

The Story of Hanuman

The **Ramayana** is one of the most important epic stories from ancient India. It tells the tale of **Rama**, a legendary prince who must rescue his wife, **Sita**, who is kidnapped by the demon King **Ravana**.

Hanuman is a **Hindu** god whose shape is half-monkey, half-human. He is the most devoted follower of Prince Rama, so he features a lot in the Ramayana as well as lots of other traditional Hindu stories and artworks. Hanuman has special powers and qualities that he uses to help Rama rescue his wife Sita. Because Hanuman uses his powers in the service of others he has come to symbolise the perfect Hindu who has lots of special qualities but is not selfish with them, and uses his abilities to help people.

Here we have a version of the story of Hanuman. Your challenge is to familiarise yourself with the Hindu qualities and attributes of Hanuman, and then read through his story, identifying examples of him using or developing his attributes. This will help us learn what it is about Hanuman that makes him the model for the perfect Hindu.



Indian Ganjifa playing cards featuring Hanuman
(Date unknown)

Hanuman's Attributes

Hanuman has several attributes or qualities that make him a model whose example Hindus can follow. These attributes represent some of the core **concepts** of Hinduism - here's some of them:

Tantra means 'weaving'. Hanuman is connected to the Hindu belief that all living things are connected, or 'woven together'.

Brahmachari means 'self-control'. Hindus need to be able to control their desires for things like money and pleasure, so that they can focus on more important things like helping others.

The Hindu concepts of **Kurūp** and **Sundar** mean that while someone can be 'ugly on the outside' (Kurūp), if they are a good Hindu they will be 'beautiful on the inside' (Sundar).

Kama-rupin means 'shapeshifting', meaning that Hanuman can become smaller than the smallest opening or larger than the largest opponent. This is connected to the Hindu concept of **Vighnahartā**, which means 'removing obstacles'. Hindus believe that the Gods and Goddesses can help them overcome any problem.

Hinduism encourages a combination of the values of **Shakti** and **Bhakti**. Shakti means 'strength' or 'power', while Bhakti is 'devotion' or 'worship'. A good Hindu should be strong and powerful, but should use their power in devotion to the Gods and to help other people, rather than for their own interest.

Once you are comfortable with these concepts, read the story of Hanuman below and look out for how Hanuman demonstrates each of these Hindu values.



Illustrated page of a book showing Hanuman serving Rama and Sita.
Unknown Artist (1825-1875)
Durham University Library and Collections

Hanuman's Birth

According to legend, Hanuman's birth took place at the same time as Prince Rama's: their stories are woven together from the very beginning. Rama's father, a King, was praying to the Gods that he would soon have children - while at the same time, Hanuman's mother **Anjana**, who was half-monkey, was also worshipping the Gods.

The Gods appreciated the King's prayers, and sent him some heavenly pudding called **payasam**, to share between his three wives. This led to the births of Prince Rama - the main character in the Ramayana - and his brothers. Because the Gods also appreciated the worship of Anjana, they sent **Vayu**, the God of the wind and the air, to snatch a spoonful of pasayam pudding while it was floating down through the sky to the King.

Vayu delivered the payasam to Anjana, who ate it and thanked the gods. This spoonful of pudding caused Anjana to give birth to a baby boy, Hanuman. Hanuman had the shape of a monkey like his mother Anjana, but Vayu took the young boy to be his own son, and so Hanuman is considered to be a God.

