

## King Yudhisthira and His Dog

[www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources](http://www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources)

### Keywords

Hinduism; Values and Issues: loyalty, devotion, heaven, dharma, non-cruelty, pride

### Notes for teachers

This story forms the end of the great Hindu epic *Mahabharata* (on which see separate information sheet). The five Pandava brothers, who are the heroes of the epic, set out to reach heaven, along with their wife Draupadi. Entering heaven in your body (rather than after death and cremation) is reserved only for the most exceptional beings. One by one, each of the six humans dies on the journey, leaving only Yudhisthira (pronounced *yoo-dish-tira*), the oldest brother, followed by a loyal dog. When he is told he cannot take the dog into heaven, Yudhisthira says he won't go.

As well as showing us all the little flaws that prevent the great heroes from entering heaven in their earthly bodies, the story demonstrates Yudhisthira's proper concern for others. He states that it would be wrong to abandon someone who has shown such devotion to him.

As Hinduism developed, the idea of devotion to a god became very important, but here it is more a question of loyalty and subservience to Yudhisthira, who is the perfect king and moral man. Yudhisthira is also the son of the god Dharma, who, as it turns out, has taken disguise as the dog in order to test his son.

'Dharma' means duty or righteousness or proper conduct, and is a key Hindu value. (It has a different meaning in Buddhism.) According to the *Mahabharata* and other early Hindu texts, each person must act according to his or her dharma, and the god Dharma is the deity who embodies this value.

Indra is the king of the gods. Brahmins are the Hindu priestly caste.

Dogs, according to early Hindu tradition, are considered unclean. However, non-cruelty is a key value of Hinduism, and Yudhisthira is concerned that no harm should come to the dog, however lowly he may be.

© Naomi Appleton, University of Edinburgh, 2016, CC BY NC.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

You are free to use, share and adapt this work. Not for commercial use.

## Questions for Discussion

### Comprehension of the story

Why can't Draupadi, Sahadeva, Nakula, Arjuna and Bhima get into heaven in their earthly bodies?

Why doesn't Yudhisthira want to go to heaven without the dog?

What qualities does Yudhisthira show in his treatment of the dog?

Why does the god Dharma test Yudhisthira?

How does Yudhisthira pass the test?

### Application to other contexts

Are you a loyal person? Is it good for people to be loyal? Why?

Should we always be loyal to others who are loyal to us?

Is it a problem to be proud? Is there a good way of being proud of what you have achieved, without being boastful?

Can you think of an occasion when you gave something up in order to help another person / animal?

### Reflecting on wider Hindu issues

What does this story tell us about Hindu beliefs about heaven and the gods?

What is dharma? Why is it important to Hinduism? What does this story tell us about dharma (the concept) and Dharma (the god)?

Why is loyalty and devotion important to Hindus?

What do Hindus believe about how we should treat animals? How does this story demonstrate these beliefs and values?

## Sources / Further Reading

This story is summarised from *Mahabharata* book 17. For further information about the *Mahabharata* see separate sheet on

[www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources](http://www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources)

For a full translation see John D. Smith (trans.) *The Mahābhārata* (Penguin Classics 2009), p.771-78 or for a readable retelling see Carole Satyamurti, *Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling* (Norton, 2015), p. 832-35.

There are several versions on YouTube including this rather nice animation in the style of a shadow puppet play: <https://youtu.be/-0JXcPvkSGE>

## King Yudhisthira and His Dog

Realising that his life was nearing its end, King Yudhisthira decided to leave his kingdom in the hands of his heir and become a renouncer. His four brothers – mighty Bhima, the archer Arjuna, and the twins Sahadeva and Nakula – decided to join him, as did their wife Draupadi. They gave up all their wealth and put on clothes made of bark. Then those five brothers - along with Draupadi as a sixth and a stray dog who followed them as a seventh - left their capital city and began their long journey.

They travelled far, crossing the Himalayan mountains and a sandy desert, eventually reaching sacred Mount Meru, the best of mountains. As they began their ascent, Draupadi fell to the ground dead.

Bhima asked Yudhisthira, “Queen Draupadi never violated dharma, so how is it that she has fallen, O king?” Yudhisthira replied, “Draupadi, though married to us all, preferred Arjuna, and today she has received the fruit of her partiality.”

Shortly afterwards, Sahadeva, the youngest of the brothers fell down dead. Bhima asked, “How is it that Sahadeva, who served us all so humbly, has fallen?” Yudhisthira replied, “Sahadeva thought nobody was his equal in wisdom, and it is for that fault that he has fallen.”

Next Nakula fell. “This brother of ours was always obedient and observant of the dharma, as well as being the handsomest man on earth, so how has he fallen?” asked Bhima. Yudhisthira replied, “Nakula has fallen because he believed that nobody equaled him in looks. Everyone gets what fate ordains, Bhima.”

Seeing that his brothers had died, Arjuna, the great warrior, fell to the ground in grief and also died. Bhima declared, “I cannot recall Arjuna ever doing anything wrong! What, then, did he do to deserve this end?” Yudhisthira replied, “Arjuna said he would burn up all his enemies in a single day, but failed to do so. He boasted and looked down on all other archers. People should do as they say they will.”

Next Bhima himself fell, and called out to Yudhisthira, “Sir, king, I have fallen! If you know the reason, please tell me.” Yudhisthira replied, “You ate too much, and boasted of your strength while dismissing others.”

From that point onwards Yudhisthira climbed the mountain alone, followed by the loyal dog.

Soon Indra, king of the gods, appeared on his chariot, and invited Yudhisthira to join him. Yudhisthira gazed at the bodies of his brothers and said, "King of the gods, grant that my brothers, and Queen Draupadi, may join me on the journey to heaven. I do not wish to go without them." Indra replied, "Do not be sad! Your brothers and sons and Draupadi are all in heaven already. They have gone to heaven before you after casting off their bodies. But you shall go to heaven in your body."

Then Yudhisthira said, "This dog has been loyal and devoted to me. Let him come with me." Indra replied, "King, today you have attained immortality like myself, and all the joys of heaven. Abandon the dog. There is no harm in this." But Yudhisthira responded, "Great king of the gods, it is difficult for a noble person to do an ignoble deed. I do not wish for glory if it means abandoning one who is devoted to me."

Indra said, "There is no place for dog-owners in heaven. Dogs disrupt the sacrifices and offerings and make them impure. You abandoned your wife and brothers on the journey. Now abandon the dog!"

Yudhisthira replied, "I left my wife and brothers because they were dead and I could be no further use to them, but this dog is alive and has taken refuge with me. I will not abandon one who is devoted to me. That would be a sin equal to killing a woman, robbing a brahmin, or harming a friend."

Hearing these words, the dog revealed himself to be the god Dharma, and praised King Yudhisthira: "King, you are the greatest of kings, with intelligence, morality and compassion. You have given up a chariot to heaven for the sake of a loyal dog. Because of this you have gained the highest heaven."

And so, praised by all the gods, Yudhisthira mounted Indra's chariot and went to heaven.