

Moral Dilemmas: The Role of Dharma in the Ramayana

Hinduism: A Brief Introduction

Hinduism embodies a large number of different expressive paths. It has no single founder or single text and no single administrative authority. Hinduism is one of the oldest and longest lasting religious traditions, with a Hindu written text dating from 1200 B.C.E. The name "Hinduism" comes from *sindhu*, the Indo-Aryan word for "the sea," and came to apply to the region east of the Indus River.

A set of texts called the Vedas (knowledge) contains much of the religious beliefs and practices. Composed over many centuries, Hindus believe that the Vedas are "revelations" that were heard, not text composed by people. Amongst the major concepts is *dharma*, one's duty in this lifetime, and *karma*, the actions one has performed in previous lifetimes and the actions one performs in this lifetime. Other concepts related to *dharma* and *karma* are transmigration of the soul after death, and rebirth of the soul depending upon one's *karma* in this life. This endless succession of births can be ended by *moksa*, or salvation, attainable only by a strict practice of liberation from desire and education in the higher forms of knowledge.

In Hinduism exists the trinity of Brahma, the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer and regenerator. Vishnu and Shiva incarnate themselves into other forms, as humans, animals or other living beings on earth to help the beings on earth in times of crisis. Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, is one of the nine major incarnations of Vishnu on this earth. Rama, the son of King Dasaratha, was put on earth to conquer Ravana, ruler of Lanka and king of the demons.

What is Dharma?

Dharma is defined as:

1. good and righteous conduct in performing your life's roles
2. performing your role correctly given a certain situation and time

Dharma is a major concept in Hindu culture. It is a complex idea of cosmic moral order underlying all existence. Correct actions reinforce this moral order, are acceptable to the gods and bring auspicious consequences. Actions that are not right violate *dharma* and bring personal, and sometimes cosmic, suffering. Therefore, the moral choice for a Hindu is doubly important. Bad actions (incorrect choices) cannot only harm those who make these decisions, but they can actually trigger cosmic tragedies like floods and droughts. Good actions bring cosmic harmony; bad actions bring cosmic suffering.

Each character in the Ramayana faces a distinct dilemma in which he must make choices most in line with righteous behavior. The correct choice depends on principles, circumstances and individual personality. It is not easy to act according to dharma; thus the dilemmas the characters face present thought-provoking problems.

Dasaratha's Moral Dilemma

"You have promised me the granting of two boons, and you have sworn to it in the name of Rama -- your darling son Rama. And now I'll speak out my mind. If you reject my demand, you will be the first of the Ikshvahu race, proud descendents of the sun god himself, to go back on a promise for the sake of convenience.' She took breath and demanded..." (from Valmiki, trans. R.K. Narayan)

By design of the Gods, four sons are born to the noble king Dasaratha of Ayodhya. Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, is the son of the king's first wife Kausalya, the twins Lakshmana and Satrugua are the sons of his second wife Sumitra, and Bharata is the son of his third wife Kaikeyi. After coming of age, Rama and Lakshmana are taken away from the palace by the sage Visvamitra. Rama is taught the arts of war, slays demons that have been threatening the forests and wins the hand of Sita, princess of Mithila, by lifting, stringing, and breaking the sacred bow.

Rama, Sita and Rama's brothers live contentedly in the kingdom of Ayodhya for 12 years until Dasaratha decides that it is time for him to give up the crown. Dasaratha tells Rama that he will become the heir, and he makes arrangements for the rituals and festivities that will celebrate the passing of the crown. The evening before the coronation of Rama is to take place, Dasaratha's third wife, Kaikeyi, reminds the king that he had promised her two boons when she had earlier saved his life in battle. She claimed these boons now. One boon was that her son, Bharata, would be crowned king instead of Rama; the other was that Rama would be exiled from the kingdom for fourteen years.

Within the terms of his culture, Dasaratha faces a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, it is customary for the eldest son to inherit rule from his father and Dasaratha had publicly proclaimed to all Ayodhya that Rama was to be his heir. On the other hand, Dasaratha is bound by the boons he promised Kaikeyi when she saved his life on the battlefield.

Outcomes/Consequences

Dasaratha must consider the consequences of his decision in terms of satisfying dharma and in terms of the good of Ayodhya. If he chooses to continue with his plan to have Rama king, he is breaking his oath to Kaikeyi. This violates the rule of dharma that demands absolute loyalty to oaths and may bring cosmic punishment. He will also lose the love of his favorite wife, Kaikeyi, and his family life, which is supposed to be the model for his citizens. If, on the other hand, he makes Kaikeyi's son, Bharata, king, he breaks his promise to Rama and violates the accepted custom of primogeniture.

