

King Shibi and the Dove

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Keywords

Hinduism; Values and Issues: compassion, self-sacrifice, kingship

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. For an introduction to the *Mahabharata* see separate resource sheet.

The story is told by a seer to the Pandava brothers during a tour of sacred pilgrimage places. The king is known by two names, Shibi (also found in the spelling Shivi) and Ushinara, but I have here used the former as this is the most widely known.

Stories about the famous generosity of King Shibi are known throughout Indian narrative traditions. Buddhist tradition holds that King Shibi was a past rebirth of the person who became the Buddha, and stories of this generous monarch (including a similar tale to that contained here) are told as *jataka* stories, or stories of the Buddha's past lives. The Buddhist story-cycle of King Shibi is provided as a separate resource on the website.

The story captures the ideal of good kingship. A good king is one who is a protector to all his subjects. Protecting the dove is not enough, for this causes suffering and pain for the hawk and the hawk's dependents. So the king must find a way to protect both, even at the expense of his life.

Another key element here is the relationship between humans and the gods. The birds turn out to be two key Indian deities. Indra in particular is associated with testing the virtue of human beings; he does this in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain stories. The fact that this is all a test allows for a neat resolution to the story – a happy ending – while allowing for a wonderfully grisly moment of tension that demonstrates the virtue of one of India's most famous legendary kings.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Why did King Shibi offer refuge to the dove? What problems did this cause?

Why did King Shibi offer his own flesh to the hawk? Could he have offered something else instead?

Why was King Shibi's flesh never enough to weigh the same as the dove?

Why did the gods test King Shibi? What might their motivations be?

Is Shibi a good king?

Application to other contexts

What makes a good leader?

Is it good to try to help those who ask for help? What limits should we put on how much we do to help others?

What responsibilities do we have towards animals? Do we have different responsibilities towards animals than humans?

Reflecting on wider Hindu issues

Why is kindness to animals important to Hindus?

What does this story tell us about the Hindu ideal of kingship?

What is the relationship between humans and gods in this story? Is it the same as in other aspects of Hinduism that you have studied?

King Shibi is famous in Buddhist traditions as well. Why do you think the *Mahabharata*'s authors chose to include the story? Is there anything different about the Hindu story and the Buddhist story-cycle (as found in a separate resource sheet on the website)?

Sources / Further Reading

This story is summarised from the *Mahabharata* 3.130-131. A full translation is available in J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata vol. 3* (Chicago University Press, 1975).

King Shibi and the Dove

There was once a very kind and generous king called Shibi. One day he was sitting on his palace terrace when a dove flew straight into his lap, and lay trembling there. "Grant me refuge!" pleaded the dove to the king. "Fear not, little dove, for I will protect you," said the king.

Then a hawk arrived, in pursuit of the dove. "Give me my dinner," said the hawk to the king. "I cannot allow you to eat this dove," said King Shibi, "for I have granted him protection." "Then what am I supposed to eat?" asked the hawk, "I am starving and will surely die if I don't get a meal soon. And my family will starve too, if I cannot bring this dove to them."

The king offered the hawk all kinds of alternative foods, but the hawk refused, saying "I only eat fresh meat."

"Then have some of my flesh," said the king. The courtiers cried out in alarm. "Bring some scales!" commanded the king, and they brought out a huge set of scales and placed them in the centre of the terrace. On one side of the scales the king placed the dove, who was still trembling with fear. Then King Shibi took his sword and began slicing pieces of flesh off his own thigh and placing them on the other side of the scales, aiming to equal the weight of the dove. But however much flesh he added to the scales he could not equal the bird's weight. It was very strange. Despite the wailing of his courtiers and the extraordinary pain of his open wound, the king kept slicing. Eventually, unable to equal the dove's weight, the king climbed up onto the scales, declaring to the hawk: "Eat me! Spare the dove!"

At that moment the birds transformed. The dove revealed himself as the god Agni, god of the fire. The hawk revealed himself as the king of the gods, Indra. "We came to test the extent of your goodness," Indra declared, "and we are more than satisfied!" Indra healed the king's wounds and the two gods disappeared, leaving all the humans astounded by the events.