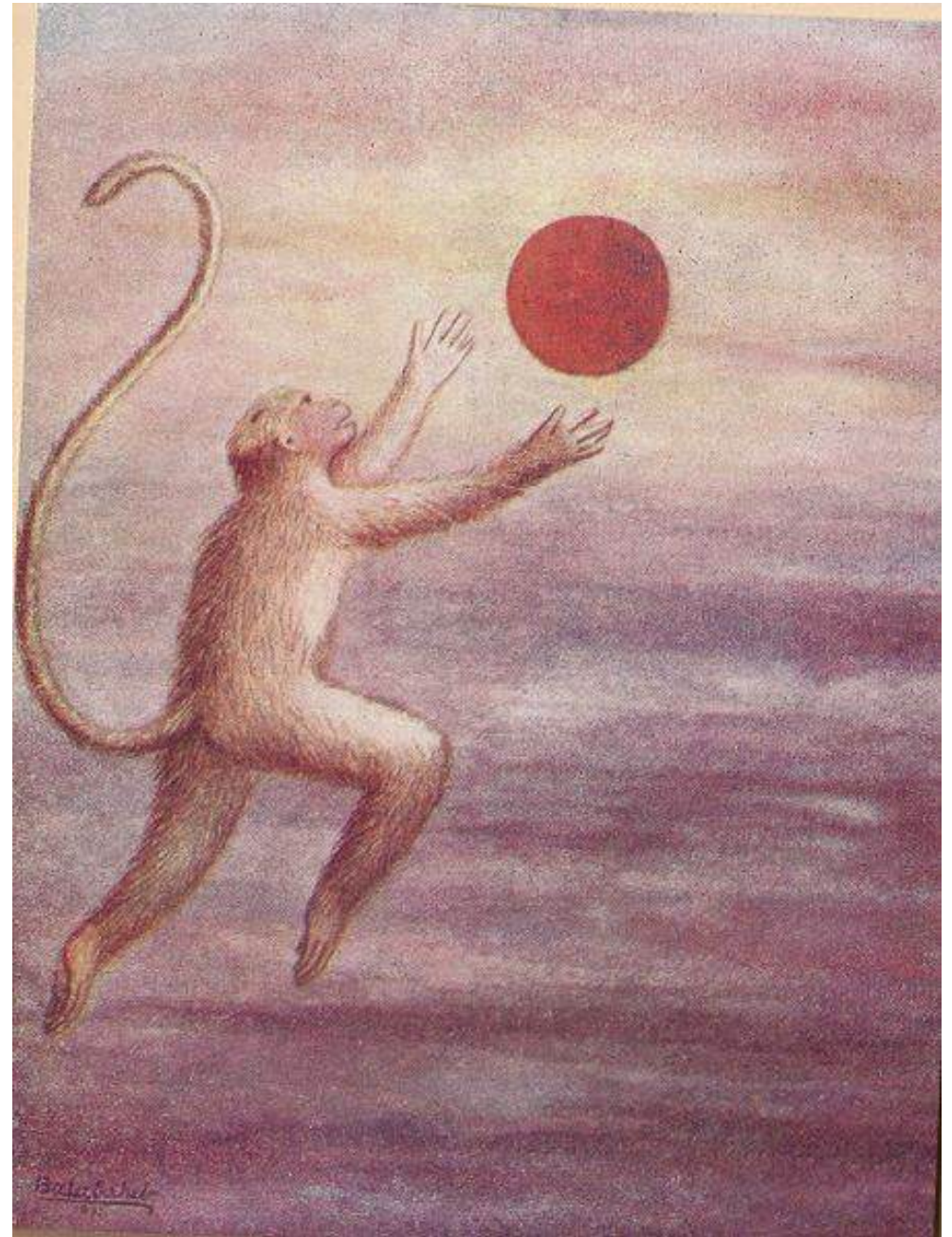


Reaching for the Sun

One morning when he was a young child, Hanuman woke up and felt extremely hungry. He saw a big sphere floating above him, bright red and glistening. Thinking with his belly, Hanuman assumed the sphere was a ripe and juicy piece of fruit, so he leapt up to grab and eat it. However, the red sphere was not a piece of fruit, but the rising sun coming up over the horizon!

To punish Hanuman for his mistake and to stop him from snatching the sun out of the sky, the King of Gods [Indra](#) intervened and struck Hanuman with a thunderbolt. It hit Hanuman on his chin, and he fell to the earth - dead - and with a broken jaw. This is in fact where Hanuman gets his name: the word Hanuman originally meant 'disfigured jaw'.

