel as if I have been harboring a poisonous snake in my palace!"

"Banish my wives, if you will," the old king continued. "Take my kingdom and my life from me, if you insist. But do not make me part with my son Rama! The world can continue to turn without the light of the sun. The harvests can survive without the moisture the rains bring. But I cannot survive without Rama! I am an old man, and I am weak. I do not have long to live. Be kind to me, dear wife! Ask for cities; ask for land; ask for treasure. But do not ask for Rama. Do not force me to break my sacred word to my son and to my people. That would be the greatest of crimes!"

The queen replied, "If you, who have always been known for your honesty and your virtue, break your sacred word to me, the world will know how poorly you rewarded the loyal, loving wife who saved your life. The world will know that you caused me to die of a broken heart. I demand kingship for Bharata and banishment for Rama. I will accept nothing less!"

On the following morning—the day of the coronation—Rama, accompanied as always by Lakshmana, approached his father. He found Bharata's mother sitting at the king's side. King Dasa-ratha was so sad of heart that he could speak nothing more than Rama's name. Rama asked, "Mother, what have I done to cause my father such distress? Why do tears glisten upon his cheeks? Is Bharata all right?"

Bharata's mother calmly replied, "The only pain grieving your father is that he cannot bring himself to tell you the bad tidings. Many years ago, he gave me his royal promise. Now, because of his great love for you, he would break it if he could. Yet you know that King Dasa-ratha cannot break his sacred word. If you are a true and righteous son, you will be loyal to dharma. Prove your virtue by holding your father to the vow that, in time long past, he made to me."

Rama exclaimed, "Tell me what I must do. I will obey my father even if he wishes me to drink poison and die!"

"If you would save your father's honor, act upon your words. Leave here immediately and live in the wild forestlands as a hermit for the next fourteen years. Wear your hair matted and clothe your body with the skins of animals and the bark of trees. My son, Bharata, will return to Ayodhya and rule your father's kingdom in your place."

Rama accepted these words with a calm heart. He was neither sad nor angry. "I hope that my journey will bring peace to your heart, Father," he replied. "Send for Bharata; I will leave as soon as I have seen Sita and my mother."

As the two brothers left the hall, the young and loyal Lakshmana gave vent to his rage. "Why should you let Bharata's mother destroy your life? Our father surely suffers the illness of old age to let her rule him in matters of state! Fight for your rightful title, and I will stand at your side!"

"No, Lakshmana," Rama replied. "I have no wish to rule our father's kingdom under these circumstances. Other men in our family have had difficult tasks placed before them. Surely this time in the forest is part of my destiny. I will live my life with honor, obeying my father as a good son is expected to do. That is the way of dharma."

Rama then told his mother and Sita, "Remain here in peace while I am in the wild forest. Mother, no matter how unhappy you are, your place is with my father. If you leave him to accompany me, he will die. Sita, I want you to watch over my mother. Love Bharata and Satrugna as your brothers, for they are dearer to me than my life."

The gentle and devoted Sita replied, "Just as your mother's place is with your father, so my place is with you! What is the moon without its light? A flower without its blossom? A lute without its strings? A chariot without its wheels? Without you I am nothing! Fine clothes, rich food, and palace comforts are nothing! Your banishment will be mine as well. The berries and roots that will sustain you, will nourish me. The beauty of the forest will bring joy to our eyes, and I will fear neither fierce wild animals nor the hard life of a hermit. As long as I am by your side, I will not count the years!"

"I too will accompany you!" Lakshmana exclaimed. "I am happy and content if I can be wherever you are. It will be my pleasure to find the forest paths and to gather food. How I shall can exile be when we are together!"

So Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita went into exile. King Dasa-ratha angrily left Bharata's mother to herself and took comfort in Rama's mother. On the evening of the fifth day of Rama's journey, the old king's heart could no longer bear its burden of grief, and he died. Then sorrow flowed over the land, for without a king a kingdom is like a river without water, a meadow without grass, or a herd of cattle with no one to herd them. The people feared for their safety and their well-being, so the palace officials sent for Bharata.

Chapter 3

Bharata learns of his mother's treachery and tries to convince Rama to return, but Rama refuses. A wise man gives Rama weapons of the gods. Ravana's sister becomes infatuated with Rama, and when he rejects her, a Rakshasa attacks him. Rama manages to kill the entire army.

On the seventh day Bharata, accompanied as always by Satrugna, arrived in the city of Ayodhya and immediately went to see his mother. He grieved to hear

of his father's death. "Where is Rama?" he asked his mother. "To me Rama is father, brother, and friend. It brings me joy to serve him."

Bharata's mother told her son the truth about Rama's departure, for she expected him to be pleased with his good fortune. To her surprise and dismay, Bharata was furious.

"If it were not for Rama's love for you, I would renounce you as my mother!" he exclaimed. "In spite of your treacherous designs, I will not rule my father's kingdom! It is too great a task for me, and the kingdom is Rama's to rule. I will search the broad forestlands for Rama. And once I have found him, I will bring him home to rule as is his right."

"As for you," Bharata continued, "your fate will bring you misery both in this life and in your life to come. You deserve to be banished, or hanged, or burned for your dreadful deed!"

Bharata refused the throne when it was formally offered to him. Instead, he and Satrugna gathered together a huge host of nobles, cavalry, learned men, and traders and led them through the wild forestlands in search of Rama. In the course of the journey, they encountered a wise man who said to Bharata, "Each man's destiny takes him along strange and unforeseen paths. Do not blame your mother for Rama's banishment. His exile is destined to benefit both humans and gods alike. Be patient, and remain true to dharma."

Finally Bharata and his companions found Rama. Bharata wept when he found his brother living with Sita and Lakshmana in a leaf-thatched hut and dressed in clothing made of deerskin and bark. Yet in spite of his simple manner of living, with his mighty arms and lion-like shoulders, Rama seemed like Brahma, the grandfather and creator of the wide earth.