Questions

1. Which decision do you think would be most in line with dharma?
2. Which decision do you think would be most in line with what you know of Dasaratha?

Continuing with the story, we know that Dasaratha chose to grant Kaikeyi her boons, thus proclaiming Bharata the king and sending Rama into exile.

1. Do you think that his decision was the most moral one? Why or why not? (What is the principle or bit of overwhelming evidence that persuaded you to answer in the way you did?)
2. What decision would you have made under the same circumstances?
3. What would have been the reason(s) for your decision?
4. What choices that you have made, or have seen others make have been similar?
5. What current or historical issue illustrates the same type of dilemma?
6. What comparable piece of literature of the ones we read illustrates similar dilemmas? Explain.
7. If this were to be viewed as a contemporary dilemma, what factors or variables would contribute to the outcome?

Lakshmana's Loyalty

"Lakshmana responds to Sita's plight by stating, 'No need for you to harm yourself. Only I shudder at the import of your words. I'll obey you now. Do not be anxious. This very second I'll leave. I only hesitated because your order goes against the command of my brother. I'll go, and may the gods protect you from harm. If I don't go, she will kill herself... if I go, she will be in danger. I'd rather be dead than facing such a dilemma...I'll go and what is destined will happen. Dharma alone should protect her.'" (from Valmiki, trans. R.K. Narayan)

Defining the Dilemma

After Sita, Rama and Lakshmana are sent into exile, and Soorpanaka has been humiliated, Ravana (Soorpanaka's brother and King of Lanka) declares revenge. He not only wants to see Rama and Lakshmana destroyed, he desires Sita to be his consort. He decides to consult with Mareecha, his uncle, who now lives as an ascetic in the woods. Mareecha had previously tried to kill Rama to avenge his mother's death, therefore Ravana thinks him to be knowledgeable on this subject. After some provoking, Mareecha agrees to assume the figure of a golden deer and to try to lure Sita from her guardians. Once Sita spots the golden deer, her heart is set on it. She begs Rama to bring it to her, and is terribly unhappy until he agrees to try.

Lakshmana warns Rama not to fetch the golden deer that Sita desires. Rama ignores his brother's plea and goes any way, making Lakshmana the guardian of Sita. Mareecha, after being mortally wounded by Rama's arrow, calls for help in a voice disguised as Rama's. Upon hearing this voice calling for help, Sita pleads with her brother-in-law to save him. When Lakshmana explains that this is a trick, Sita tells him that she will throw herself into a fire and die if he does not help Rama.

Lakshmana is in a dilemma. He has sworn to protect his sister-in-law, yet he must help his brother as well. When Lakshmana decides to leave Sita to try to help his brother, Ravana captures Sita.

Outcomes/Consequences

If Lakshmana goes to the aid of his brother, he is forsaking his duty to guard Sita. Yet, Sita swears that she will kill herself if he does not go.

Dharma

Lakshmana's dharma as a younger brother is to follow what his elder brother orders him to do. An earlier example of this is represented when Lakshmana leaves his wife and beloved city behind to follow his elder brother into exile. Lakshmana's dharma as a brother-in-law is to follow the wishes of his sister-in-law (who becomes as a mother figure to him after the marriage ceremony) and to protect her from harm.

Questions

Brainstorm and discuss the following questions as they relate to this scene.

1. In a situation like this one, assuming that you do not have an omniscient point of view, which decision seems to be the best one?
2. According to Lakshmana's dharma, which choice would have made the most sense?
3. Is Lakshmana's decision correct according to his dharma?
4. Does this remind you of a situation you have been in, read about or seen?
5. What current or historical issue illustrates the same type of dilemma?
6. What comparable piece of literature of the ones we read illustrates similar dilemmas?
7. If this were to be viewed as a contemporary dilemma, what factors or variables would contribute to the outcome?

What other episodes relate a test of the moral fortitude and dharma of a character or characters?

Ramayana: A Glossary

Ayodhya (EYE-'YODE'-YA)- Capital city of Kosala that was ruled by Dasaratha, later by Rama.

Asoka (AH-'SHOW'-KA) - Garden in Lanka where Ravana kept Sita captive.

Avatar (AH-VAH-'TAR') - The incarnation of a god into another form. The incarnation of Vishnu on earth is Rama.

Bharata (BAH-'HRA'-TA)- Son of Queen Kaikeyi and the half brother of Rama.

Boon - A promise or reward.

Brahma ('BRAH'-MA) - The creator god of the Hindu triad of gods, which includes Shiva and Vishnu.

Chitrakoot (CHEE-TRAH-'KOOT')- A beautiful forest where Rama, Sita and Lakshmana lived.