His father, Vayu the God of air, became very upset and ran away from the world. This meant that there was no air for living beings to breathe, so all the gods, people and animals began to suffer terribly. This led Lord [Shiva](#), one of the most powerful Gods, to bring Hanuman back to life. Vayu was so relieved that he returned to the world and living beings were able to breathe the air again.



Hanuman's Powers

Indra, the King of the Gods, struck Hanuman with a thunderbolt, blessing Hanuman and making him as strong as Indra himself. Many other gods also gave Hanuman powers and protection: the God **Brahma** gave him the ability to grow bigger or shrink smaller, the god **Agni** granted a wish that meant fire couldn't hurt Hanuman, the god **Varuna** granted a wish meaning water couldn't harm him, and his father Vayu blessed Hanuman so that he could be as fast as the wind.

But Hanuman was still young and foolish, and began using his special powers on innocent people as pranks. One day he pranked an old man who had spent years meditating and trying to focus on praying to the Gods. In fury at being pranked and at having his meditation disturbed, the old man cast a curse on Hanuman to make him forget his powers so he lost all the abilities given to him by the Gods.

The Quest to find Sita

Many years pass, and Hanuman becomes more mature and sensible, and gets a job as the servant of Prince Rama. But then Rama's wife, the Princess Sita, is kidnapped by his enemy - the demon King Ravana, who is very jealous of Rama's popularity and Sita's beauty.

Rama is devastated that Sita has gone, and sends his servants out all over India to search for her. Hanuman is sent south, and eventually comes to the very bottom of India, where the land turns to ocean. On the other side of the ocean Hanuman could see the island of **Lanka** - but it was too far for him to jump or to swim.

Hanuman wished that he still had his powers and abilities from the Gods so that he could jump or swim to the island. He was upset that he was unable to serve his master Rama, and prayed to the Gods for advice. They saw that Hanuman no longer wanted to use his powers to prank people, but wanted to help them instead. He was given back his powers because he had matured, learned to control himself, and because he didn't want to use the powers for himself.

Suddenly powerful again, Hanuman transformed into the size of mountain, and flew across the narrow channel to Lanka. Upon landing, he discovered a city ruled by the evil King Ravana and his demon followers, so he shrank down to the size of an ant and snuck in.



Print of a scene from Ramayana showing Hanuman's strength

B.G. Sharma (21st century)

Durham University Library and Collections

The Battle of Lanka

In the city on Lanka, Hanuman finds Princess Sita locked in a prison. In ancient India it was believed that only a husband should protect and save his wife, so Hanuman left Sita in her prison and went to get Prince Rama. Rama arrived at Ravana's castle and declared war on the demon king. The fighting that took place was called the **Battle of Lanka**, and during the chaos, Rama was able to rescue his wife Sita.

While this was happening, however, Rama's brother **Lakshmana** was injured in the battle. Lakshmana's wounds were so bad that the Prince's doctor was certain he would die unless he was very quickly given medicine made from a magical herb from a **Himalayan** mountain. The Himalayan mountains are thousands of miles from Lanka, at the other end of India, and so Hanuman with his restored powers was the only one strong and fast enough to make the journey so quickly.

Hanuman flew like the wind to the mountain, but when he arrived he discovered that there were thousands of herbs on the mountainside, and he did not know which one he needed to pick. He did not want to take the wrong herb back, so he grew to an enormous size, ripped the mountain from the Earth, and flew back to the battle carrying the mountain under his arm. The Prince's doctor was able to find the magic herb, make the medicine, and save Lakshmana's life.



Print depicting a scene from the Bhagavad Gita (another Hindu epic) in which Arjuna, Krishna, and Hanuman head to war.
B.G. Sharma (21st century)
Durham University Library and Collections



Print of Hanuman carrying the mountain
B.G. Sharma (21st century)
Durham University Library and Collections

Hanuman's Heart

At the end of the Battle of Lanka, Rama transformed himself to reveal that all along he had in fact been the God Vishnu in disguise as a human! He uses his godly powers to defeat Ravana and his army of demons.