"Are you that Rama, prince among men, whose people placed him on the throne of Ayodhya to rule the kingdom of Kosala?" Bharata asked him. "You have exchanged your luxurious robes for forest leaves and animal skins, and you have left your palace for the solitary life of a hermit. The very sight of you fills my heart with sadness!"

Rama embraced Bharata and Satrugna and lovingly welcomed them into his simple home. Then he asked, "Bharata, why have you sought me in my forest dwelling? Tell me, did our father ask you to come? Is he well? Do our warriors guard our kingdom as they should? Do the king's counselors serve him as they should? Surely some serious matter has moved you to undertake this long and difficult journey into the wilderness to find me!"

Bharata tearfully replied, "Rama, our father is dead! He walks the paths of heaven now instead of earth. His death has brought my mother to her senses and made her ashamed of her treacherous deed. I have come to ask you to return with me to Ayodhya and rule the kingdom of Kosala as the eldest son of King Dasa-ratha should. It is your duty according to the ancient law of our land. Besides, I need you! You are not only my brother; you are my father and my teacher."

Rama replied, "Bharata, I cannot return with you to Ayodhya, no matter how you plead with me to do so. I cannot claim the throne of our kingdom, for I cannot disobey the command of my father and king. Even though he is dead, I cannot break the promise that I made to him."

"And, Bharata, have kindness in your heart for your mother. She is not to blame for my exile. As for you, you must rule our kingdom and protect our people during my years in these wild forestlands. That is the way of dharma. As a dutiful son, you also must obey our father's wishes."

Rama concluded, "You must remember to care for the ordinary people in our country. Think of the herders who tend their cattle and the farmers who work their land. Make certain our soldiers guard our borders. Guard our nation's great treasure. Give gifts of food and wealth to all who are worthy, not just to the nobles. Always rule with justice, defending those who are innocent, no matter who they happen to be."

Bharata replied, "Rama, in truth, I cannot rule your kingdom. Our people look to you, not me, as their leader."

"Nonsense!" Rama exclaimed. "You possess the virtue and the strength to rule an empire that is as great as the world. Surely, then, you can rule the kingdom of Kosala. Our father's trusted counselors will advise and guide you."

"As for me," Rama concluded, "I am as firm in my resolve as a great rock. Your pleas, no matter how eloquent, cannot move me. The pleas of your entire company cannot move me. The moon may lose its glow and the mountains may lose their snow, but I cannot forget my promise to our father."

"So be it, then," Bharata replied. "Give me your golden sandals. I will place them upon the throne of Ayodhya to rule in your absence. They will give me the courage and the will to keep our kingdom for you. As for me, I will spend the next fourteen years as a hermit, even though I live in the royal palace. I will dress and eat as you do. If you do not return at the end of that period, I intend to die in the flames of a funeral pyre."

"So be it," Rama replied. "Take my sandals, then, and return to Ayodhya with Satrugna and your companions. We will meet again in fourteen years. You have my respect, my love, and my friendship."

So the ever-true Bharata and the righteous Rama parted. At first Rama wandered from place to place in the pathless forest, accompanied by his faithful Sita and his loyal Lakshmana. He met many of the holy hermits who lived within its dark shelter. To many people, the endless forest seemed nothing more than a dark, gloomy, and fearsome wilderness. But within its trackless depths Rama and his companions, like the holy hermits, found purity and peace. Ripe, wild fruits hung from broad, bending trees. The fragrant lotus and the lily rested on quiet inland waters. Drops of sunlight glittered upon lush, green leaves that sheltered grazing deer. Both day and night, the air was alive with the songs of birds.

In the course of their wanderings, Rama and his family came upon a mighty wise man, one of the holy hermits who also made the wild forestlands his home. "Rama," he said, "you are a hero, but even in this forest you will need weapons of war. Here is Vishnu's bow. Take it with you, for it is truly a wondrous weapon that was shaped in the heavens. Here is Brahma's shining arrow. In the hands of a good Bowman, it will never miss its target. Here is Indra's large quiver filled with sharp-tipped arrows. They will never fail you in battle. Finally, take this case of burnished gold. Within it rests a sword with a golden hilt that should belong to a valiant warrior and a king."

"The enemies of the gods," the hermit continued, "know and fear these great weapons. So make them your constant companions because you will need them often. Here in the peaceful forest you will meet Rakshasas, those evil hunters who haunt the forest ways at night. Only you can defend us from those who disturb our prayers and defile our holy shrines. Even here, a hero will find deeds of honor to perform."

"Thank you, respected sage," Rama replied. "You have blessed my exile with your kindness and your friendship."

Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana lived in the forest for ten years, defending the hermits against the attacks of the Rakshasas who hunted in the night. The young and valiant Lakshmana built a comfortable house of bamboo and leaves for them in an area where food was plentiful. Their clearing was surrounded by date palms and mango trees. Nearby, a river teemed with fish and the forest with deer. Both fragrant lotus flowers and ducks made their home upon a beautiful, small lake.

All was well until the sister of Ravana, king of the Rakshasas, came upon Rama's forest home, observed Rama, and fell in love with him. "Who are you," she asked Rama, "dressed like a hermit, yet armed with a mighty bow? Why do you live in a lonely house in this dark forest where the Rakshasas are accustomed to having their way?"

When Rama had explained the nature of his stay in the forest, he asked the maiden about herself. She replied, "Ravana, king of Lanka, is one of my brothers. I usually wander through this forest with my brothers, but my love for you has caused me to leave them to their own pursuits. My kingdom is broad and boundless, so you should feel honored that I have chosen you to be my husband and my lord. Put your human wife aside; she is not as worthy a companion for you as I am! Rakshasas feed on human flesh. With no effort at all, I can kill your wife and your brother. Compared to the Rakshasas, humans are weak, fragile, puny beings."

Rama repressed a smile, but he could not resist teasing the brash maiden. "You do not want a married man for your husband," he replied. "Instead, you should consider my brother, Lakshmana. You see no wife of his in this forest home of ours!"

When Ravana's sister approached Lakshmana, he smiled and rejected her advances. "You certainly would not be satisfied with me!" he exclaimed. "I am Rama's slave. Given your royal birth, you would not become the wife of a slave, would you?"

These words caused unrequited passion to unite with wounded pride, igniting a blazing rage in the maiden's heart. "You insult me, Rama, by not treating my feelings seriously," she announced. "That is very foolish of you! Apparently you have not felt the fury and wrath of an injured Rakshasa. No female will live as my rival!" Like a demon of destruction, she moved to attack Sita, who fell to the ground shuddering with terror.

Rama placed himself between his wife and the savage maiden. "I was wrong to treat any Rakshasa lightly," he said to Lakshmana. "My humor provoked this danger, and now we must deal with this shameless female as best we can."

Lakshmana wasted no time with words. The threats of the Rakshasa struck like lightning in his heart. He quickly raised his sword and sliced off the maiden's

ears and nose before she could defend herself. Her cries of anguish tore through the forest as she fled to her brothers.

With only one glance at their sister's bloody face, they sent a group of fourteen Rakshasas to avenge her. Rama raised his mighty bow and killed them all with his arrows. With mounting fury, the maiden's brothers then assembled a force of 14,000 Rakshasas, each as cruel as he was courageous.

Rama ordered Lakshmana and Sita to take refuge in a well-concealed cave. He was determined to protect them and to fight the enemy alone, so he put on his armor and waited for the Rakshasas to arrive. Many of the gods in heaven came down to earth to watch the battle.

Like the waves of the ocean, the 14,000 Rakshasas attacked Rama. The gods fled at the sight of them. Rama, however, stood firm, without fear in his heart. Like stinging raindrops in a raging storm, his arrows fell upon the Rakshasa warriors. In return, the Rakshasas dislodged mature trees and mighty boulders and hurled them upon Rama. But even these missiles could not stop the defender of the earth. He killed all 14,000 demons, leaving alive only their leader, one of Ravana's brothers.

Rama and the Rakshasa leader then faced one another in a fight to the death. They fought long and hard, like a lion against an elephant. Finally Rama triumphed and the Rakshasa leader lay lifeless upon the bloody earth. The forest floor was strewn with the bodies of the enemy host.

Indra, king of the gods, smiled upon Rama. He poured down upon him a shower of blossoms, a great rain of flowers from the heavens.

Chapter 4

Ravana is determined to capture Sita. His adviser, Maricha, devises the deception that makes it possible. After Sita is captured, Rama seeks the help of the monkeys to find her. When the monkey Hanuman learns where she is, Rama and the monkeys set out to kill Ravana and rescue Sita.

When Ravana heard of the death of his brother and the total destruction of his army, he became determined to destroy Rama by capturing Sita. His adviser, Maricha, objected to his plan. "If you provoke Rama, you will destroy your city of Lanka and every Rakshasa in your kingdom!"

"You speak of an empty threat," Ravana replied. "Rama is but a man, and all men are easy prey for a Rakshasa. You must either help me or forfeit your life. I have no use for cowards in my kingdom!"

So Maricha devised a plan to capture Sita by deceptive means. He transformed himself into a beautiful golden and silver deer, with antlers of sapphire and skin as soft as the petals of a flower. He wandered in the forest near Rama's house until Sita noticed him.

When the gentle Sita saw the beautiful creature, she was as enthralled as Maricha had hoped. "Please, Rama," Sita begged. "Follow that deer and capture it for me. I long to have it for my companion, or if you must kill it, I will cherish

its shining hide as a golden and silver carpet. I have seen many graceful creatures roaming the forest ways, beautiful antelope and frolicsome monkeys, but never have I seen such a one as this deer! Its beauty illuminates the forest as the moon lights up the sky."

"Beware, Rama!" Lakshmana warned. "No real deer possesses such beauty. This creature must be a Rakshasa in disguise! Their ability to change their shape makes them a treacherous foe. Remember how quick they are to slaughter unwary victims." Thus he prevailed upon Sita to view the animal in its true light.

"On the contrary, Lakshmana," Rama replied, "if this creature is really a Rakshasa, then I feel obligated to kill it before it threatens us. Guard Sita in my absence. I will not be gone long, and I will bring Sita that star-studded deerskin."

Maricha led Rama on a long, tiresome chase through the deep forest. Finally he came within bowshot and killed the creature with an arrow. As Maricha lay dying, he resumed his own shape. Making one last attempt to help Ravana, he disguised his voice as Rama's and called out, "Lakshmana! Help me! I am dying, helpless, in this forest!"

Rama heard these words with a sense of terror and impending doom. He immediately set out for home, painfully aware of the long distance he had to travel.

"Lakshmana," Sita asked, "did you hear Rama's cry? You must go, right now, to help him. What a fool I was to send my dear lord after that deer! If blood-thirsty Rakshasas have found him, they will slaughter him as raging lions slaughter even a fearsome bull."

"It must be some clever Rakshasa trick," Lakshmana protested. "No one in heaven or earth or the netherworld can conquer Rama! Besides, I gave my word that I would guard you from all danger."

"You must be a wicked monster of a man!" Sita replied angrily. "You only pretend to be compassionate. Your heart is as callous as a stone! You cannot love Rama as much as you claim if you will not go to his aid when he needs you."

"All right, Sita. I will do as you wish, although I fear the outcome. A clever trick has clouded your mind. I do not deserve the dishonor you cast upon me. May the guardian spirits of the forest protect you in my absence, and may I soon see Rama by your side!"

Ravana, who was secretly watching nearby, bided his time. Changing himself into a holy hermit, he appeared before Sita with a staff in one hand and a beggar's bowl in the other. As leafy trees conceal a deep, dark cave, so Ravana's disguise artfully concealed his evil purpose. However, all of nature knew what Sita could not sense. Aware of Ravana's dark plans, the fragrant forest breeze ceased to blow, and the trees stood like silent sentinels. No sound of any kind could be heard.

Beneath his pious exterior, Ravana gazed upon Sita with illicit passion. Even in her simple clothing, Rama's queen illuminated her forest home as the moon's silver rays illuminate a starless sky. He spoke of her great beauty with flattering eloquence. Then he said, "Why do you live in this lonesome forest, where dangerous beasts wander and terrifying Rakshasas haunt the gloomy woodland? Your beauty deserves silken robes instead of leafy garments, a palace instead of the trackless forest, and thousands of servants instead of none."

"Choose a royal suitor," Ravana concluded. "a king and a mighty hero, who will treat you with the attention you deserve! I am not the pious hermit that I appear to be. I am Ravana, king of Lanka and the fearsome Rakshasas. My courage and skill have made me ruler of both the heavens and the wide earth. I have many lovely wives, but your beauty has so won my heart that I offer to share my glory and my empire with you alone!"

The faithful Sita angrily replied, "My husband is Rama, a lion among men! Why should the woman who has his love desire yours? In valor and virtue, in word and deed, Rama shines with the brightness of the full moon. You could sooner tear a tooth from the mouth of a hungry lion as it feeds upon a calf, touch the fang of a deadly serpent as it reaches for its victim, uproot a majestic mountain as it stands rooted in rock, than you could win the wife of the righteous and mighty Rama!"

Sita's words did not deter Ravana. Resuming his monstrous shape, he grabbed her hair in one hand and her body in the other. He carried his prisoner to his golden chariot and away through the sky to his distant kingdom.

"Rama! Rama!" Sita cried to the dark forest below. "Save me! Attack the evil Ravana who assaults your faithful wife! Lakshmana, save me from Ravana! Your warning was true, and my charge against you was false. Forgive me! Oh you towering mountains and wooded hills, tell Rama of my abduction."

While all of nature grieved for Sita, Brahma, in the heavens above, was delighted. "Now Ravana surely will die!" the grandfather and creator exclaimed.

Gentle Sita, scanning the land below for some sign of life, spied a group of monkeys sitting on a mountain peak. Secretly, she threw down to them her jewels and her golden veil in the hope that Rama would somehow find her tokens and learn of her fate.

When Rama returned to his house with Lakshmana, whom he had met along the way, his worst fears were realized. Tirelessly the two brothers searched the forests, the mountains, and the plains for Rama's beloved wife without success. In the course of their journey, they mortally wounded a Rakshasa who said, "You will find Sita if you enlist the aid of Sugriva, the great monkey king, and his band. They too can change their shapes, and they know where to locate every demon."

So Rama sought Sugriva, king of the monkeys. "Rama," the monkey king said, "We do not know where Ravana lives, but we do know that he has captured Sita. We were sitting on a mountaintop when Ravana's chariot passed overhead, and Sita dropped these tokens down to us." Sugriva handed Rama Sita's golden veil and her jewels.

Once Rama held Sita's possessions in his hands, joy brightened his face as the light of the full moon illuminates the midnight sky. "Can you and your people help me find her, Sugriva?" he asked.

"We can certainly try!" the monkey king replied. "I will summon the monkeys from all over the earth. We will divide the earth into four quarters and send one-fourth of the monkeys searching in each direction. I place my greatest hope in the ability of Hanuman, son of the wind. He is strong enough to leap into the heavens and to reach every place on earth, and his courage and intelligence are as great as his strength."

Hanuman, who was standing next to Sugriva, grinned with delight at the praise. "If anyone can find Sita, I can!" he assured Rama. "As a child, I leaped 9,000 miles into the heavens because I hoped to pull down the sun as if it were a ripe fruit swinging on the branch of a tree. Brahma, the grandfather and creator, has made me invincible. Indra, king of the gods, has given me the power to choose my own death. Surely I am the one to perform this heroic deed!"

Hanuman's words caused hope to shine in Rama's eyes as the evening journey of the sun causes the stars to glow in the heavens. "I too feel certain that, if Sita is still alive, you will be able to find her," Rama said. "If your search is successful, Hanuman, show Sita this signet ring of mine. It will make her trust you, and it will remind her of my great love for her."

The monkey band divided into four groups and set out to search the earth for Sita. Hanuman's band was in charge of the southern quarter. They learned that Ravana lived in Lanka, an island that lay on the other side of an ocean 300 miles wide. The broad sea stopped all of the monkeys except Hanuman himself.

Using his extraordinary strength, Hanuman leaped over the great body of water. He glided gracefully across the heavens as a duck moves smoothly upon the water, landing safely and energetically upon the far shore. He rested until the evening journey of the sun brought darkness upon the land.

Then, in order to perform his secret mission, the monkey transformed himself into a cat. In this inconspicuous form, Hanuman entered the golden-walled city and prowled the streets until he learned that Ravana's palace was located on a mountaintop. Again, protective walls were no deterrent. However, no matter where he looked, Hanuman could find no sign of the gentle Sita. He finally returned to the wall of the city and sat down to consider what he should do.

"I hope the Rakshasas have not killed and eaten Sita!" the monkey king thought. "I cannot leave here until I know what has happened to her. If I return without any news, Rama will die of grief!"

Hanuman decided to search the wooded area that lay beyond the city wall. He sprang down from the wall like an arrow leaving a bow and set off among the trees with renewed hope in his heart.

He found Sita deep within the forest, guarded by a number of female Rakshasas. She looked pale, thin, and careworn, but her beauty shone through her grief as moonlight shines through a covering layer of clouds. Hanuman hid among the leafy branches of a tree and waited in silence.

He watched Ravana approach Sita and offer her power, wealth, and comfort if she would accept him. He watched Rama's devoted wife hide her face from her captor and sob. He heard her exclaim to Ravana, "One of these days, Rama will arrive and kill you!" He heard Ravana reply, "My patience with you is fast coming to an end! If you have not given yourself to me by two months from this day, it is you who will be tortured and slain."

Once Ravana departed, Sita took refuge at the base of the tree in which Hanuman was hiding. He wished to attract her attention without frightening her or alerting her guards. So he softly spoke about Rama's life in Ayodhya and the major events that had followed, concluding with the search for Sita and his own discovery of her.

At first Sita feared that Hanuman was simply a Rakshasa in another disguise. But when he gave her Rama's signet ring, she plied him with questions. "Does Rama live in safety, and does Lakshmana still serve him faithfully? Does he miss me? Does he still love me? Is he planning to kill Ravana and the Rakshasas for this insult to my honor?"

"Be at ease, gentle Sita," Hanuman replied. "Rama remains as loyal and courageous as ever. He thinks of you day and night. Without you, he takes no pleasure in eating and finds no joy in the beauties of nature. His only goal is to destroy Ravana and rescue you."

Devoted Sita's face brightened as the sky glows once dark clouds move away and reveal a full moon. "Give Rama this jeweled token from my hair," she said, "and tell him to rescue me soon. It has been ten months since I last saw him, and each day of each month creeps to an end. Good luck, heroic monkey! In coming here, you have done what no human could have done, and you have brought the light of hope into my life again."

Rama too revived when he learned that Sita was still alive. "Hanuman, your heroic deed has made you as dear as a brother to me!" he exclaimed. "Tell me again how Sita looked and what she said to you. Your words are like water to a thirsty man, like food to a starving man. Speak to me of my gentle wife, who weeps in sorrow, surrounded by wicked Rakshasas. Then let us arm at once and prepare to cross the ocean. My heart longs to invade Ravana's kingdom and avenge my faithful Sita's honor!"

So it came to pass that Sugriva and Rama led the huge host of monkeys south to the great sea.

Chapter 5

Rama and the monkeys invade Lanka, Ravana's kingdom. After many difficult battles, they defeat the Rakshasas, and Rama kills Ravana. Rama makes Sita prove her purity in an ordeal by fire. Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana then return to Ayodhya, where Rama rules for 10,000 years.

Hanuman had burned a large part of the city of Lanka before returning across the sea. Therefore, Ravana gathered his leaders together to discuss retaliation. Most of them told Ravana what they thought he wanted to hear and advocated total war against Rama and the monkeys. However, two of Ravana's brothers were more thoughtful in their comments.

Kumbha-karna, the mightiest warrior of all the Rakshasas, awoke from his usual slumber and said, "Ravana, stealing Sita was a foolish thing to do, and it has brought needless strife to our land. However, I will continue to support you, for you are my brother and my king. I will slay Rama and tear his limbs apart! Then you can marry Sita."

Vibhishana, Ravana's youngest brother, was more critical. "Ravana, who can fight a war against Rama and win? Rama has a righteous cause behind him, and

you are the offender. The warrior who fights with right on his side is doubly armed. Sita has brought evil demons into our land. The cows give no milk, serpents sleep in our kitchens, and wild beasts howl all night long. Like a falcon diving upon its victim, Rama and the monkeys will swoop upon our land with bow and with fire. If you value virtuous behavior and peace, you will save the lives of your people. I advise you to return Sita to Rama and cleanse yourself of your foul deed. Then we can avoid the war that would surely destroy us."

Ravana angrily replied, "Sita is mine, and she will remain mine no matter whom I must fight in order to keep her! I would have taken her by force long ago if Brahma, the grandfather and creator, had not warned me that I would die for such an action."

Ravana concluded, "Either you are jealous and want my kingdom and my queen for yourself, or else you are a traitor. If you were not my brother, I would kill you for what you have said. Because you are of my blood, I order you to leave the kingdom at once. Join Rama, since your heart is already with him!"

"I will leave you, Ravana," Vibhishana replied, "but I pity you, for you cannot see the wisdom of my words. You cannot see the danger and the destruction that will follow if you listen to those who misguide you with their self-serving, honeyed speech. You have lost the ability to save yourself!"

So it came to pass that Vibhishana flew across the sea and joined Rama and the monkeys as an important adviser. In return for his help, Rama promised him the kingship of Lanka once they had killed Ravana. The monkeys collected rocks and trees and placed them in the sea to create a bridge across the broad expanse. Ravana's enemies crossed the bridge, and the war began.

Battle raged both day and night, for the Rakshasas always were most aggressive at night. Rama was the greatest fighter on the field, but Ravana was second only to him in might, and each had a brother who was also a great warrior to support him. The forces were thus closely matched. Clouds of dust from charging elephants obscured friend and foe alike. Arrows fell like hissing serpents upon all warriors. The best on both sides were strong enough to hurl mountaintops upon their enemies. Streams of blood from hundreds of slain Rakshasas and monkeys flooded the earth like summer rains.

Ravana was so certain of victory that he let his great warrior-brother Kumbha-karna sleep through most of the war; he himself did not enter the battle until the monkeys had killed all of his strongest warriors. Ravana seemed invincible as he fought his way across the battlefield in his chariot. But the balance tipped in favor of Rama when that mighty son of Dasa-ratha climbed upon Hanuman's back and fought a fierce battle with Ravana. He demolished Ravana's chariot, broke the Rakshasa's crown in two, and severely wounded him with an arrow.

Then, instead of killing Ravana while the advantage was his, Rama said, "You are too weak to fight, so return to Lanka and rest. When you have recovered your strength, we two will fight again. Then I will show you how strong I really am!"

Ravana decided that the time had come to seek the aid of his great warrior-brother Kumbha-karna, who was fast asleep as usual. Kumbha-karna often slept for as long as ten months at a time and awoke only to gorge himself with food. So the Rakshasas first prepared for the huge creature a mountain of food: heaps of buffalo and deer meat, rice, and jars of blood.

Once they could feed him, they tried to awaken him. They shouted and beat their drums so loudly that the birds in the sky died of fright, but Kumbha-karna did not wake up. In unison, 10,000 Rakshasas yelled at him, beat 1,000 kettle-drums, and struck his body with huge log clubs, but Kumbha-karna still did not wake up. Then they bit his ears, poured pots full of water upon him, drove 1,000 elephants against him, and wounded him with spears and maces. At long last, Kumbha-karna woke up.

The monstrous Rakshasa ate the mountain of food and drank 2,000 flasks of wine. Then he put on his golden armor and marched upon the monkeys. They fled from this moving mountain in terror—with good reason, for whomever Kumbha-karna caught, he devoured.