Dandaka ('DAH'-DA-KA)- Great forest which Rama, Sita and Lakshmana traveled through for ten years of their exile.

Dasaratha (DAH-SHAH-'RAH'-TA)- King of Kosala and Rama's earthly father.

Dharma ('DAR'-MA)- Laws, duties and obligations.

Dushan ('DOO-SHUN)- Brother of Ravana and Surpurnakha.

Ganges ('GAHN'-JEEZ)- The river considered sacred by Hindus.

Garuda (GAH-'ROO'-DA)- King of winged creatures.

Godavari (GO-'DAH'-VA-REE)- River Rama, Sita and Lakshmana cross to get to Panchavati.

Hanuman ('HUN'-YOU-MUN)- Monkey warrior who became Rama's devoted friend and servant.

Indrajit (IN-'DRAH'-JIT)- Ravana's favorite son who fought Rama with magical weapons.

Jambuvan ('JAM'-BUH-VAHN)- Leader of the bears who found Sita.

Janaka ('JAH'-NA-KA)- King of Mithila who found Sita in a furrow.

Jatayu (JA-'TIE'-YOO)- The great bird who tried to rescue Sita and was killed by Ravana.

Kaikeyi (KYE-'KAY'-YEE)- Dasaratha's youngest queen and the mother of Bharata. She called for Rama's exile.

Kailasa (KYE-'LAH'-SA)- Mountain where Hanuman found the medicinal herbs.

Kausalya (COW-'SAL'-YA)- Dasaratha's queen and Rama's mother.

Khar (CAR)- Brother of Ravana and Surpurnakha.

Kiskindha (KISH-'KIN'-DA)- The monkey kingdom ruled by Sugriva.

Kosala (KOH-'SAH'-LA)- The kingdom ruled by Dasaratha.

Kush (COOSH)- Sita and Rama's son, twin of Lava.

Lakshmana (LAKS-'SHMA'-NA)- Queen Sumitra's son and devoted half-brother of Rama.

Lanka ('LAHNG'-KA)- Island kingdom ruled by Ravana.

Lava ('LAH'-VA)- Sita and Rama's son, twin of Kush.

Lotus ('LOW'-TUSS)- Flower; Hindu symbol of beauty, purity & good fortune.

Manthara ('MAHN'-TA-RA)- Maidservant who convinced Kaikeyi to have Rama exiled and make Bharata king.

Mantra ('MAHN'-TRA)- Hindu prayers or incantations.

Mareech (MUH-'REACH')- The magician who helped Ravana capture Sita.

Nala ('NAH'-LA)- Son of the great builder who helped Rama construct the bridge to Lanka.

Panchavati (PUN-CHA-'VAH'-TEE)- Rama, Sita and Lakshmana's abode in the forest.

Payasam ('PYE'-EH-SUM)- A mixture of rice pudding, milk and sugar.

Rakshasas ('RAHK'-SHA-SHASS)- Warrior-demons.

Ravana ('RAH'-VA-NA)- King of Lanka who kidnapped Sita and was defeated by Rama.

Sanyasi (SUN-'YAH'-SEE)- A religious man who lives in a forest, a hermit.

Sarayu (SAH-'RYE'-YOO)- The river that runs alongside Ayodhya.

Sari ('SAH'-REE)- A garment of yards of cloth draped to form a skirt and head or shoulder covering.

Sat-purusa (SAHT-POO-'ROO'-SHA)- The ideal Hindu man.

Shiva ('SHIV'-AH)- The deity whose bow Rama lifted to win Sita's hand in marriage.

Surpanakha (SHURE-'PAH'-NAH-KA)- Ravana's demon sister.

Sita ('SEE'-TA)- Daughter of King Janaka, wife of Rama; name literally means "furrow."

Sugriva (SOO-'GREE'-VA)- Monkey king of Kiskindha who helped Rama get Sita back.

Sumantra (SOO-'MAHN'-TRA)- Charioteer of Kosala.

Sumitra (SOO-'MEE'-TRA)- One of Dasaratha's queens and mother of twin sons Shatrughna and Lakshmana.

Tataka ('TAH'-TA-KA)- Demoness who was killed by Rama.

Valmiki (VAHL-'MEE'-KEE)- Poet and author of the Ramayana who helps Sita and her twin sons.

Vasistha (VAH-'SEESH'-TA)- Priest to King Dasaratha.

Vibhishana (VEE-'BEE'SHA-NA) - Ravana's brother who leaves Lanka to join Rama.

Vishnu ('VISH'-NOO)- God who came to earth in the form of Rama to rid the world of demons.

Vishwamitra (VISH-WAH-'MEE'TRA)- Religious man; went to forest with Rama to kill the demons that were bothering him.