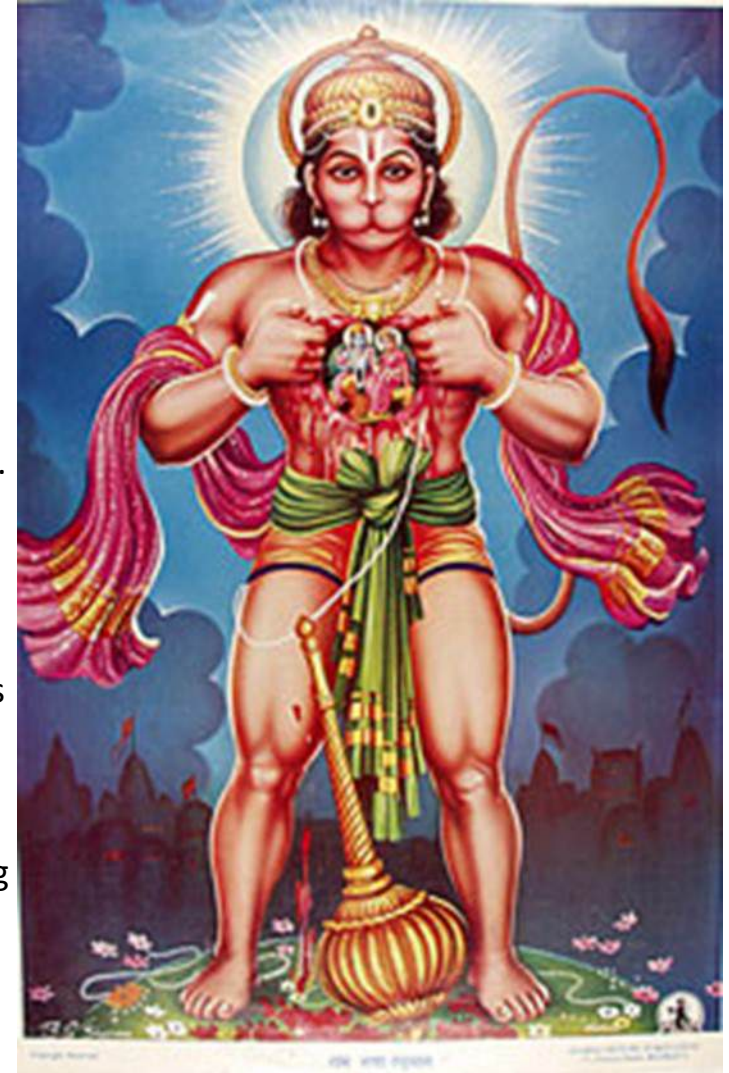
Rama eventually returns to his hometown and becomes King. After blessing all those who helped him in the battle with gifts, he gave Hanuman the finest presents as a reward, but Hanuman immediately threw them away. Many of Rama's other servants were confused by this action and became angry, thinking that Hanuman was ungrateful.

Hanuman explained that he did not need a gift to remember Rama, because Rama and his wife Sita would always be in his heart. Some of the servants were still upset and demanded that Hanuman prove what he said. So Hanuman took his sword and sliced into his chest, tearing his heart in two. Opening his heart, he showed the other servants that inside was painted a picture of Rama and Sita.

Hanuman was dying from the wound in his chest, but he had proven that he was truly devoted to Rama and Sita. Rama cured him and blessed him with immortality - meaning that he would never die. Hanuman tried to refuse this blessing too, and said all he wanted was a place at Rama and Sita's feet so that he could worship them. But Rama truly appreciated Hanuman and loved him, so blessed him with immortality anyway!

Task:

Make a table listing the Hindu concepts we have learned: Tantra; Brahmachari; Kurūp and Sundar; Kama-rupin and Vighnahartā; Shakti and Bhakti. For each one, make a note of whereabouts in his story Hanuman demonstrates or develops that quality. You might also want to do your own research into other Hindu values, and add them to your table. There are thousands of ideas and lessons to be learned from the Hindu stories, but as a model of a perfect Hindu devotee Hanuman is the perfect place to start!



Print of Hanuman opening his heart
B.G. Sharma (21st century)
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