

6. The Search for Sita

*If the mind is cleansed of all dirt,
And lofty thoughts are nourished,
Then to the wise would be visible,
Entire Creation, resplendent with Divinity.*

Students, Embodiments of Love!

Those who want to harvest *Atmic* Bliss should follow the example of Rama. Those people who want to find fulfilment in life must live by the ideals set by Sita. This is the message of the story of Rama and Sita, as depicted in the *Ramayana*. Ravana, who could not conquer his weakness for women, was the cause for the death of his sons, brothers and relatives. He was the cause for the destruction of Lanka. How did it all end? It ended in the destruction of Ravana and brought him disrepute that outlived his death. It was the evil desire of Ravana that brought his end. If only he had controlled his desire, his sons, brothers, and relatives would have survived and prospered. The selfishness of Ravana and his uncontrollable desire brought endless sorrow to his people.

Surpanakha Arrives

One day, while Rama and Sita were entering their hut in Panchavati, guarded by Lakshmana, a lady was seen walking toward them. Though Rama and Sita did not see her, the ever-watchful Lakshmana spotted her and asked, "Who are you?" The lady ignored him and went straight to Rama. Rama too asked the same question. The lady countered by asking a

question herself, "What does it matter to you as to who I am? By the way, who are you?" Rama then introduced Himself as the son of Dasaratha. The lady responded by introducing herself, "I am the sister of the brave Ravana. I am the sister of Kumbhakarna and Vibishana, Khara, and Dhushana. My name is Surpanakha." When Rama asked her to explain the purpose of her visit, she replied without a trace of modesty that she wanted to marry Him!

Rama and Lakshmana could not help smiling at the behaviour of Surpanakha and decided to have some fun at her expense. Rama said to her, "Oh lady! You are the very embodiment of beauty. It is not possible for Me to marry you since I have a wife of My own. See there! That young man will be a fitting husband for you, since he is not accompanied by his wife." Taking Rama seriously, she went to Lakshmana and said, "Lakshmana, are you ready to marry me?" To this Lakshmana replied, "Yes, I am ready. But I do not wish to reduce you to the lowly status of a servant. Since I am the servant of Sri Rama, you too will become the servant of Sri Rama if you marry me. You are the sister of Ravana who is of a great royal lineage. It is not proper on your part to become a servant by marrying me. Hence, marry my Master Sri Rama, instead of wishing to marry me."

In this way, the two brothers had fun teasing Surpanakha. In the end, Surpanakha came to Rama and said, "If You permit me, I will kill Sita and Lakshmana so that both of us can live happily in this forest." Saying this she rushed toward Sita in order to

swallow her. Rama sent a signal to Lakshmana by looking at the sky. The intelligent Lakshmana, who had a thorough understanding of the signs and gestures of Rama, concluded that Rama was asking him to cut off her nose and ears, since the sky signifies sound and sound in turn signifies ears.

Surpanakha was now devoid of her ears and nose. She screamed furiously, calling her brothers Khara and Dhushana to her rescue. In a trice Rama wiped out Khara, Dhushana, and a host of terrible demons who accompanied them. Surpanakha then rushed to her brother Ravana and related her pitiful story. Ravana burned with fury when he heard her and at once dispatched a force of forty thousand demons to destroy Rama. