

Hanuman

or the Way
of the Wind



CHRISTINE **DEVIN**

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Author: Christine Devin

Translator: Roger Harris



616 Corporate Way

Valley Cottage, New York

www.discoverypublisher.com

editors@discoverypublisher.com

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FROM THE RAMAYANA

TALES AND LEGENDS OF INDIA
Volume 3

This series was started with the aim of providing the modern reader with a glimpse of the fascinating, but infinitely complex world of Indian sensibility. Today's mind is at times taken aback by the superimposition of different worlds in the old Indian stories. This characteristic is not the fruit of a laboured aestheticism, but is the sign of a mentality that always tries to describe terrestrial life not in outer terms, but in terms of what it hides. It is a mentality that sees the field of human action as always surrounded and influenced by other forces that one could qualify as cosmic in nature. For the Greek spirit the light of the sun is its natural atmosphere, but for the ancient Indian spirit the sun is a golden veil that hides wonders that it desires ardently to possess. Ours is not a scholarly venture but an attempt to suggest through certain stories, told in as living and simple a language as possible, a key to understanding the culture and genius of India.

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

"The Hindu has been always decried as a dreamer and mystic", writes Sri Aurobindo. "There is truth in the charge but also a singular inaccuracy. The Hindu mind, in one sense, is the most concrete in the world. It seeks after abstraction, yet is it never satisfied so long as it remains abstraction... [The Hindu] is passionate for the infinite, the unseen, the spiritual, but he will not rest satisfied with conceiving them, he insists on mapping the infinite, on seeing the unseen, on visualising the spiritual."

Thus, in this detailed "map", each Hindu divinity incarnates a great spiritual principle or power, gives concrete form to a truth of the spirit. It seems to us that becoming familiar with these gods through a retelling of their tales could teach us more about Indian culture than many an abstract study of Hinduism. We therefore invite the reader to discover here the story of one of these cosmic figures, the very popular, but too often caricatured, Hanuman.

*Should Hanuman live
Then our army, even if dead,
Will rise and live again.
Should he perish,
Then all of us, even if living,
Will die.*

— Valmiki

*The only exploit of which a monkey is capable,
Is to jump from branch to branch,
O Rama,
I am for nothing in what has occurred,
All that has been done is due to your power alone.*

—Tulsidas



Hanuman carrying Rama and his brother Lakshman on
his shoulders (*patua* from Bengal)

FOREWORD

Who has not dreamed of overleaping all obstacles? Who, tired of endlessly boxing with a recalcitrant reality has never felt like ending the bout once and for all, the sparring that leaves us reeling and groggy, and with one powerful leap find himself on the other side? Far from the exhausting back-breaking roads, on a path that is light, on the way of the wind.

According to Hindu mythology it is Hanuman who can lead us onto this path. Because to fly on the path of the wind one must become the wind, and Hanuman is the prince of the air, “Vayuputra” or the son of Vayu, God of the Wind. And what is the wind if not that which outmanoeuvres all hindrances, bypasses obstacles, finds the opening and plunges into it; chooses to caress or strike, has no fixed form

yet can take any form, always perfectly filling the space it occupies, always the exact measure of any adversary?

And is he not our most intimate companion, our very life-force, from our very first cry to the last breath we draw? With us in the exaltation of a sudden joy that fills our being, in the sighs of our discouragement, in the steady breathing of the measured race, or the rising of anger's waves, in our moments of suffocating depression and anguished doubt, in the warm relaxation of tranquillity, in everything we think or do. And yet despite this constant proximity, despite the fact that our very life is permeated by its substance, and our energy dependent on the way it circulates within us, we know little about its powers. And it is here where Hanuman, son of the Wind, comes in.

The great sages of ancient India had described and given a name to this essential principle of life. In the Vedas it was known as Vayu, God of the Wind in his outward form, but more profoundly the Lord of dynamic energy, the master of *Prana* — a word that can be translated as the Breath of life, its most

important manifestation in man being the force presiding over the distribution of air within the body, called respiration. Vayu is He who moves, breathes, expands, grows without limits. He is the immortal breath, the unbroken thread that links all our lives, gives life to each of our new embodiments, and leads us across the straits of life just as Rama seated on Hanuman's shoulders is carried across the ocean. Vayu's domain is that of the intermediate sphere, the middle realm that links spirit with matter.