Rama, Hanuman, and the monkeys gathered around him as clouds cling to a mountain peak. Although they hurled massive rocks and huge trees upon him, their weapons splintered against the giant Rakshasa's metal coat. Meanwhile, Kumbha-karna killed hundreds of monkeys with each thrust of his mighty spear, and he ate twenty or thirty monkeys at a time, the excess blood and fat dribbling from his mighty mouth.

Having wounded the best of the monkey leaders, he came face to face with Lakshmana. "You are the finest of warriors, Lakshmana," Kumbha-karna said. "You have shown great skill and have won great glory. I have no desire to fight you because I intend to pit my might and skill against the only human who is greater than you are, your brother. I shall fight Rama to the death."

Kumbha-karna's fortune turned when he fought Rama, for Dasa-ratha's son sent deadly flaming arrows against him. Rama severed the giant's two arms with two of his arrows. He sliced away the giant's two legs by hurling two sharp-edged discs at him. Finally Rama aimed Indra's great arrow at the giant's neck. It pierced his armor and severed his head from his shoulders. His headless body crashed upon the bloody earth and tumbled into the sea, where it created such violent waves that it seemed as if a tempest were stirring them.

Lakshmana killed Ravana's son. Soon thereafter, he was severely wounded by a flaming arrow that he intercepted in order to save the life of Vibhishana, Ravana's brother who had become their ally. These two incidents brought Ravana and Rama against one another in their final battle.

From the heavens the gods were watching the great battle. When Ravana entered the battle in a new chariot drawn by fresh horses, Indra, king of the gods, announced, "We gods always help those who are righteous and brave. The time has now come to help Rama in his fight against Ravana. Rama already has my quiver filled with sharp-tipped arrows. I will now give him golden armor that was fashioned in the heavens and my own golden, horse-drawn chariot, driven by my own driver."

Now Rama's war gear was superior to Ravana's. Nevertheless, Ravana was such a great warrior that the battle raged long and furiously. Some of Ravana's arrows wore fiery, flame-spewing faces that turned into hissing poisonous snakes. Against these, Rama used Vishnu's bow, and arrows belonging to Vishnu's golden-winged bird, for these arrows turned into birds and consumed the snakes on Ravana's arrows. Still the battle raged. In terror, the brilliant sun turned pale, the winds ceased blowing, and the mountains and the sea shook. With Indra's

mighty arrows, Rama sliced off Ravana's ten heads one by one, but each time he severed a head another grew in its place. Finally Rama lifted Brahma's shining arrow, which blazed like the fire of the sun and had wings like Indra's lightning bolt. It shattered Ravana's heart, killing him.

Indra smiled upon Rama. He poured down upon the bloody earth a shower of blossoms, a great rain of flowers from the heavens. The sun shone forth in its full brilliance. Gentle, cool breezes rustled the leaves on the trees, perfuming the air with their fragrance. Heavenly harps played celestial music, and Rama heard a heavenly voice exclaim, "Rama, champion of the righteous and doer of virtuous deeds, now you have completed your noble task. Peace reigns in the heavens and on the earth. We shower our blessings upon you!"

Rama unstrung his bow and joyfully put aside his weapons. When Vibhishana mourned Ravana's death, Rama said to him, "Ravana was one of the earth's great warriors and heroes. Even Indra, king of the gods, could not stand against him. Such heroes should not be mourned when they die in battle, for they have died with honor, and none of us can escape death."

After giving Ravana a hero's funeral, Rama sent Hanuman to Sita with news of the victory. She returned freshly bathed and dressed. At the sight of her husband, her face shone with the radiance of the full moon in the midnight sky.

Rama said, "Dear Sita, with the help of Hanuman, Sugriva, and Vibhishana, I have kept my promise to you and have performed the obligation of a man on whose honor a stain has been placed. I have cleansed my family and myself of dishonor by killing Ravana.

"However," Rama continued, "you bear the stain of a woman who has lived with a man other than her husband. Ravana gazed upon you and touched you. No man of honor can accept such behavior in his wife. Therefore, I must publicly renounce you. You may live with whomever you choose—Lakshmana or Bharata, Sugriva or Vibhishana—but you may not live with me!"

Sita trembled like a leaf in the wind and sobbed as she heard these words. Then she dried her tears and said, "If you doubted my faithful devotion to you, my purity of heart, why did you cross the broad ocean and risk your life for me? Have you forgotten that I am the daughter of Mother Earth and that I followed you into the wild forestlands with a woman's deep devotion? At no point in my life have I ever been unfaithful. If Ravana gazed upon me and touched me, you must realize that I had no power to stop him.

"However," she continued, "when the shadow of dishonor casts its shade upon an innocent woman's life, death by fire is the only way to restore the honor she deserves. So, Lakshmana, if you love me, build a funeral pyre for me and light it. I would rather die than live with a stain upon my name."

Rama showed no sign of weakness or anguish at these words. So Lakshmana, with an aching heart, did as Sita had asked him.

As she stood before the roaring flames, Sita announced, "If in thought and in deed I have been faithful and true, if in my lifelong devotion to dharma I have lived without a stain, may this fire defend my name!" Then, showing courage and faith and no sign of fear, the gentle Sita entered the flames and disappeared. All who watched her wept with grief and awe.

The gods descended from the heavens in their golden chariots and said to Rama, "Preserver of life on earth, how can you act like a common man and treat Sita in this way? Do you not remember that you are the first of all the gods, the grandfather and creator of all? As you were in the beginning, so will you be in the end."

Rama replied, "I believe that I am Rama, eldest son of Dasa-ratha. If I am wrong, then let the grandfather tell me who I am."

Brahma said, "Rama is an earthly form of the great god Vishnu, who lives forever. In your heavenly form, you are both creation and destruction, the savior of all gods and holy hermits, the conqueror of all enemies. You live in every creature and in every part of nature. Day comes when you open your eyes, and night comes when you close them. I am your heart. Sita is the earthly form of your heavenly wife, Lakshmi.

"Now that you have killed Ravana," Brahma concluded, "you can assume your divine form and return to heaven, for you have accomplished the task for which you adopted human form. Those who love you and who tell your story will be rewarded."

The flames parted and Agni, the god of fire, appeared with faithful Sita. The flames had not touched her. Her face, her hair, and her clothing were as fresh as the grass in the morning. Agni said to Rama, "Son of Dasa-ratha, reclaim your devoted wife. She resisted all the temptations Ravana put before her and has remained pure in both thought and deed."

Rama's eyes glowed with the radiance of the sun as he announced, "In all the years that I have known her, I have never doubted my Sita's virtue. Now the whole world knows what I know, for Agni has attested to her pure and shining name. I reclaim her with delight in my heart, now that my people know that the eldest son of Dasa-ratha puts the law of his country above his own personal desires." Rama then embraced his loving wife, who understood the reason for her trial and forgave him.

The gods then revealed the presence of King Dasa-ratha in their midst. "Rama," his father said, "not only have you helped the gods and the holy hermits, but you have saved my honor. Your exile is now at an end. Return as a victorious hero to Ayodhya, and rule there with your brothers. May you live a long life!"

King Dasa-ratha turned to Lakshmana and said, "My son, you are ever true to deeds of virtue. Continue to take care of Rama, and may you have a good life."

Finally the king turned to Sita and said, "Forgive Rama. It was for your own good that he spoke against you in public. You have earned glory that few women can ever achieve."

Then Indra, king of the gods, appeared before Rama and said: "Righteous Rama, lion among men, in return for what you have done for us, ask whatever you wish, and the gift will be yours!"

Rama replied, "Lord of heaven, please grant renewed life to all those who fought on my behalf against the Rakshasas, and provide them with food and fresh water wherever they may go."

"So be it," Indra replied.

When it was time for Hanuman to leave Rama, he said, "Rama, I ask you to grant me one special gift. As you may remember, Indra, king of the gods, gave me the power to choose my own death. I ask you to permit me to live on earth as long as people tell the tale of your glorious deeds."

"So be it, Hanuman," Rama replied, "and as a token of my gift to you, I also give you this jeweled chain from around my neck and place it, with love and respect and gratitude, around yours."

So Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita returned to Ayodhya after an absence of fourteen years. Bharata had remained true to his word. His face now glowed with the radiance of a great wise man, for he had been loyal to dharma. He had faithfully honored Rama's sandals as the token of Rama's kingship and had lived the life of a holy hermit within the palace walls.

Rama and Sita became the king and queen of Ayodhya and ruled their kingdom of Kosala for 10,000 years. During all of that time, neither terrible diseases nor untimely death visited their land. Yama, lord of the dead, let infants grow to maturity and husbands live to old age. Farmers rejoiced, for rains came reliably and winds were friendly. In gratitude Mother Earth provided bountiful harvests, fruitful trees, and rich pastureland. The people were loyal to dharma and loved their neighbors and their king. Those who lived in towns and cities worked at their customary tasks on the loom or the anvil without fearing liars and robbers. It was truly a time of happiness and peace for all.

Chapter 6

The people of Kosala again question Sita's virtue, and Rama banishes her. In exile she gives birth to Rama's twin sons. Valmiki teaches them The Ramayana. When Rama hears his story and meets his sons, he brings Sita back and asks that her purity be tested again. Instead, Sita returns to Mother Earth, her mother. After 1,000 years of additional rule, Rama and his brothers return to heaven as Vishnu.

When Rama had reigned for 10,000 years, Sita became pregnant and decided to visit the hermitage of the wise men along the holy Ganges River. The night before the start of her journey, Rama asked his friends and advisers, "What do my subjects say about my brothers, Sita, and me?"

One replied, "They speak admiringly of your alliance with the monkeys and your conquest of the Rakshasas and Ravana."

"Surely that cannot be all they speak of," Rama said. "Do they not say more?"

Another replied, "Since you press us, you should know that your subjects criticize you for taking Sita back after she had lived with Ravana in Lanka. They feel they must accept improper behavior from their own wives because their king has done so."

Rama's heart flooded with dismay. He dismissed his companions and sent for his brothers. Tearfully, he told them what he had just heard. "My heart knows that Sita is pure, and she has proven her purity by fire. Yet my subjects force me

to renounce my devoted wife for a second time. A king cannot reign with disgrace upon his name.

"Therefore," Rama continued, "I want you, Lakshmana, to take Sita to Valmiki's hermitage along the Ganges River as if you are simply honoring her request. Then, however, you must leave her there."

When Lakshmana had brought Sita to Valmiki and had told her of Rama's position, she said, "In some past life I must have committed grave sins to be punished this way twice in spite of my purity! I would drown myself in the Ganges if I were not carrying within me Rama's child.

"Return to Rama with this message," Sita concluded. "Tell him that, as always, I will be loyal to dharma. I will continue to serve my husband with a woman's deep devotion no matter what the circumstances. I accept my exile but grieve over my false reputation."

Lakshmana gave Rama Sita's message. Then he said to his brother, "Do not grieve over what you have had to do. Each of us must accept whatever life brings. Wherever there is growth, there is decay. Wherever there is birth, there is death. Wherever there is prosperity, there is poverty. Wherever there are friendship and love, there is separation."

In time, Sita gave birth to twin sons, who grew up with their mother and the holy hermits in the forest. The hermit Valmiki taught them wisdom and the skill of recitation. Then he taught them to sing *The Ramayana*.

Valmiki knew the story of Rama because one day, years earlier, he had asked the great wise man Narada, "Is there any man alive who possesses perfect righteousness and courage?" Narada had replied, "Rama is such a man. I will tell you about him."

Soon after that Brahma, grandfather and creator of the world, appeared before Valmiki. "I have watched how you live your life. Your thoughts and your deeds have shown me that you are a wise and compassionate man. Therefore, I have chosen you to fashion the story of Rama into beautiful verses that will reveal truth from beginning to end."

Brahma continued, "Be confident that you already possess the understanding of human nature and the gift of poetry. Whatever more you need to know about Rama's story I will see that you discover. Your *Ramayana* will be told from one generation to another as long as snow-covered mountains rise from Mother Earth and sparkling seas wash her shores." With these words, Brahma disappeared.

