

The Brahmin and the Hunter

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Keywords

Hinduism; Beliefs: karma and rebirth, dharma, caste, killing

Notes for teachers

This story is found in the Book of the Forest (book 3) of the *Mahabharata*, one of the two great Hindu epics, where it is one of the many embedded sub-tales. For an introduction to the *Mahabharata* see separate resource sheet.

The tale addresses several important Hindu beliefs. The first is that one's position in life is determined by one's past actions, or karma. Thus a person is born as a brahmin (a high-caste priest or religious specialist) because of good deeds in the past, whereas a bad karmic load would lead to a lower rebirth, for example as a low-caste human, or a woman, or an animal. The Hindu caste system is broadly based on this idea, as the social hierarchy is morally justified by the understanding that everyone has created their own situation.

This notion of the immovability of caste is further justified by the hunter's understanding of his *dharma*, or duty. As someone born into a family of hunters, his responsibility is to be a hunter, and to do that as well as possible. By doing his *dharma* well he will achieve a better rebirth, even though killing is generally viewed as a polluting and immoral act.

However, the story also challenges some understandings of caste hierarchy as it shows a hunter as more virtuous than a brahmin. The hunter is also much better informed about the way of the universe, and teaches the brahmin about karma and rebirth as well as about the virtue of living according to one's *dharma*. He even shows the brahmin the importance of looking after one's parents, which is a universal ethical duty for all. The brahmin is also helped by the low-caste woman who first directs him to the hunter. There is some gentle mockery of brahmins here: they may be top of the caste hierarchy and accomplished ascetics, but they don't necessarily understand *dharma*! Plus they may be reborn lower down next time...

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Why is Kaushika angry at the village-woman?
Why does Kaushika decide to visit the hunter?
What does the hunter say to justify his lifestyle and all the killing that it involves?
What does the hunter say about the reason why he is a hunter?
What is the right way to behave, according to this story?

Application to other contexts

What makes someone a helpful teacher?
Can you think of any occasions when someone you weren't expecting to be able to teach you has taught you something important?
Is it wrong to be a hunter?
What does it mean to do your duty? What is duty?
Is it right to follow your family's profession?
Karma provides one explanation for why virtuous people are sometimes in unfortunate positions. What other explanations are there for why bad things happen to good people and vice versa?

Reflecting on wider Hindu issues

What does it mean to be a brahmin?
What does this story tell us about Hindu ideas of the caste system?
How does karma affect a person's rebirth?
What is dharma and how does it differ from person to person?
What does the story tell us about Hindu ideas about killing animals?
Are there any universal Hindu values in this story?

Sources / Further Reading

This story is summarised from the *Mahabharata* 3.197-206. A full translation is available in J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata vol. 3* (Chicago University Press, 1975).

The Brahmin and the Hunter

There was once a very famous brahmin sage called Kaushika. He lived as a religious ascetic, begging for his food, and seeking liberation.

One day he begged for food from a village woman, but she served the food to her husband first before offering him anything, and this made Kaushika angry. He thought she should have served him first, as the important brahmin guest. She explained that her primary responsibility – her dharma – was to look after her husband, and she told Kaushika that he should not be angry. She recommended that he visit a hunter in a nearby city, who would teach him about the dharma.

Kaushika was intrigued by the suggestion that a hunter – one of the lowest and basest occupations for a human because of the killing involved – could teach him about dharma. He went to the city to find this hunter. The hunter invited Kaushika into his home.

“This is a terrible profession, killing animals. Why do you pursue it?” asked Kaushika. “It is my family’s way of life, and I cannot abandon it. Everyone must follow their dharma,” replied the hunter.

The hunter explained to Kaushika that he was born a hunter because of bad deeds in a past life. He went on, “It is said that killing is bad, but to live is to kill. Even walking on the ground kills many living creatures. But someone who does his job well is praised as virtuous. My job may not be a good one, but I do it as well as I can, and as a result I hope to achieve a better rebirth in the future. There are a lot of disparities between people’s virtue and their occupation and status. This is the result of their past lives.”

“What did you do to earn this rebirth?” asked Kaushika. “I was a brahmin in a past life, but I liked hunting, and one day I accidentally shot an ascetic, who cursed me to be reborn as a hunter,” the hunter replied.

The hunter showed Kaushika how he honoured his parents and looked after them in their old age. Kaushika was ashamed, as he had not cared for his parent’s opinion when he decided to become an ascetic. Kaushika decided to return home and pay proper honour to his parents, and to live the best life he could. He thanked the hunter for his teaching, and went on his way.