In the epic of the Ramayana, which was composed much later than the Vedic hymns, Hanuman, the Monkey-God, son of Vayu, is the faithful messenger of King Rama. He represents the ideal of the highest and most ardent devotion, but underlying this, it is still possible to sense the more ancient symbolism.

But why a monkey? What is the link between Vayu, the Lord of the Wind, and the simian form that Hanuman takes on? There are many words that refer to the monkey in Sanskrit. The monkey is the animal that inhabits the forest (*vanara*), the one that jumps (*plavaga*). It is also called *kapi* (from the root

kamp, to tremble) : that which is always in a state of trepidation. The texts also describe the monkey as *chanchal*, that is to say, agitated, unstable, with a tendency to suddenly shift moods from enthusiastic to discouraged, or from fearful to aggressive. In other words, it is a being in which the nervous pranic energy manifests itself in a primal uncontrolled way. A being whose physical receptacle has difficulty containing the vital energy without its spilling over. In this sense it is a striking symbol of a certain aspect of human nature. It may not be a coincidence that one can play with the Sanskrit word *vanara* (forest dweller, monkey) reading it as *va-nara* meaning “or a man”.

Albeit a monkey, and thus associated with this force, Hanuman is also the Prince of the Wind, and therefore a master of this energy. He knows how to use and tap it, how to direct and control it and make it grow in him. One should remember that Hanuman is traditionally considered a *brahmacharin*, one who has taken the vow of celibacy, that is, in a deeper sense, one who has mastered his impulses.

But to really know Hanuman one must look even

deeper. In fact, in the evolution of Indian culture, from the ancient symbolic thought of the Vedas to the “imaginative religion” that is so characteristic of the later Hindu tales, many levels of meaning have become superimposed without in any way being exclusive. Thus, Hanuman is not only the most glorious of the kapi, he is not only the Son of the Wind and Master of the life-principle. He is also the perfect representative of that very same life, not only mastered, but entirely placed at the disposal of the divine’s power. Hanuman offers this inexhaustible spring of life to which he has access to Lord Rama, to do with as he will, whether it be for action, or to be retained and held back, much as an arrow that the great archer lets fly or not.

He allows Lord Rama to tap this magnificent vital energy and perform deeds that are either grandiose or subtle, depending on the moment’s need. Servant and ideal messenger, for whatever the circumstance, he is always inwardly connected with and inspired by Lord Rama, his highest happiness lies in the perfect accomplishment of the mission with which he has been confided. His only aim and goal is that of

ramakaryam, “the work of Rama”, and if one can speak of Hanuman’s personal joy, it is that of the ecstasy of a musical instrument supremely played by a master artist.

One thus sees that two major elements of Indian spiritual search are combined in Hanuman : Shakti and Bhakti, power and devotion. The extracts chosen here are an attempt to highlight these two complimentary sides of Hanuman. We have sometimes borrowed from Valmiki, the creator of the original epic in Sanskrit, and sometimes from Tulsidas, a great sixteenth century poet who wrote a version of the Ramayana in the popular language of the time.



Prince Rama, son of the king of Ayodhya, has been exiled from the kingdom for fourteen years. He lives in the forest accompanied by his brother and his wife Sita. One day Sita is abducted by the demon king Ravana. Rama desperately searches for her, ranging throughout the forest with his brother. He meets Sugreev, a monkey king who has been banished from his capital by his brother, Vali. At the urging of Hanuman, the wise and perceptive counsellor of Sugreev, a treaty is concluded between Rama and the deposed monkey king. Rama helps Sugreev to kill Vali and reclaim his kingdom. A little later Sugreev, having become king, sends out several expeditions in different directions to try and locate Sita's whereabouts. Hanuman is part of the group led by Angad, the son of Vali, whose relationship with his uncle, Sugreev, is ambiguous. This band of monkeys has been ordered to explore the southern regions and to return and report to Sugreev within a month.

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Feeling that they were nearing their goal, they redoubled their efforts, loudly encouraging each other, their raucous cries echoing each other from tree to tree. But just as they were reaching the outskirts of the forest, a terrifying unknown noise — at once the rumbling of furious war-bound chariots surging forth from the deepest reaches of the infinite as well as the roaring of an unknown beast with thousands of mouths — drowned out the sounds of their voices. They froze as it breathed heavily, rolled over, lashed out. Motionless they listened, stuck to the sands. Then with extreme caution, casting nervous glances right and left, they began to slowly advance and scale a last white dune.