As Valmiki sat in deep thought, the people in Rama's life came alive in his mind and revealed their tale. The holy hermit shaped their words and deeds into verses. Thus he was able to teach *The Ramayana* to the sons of Rama and Sita.

After many lonely and joyless years had passed, Rama decided to hold the sacred sacrifice of the horse. During the year that the horse wandered in freedom, the king gave many gifts to the poor: clothing to the needy, food and drink to the hungry, shelters to the weak and aged, and gold and homes to orphans. He invited all of his subjects as well as the monkeys and Vibhishana, king of the Rakshasas, to the final ceremony.

When the time came, Valmiki arrived with Rama's sons. He instructed them to sing *The Ramayana* from beginning to end, reciting twenty of the 500 cantos each day from morning until night. "Do not speak of your own misfortunes," he

advised them. "If Rama asks who your parents are, tell him that I am your teacher and your father here on earth."

The children captivated everyone who heard their song. The people whispered to one another how much like Rama they looked. As the days passed and the boys continued their performance, Rama realized that these were his own sons. He called Valmiki to him and said, "I long to have Sita at my side again, for I have never forgotten our love. Let her prove her purity before the assembled guests once more. Then she can again share my throne and my kingdom with me."

When Sita arrived in Ayodhya, Rama said, "Gentle, devoted, faithful Sita. Let the world once again know of your virtue. I have never questioned your purity. Forgive me for banishing you in order to please my subjects. It was a shameful deed and an error, but I knew no other way to stifle the voice of rumor."

Sita looked upon the assembled throng. She saw her husband and king, as bright as a star. She saw her sons performing as hermit-minstrels, as radiant as two moons. She saw kings from many lands and the gods from heaven. "How many times should I have to prove my purity?" she asked herself. "I am Rama's queen and the daughter of Mother Earth and a great king. Surely it is time to put this life behind me and leave the earth."

So Sita sadly announced, "If my thoughts and deeds have been pure from the day of my birth, and I have been loyal to dharma in my devotion and duty to my husband, I call upon you, Mother Earth, to receive your child. Put an end to the pain and shame of my life, and claim me as your own!"

Before the astonished eyes of the crowd, the earth opened, and a golden throne rose from its depths, supported by serpents from the netherworld as a rosebud is enfolded by leaves. Mother Earth stretched forth her loving arms to embrace her virtuous daughter and to place her upon her own throne. Then mother, daughter, and throne descended into the earth, which closed above them.

Rama watched the spectacle with grief and anger. Brahma, the grandfather and creator, then appeared before him and said, "Rama, do not grieve for Sita or for yourself. Sita is pure and innocent, and her reward is to join her mother. Remember that you are the great god Vishnu. You will be with Sita once again in heaven, where she is your wife, Lakshmi. The end of Valmiki's story will reveal your future to you."

Rama reigned for another 1,000 years without joy. He had his craftspeople fashion a golden statue of Sita, which he kept by his side. His kingdom prospered.

One day the figure of Time entered Rama's palace and said to him, "As Rama, you have reigned on earth for 11,000 years. The grandfather has sent me to ask you: Do you wish to reign longer over mortals, or are you ready to reign once again over all of the gods?"

Rama replied, "I am ready to return to my place among the gods in heaven."

When Rama announced that he was going to leave the earth and return to heaven, his brothers left their thrones to their children and joined him. Sugriva, king of the monkeys, also joined him. "Wherever you go," he said, "I will follow!"

Rama permitted any monkey who chose to follow him to do so—except Hanuman. "Do you remember the gift you asked of me long ago?" he asked Hanuman. "You asked to live on earth for as long as people spoke of my great deeds. Therefore, you will live here forever. May you be happy!"

Vibhishana, king of the Rakshasas, prepared the departure rites. When Rama's brothers and their wives, his counselors and servants, all the people of Ayodhya, the Rakshasas, monkeys, bears, and birds had assembled, Brahma arrived on earth with 100,000 chariots. Indra, king of the gods, smiled upon the loyal host. He poured down upon them a shower of blossoms, a great rain of flowers from the heavens.

Brahma exclaimed, "Hail, Vishnu, preserver of life on earth! Enter heaven in whatever form pleases you."

Rama and his brothers entered heaven in the form of Vishnu, and all of the gods rejoiced and bowed before him. Then Vishnu said, "Brahma, all of those who assembled wish to follow because they love me. In order to remain with me, they are renouncing their lives on earth. Therefore, give each his or her place in heaven."

So it came to pass that those who followed Rama assumed their godly forms, and now they live in heaven.

So ends *The Ramayana*, created by Valmiki and honored by Brahma, the grandfather and creator. Those who recite it will earn rich gifts of cows and gold. Those who hear it or read it will become cleansed of all sin. They will have a long and honored life. They will enjoy the blessing of children and grandchildren, both on earth and in heaven.

Introducing The Creation of the Universe

Scholars believe that the Chinese myths that have come down to us are not as old and authentic as the myths from other ancient cultures. The principal reason is that in 213 B.C., the first emperor of China burned all books that were not about medicine, prophecy, or farming.

During the great Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), the emperors instituted the teachings of Confucius as the state religion and banned religions that involved nature worship. Many of the old myths that had been passed down orally were recorded anew during this period, but Han scholars revised them to reflect their own attitudes and the political and religious climate of their times.

The creation myth of Pangu is the most detailed Chinese creation myth

in existence. It is found in texts written between A.D. 200 and 500. This myth focuses on the creation of order out of chaos and the preservation of that order. Pangu first brings order into the universe by separating heaven from earth. His body provides additional structure by differentiating the surface of the earth into a variety of natural forms, such as mountains, oceans, and forests, and by differentiating the heavens as well. Later, after the monster Gong-gong inadvertently destroys the natural environment, the Mother Goddess Nügua restores order to the world.

Unlike other ancient cultures, the Chinese divide the universe into two complementary essences, *yin* (shaded) and *yang* (sunlit), which, taken together, comprise the whole. Yin is