Suddenly in front of them was what seemed an immense and moving wall. The Ocean! A hostile space as far as the eye could see. In places it seemed asleep — a deceptive unsettling calm that veiled a boiling liquid rage. Elsewhere it seemed to enjoy throwing up its ever higher waves just to watch the cascading streams and swishing manes of foam. Farther in the distance one could make out rearing grey mountain-like masses of water, beneath which no doubt swarmed countless demons of the depths. On the horizon, superimposed bluish lines receded through a trembling vapour's haze into the infinite. And here, the mournful eye could only admit defeat.

There was no way to cross this ocean, it could not be done!

Stalled, the army of monkeys considered this immensity, this impossibility. Then, one after the other they fell listless to the sand. They who only recently had been leaping exuberantly from branch to branch, filling the air with their enthusiastic cries, were now reduced to small dark piles in the blinding light, disconsolate and forlorn as they faced the ceaseless din of the ever-crashing waves.

Angad, prince Angad, the chief of the expedition, tried with a few well chosen words to exhort them to courage but his words seemed to lose themselves like spindrift in the ocean vasts of space. A stupor reigned throughout the afternoon. As night came the monkeys fell asleep in the same position.

The following morning Angad gathered the elders and held counsel.

“I do not need to remind you,” he began, “that the time accorded to us by our king Sugreev to find Sita has expired. Now, we have come to suspect that she is a prisoner of the fearsome Ravana in his kingdom of Lanka, eight hundred leagues from here and surrounded by the sea on all sides. To return to our capital having failed in our mission would expose us to the gravest of dangers. Sugreev promised his friend Rama that he would find his wife: he would never forgive us for having failed. If we want to be able to return home, to see our wives and children once again, it is imperative that one of us crosses the ocean and establishes contact with Sita. Who will save us? Who amongst the most agile monkeys is capable of leaping that distance? Who has this

capacity?”

Not one of the monkeys assembled around Angad opened his mouth. The whole army seemed petrified.

Angad spoke again but this time his voice betrayed his anxiety: “Speak! May each one step forward and announce what he can accomplish, what distance he can cross.”

Reluctantly, one after the other, the monkey chiefs then spoke. One could leap ten leagues, another declared that twenty leagues was the most he could leap, a third spoke of fifty leagues. Then the famous Jambavan, the elder respected by all, addressed those assembled. In his youth he would have been able to accomplish such an exploit, but his body was now old and would certainly not be able to make this extraordinary leap of eight hundred leagues.

Angad, whose furrowed brow revealed his anxiety, seeing that none was able to accomplish the one feat that would extract them from the situation they were in, announced: “I feel I could just manage the distance and leap to Lanka. This done, I do not

know however if I could make it back. But in any case, I should at least try..."

Jambavan stopped him. "No, it is not correct that he who leads the expedition be sent out on a mission. The commander of an army cannot leave his troops. "

"Then", declared Angad "there is nothing left for us but to perish. Better to die of hunger here than to return to Kiskindha and face the wrath of Sugreev. I refuse to submit myself to such a humiliation. Do what you want, but I declare to you that I shall not move from this shore. May death come and claim me here !"

As Jambavan opened his mouth to dissuade Angad from such an extreme decision his eyes fell on a solitary figure whose back was turned to the gathering. Sitting apart, silent and immobile as if indifferent to the critical debate underway, Hanuman sat facing the sea absorbed in God knows what dream.

Hanuman! Son of Vayu, God of the Wind: Hanuman of whom it was said that he could take any form his heart desired! Why was he silent? Had he forgotten his power?

“O Hanuman, look at this army, once so powerful and now so stricken, look at these warriors in whom only yesterday life overflowed, but who now like a collection of rags sit stooped and shamed, eyes stained with brine and tears.

“Would you leave them here to die?”

The monkeys most of whom had buried their heads in their hands, parted their fingers ever so slightly, daring to cast a side glance at the one to whom Jambavan spoke.

“Hanuman, you whom Vayu engendered by blowing into the robes of Anjana, the nymph with the beautiful thighs, remember how already as a child you traversed the wide spaces that separate earth from heaven. Have you forgotten the day you sought to catch the sun, thinking it a ripe fruit? How high and far you leapt! And even when its brightness made you stagger back, far from admitting defeat, you gathered breath and again lunged forward to seize it. Indra himself had to intervene, hurling his lightning bolt to put an end to your audacity. You were thrown down backwards and you smashed your chin against a mountain peak. But this



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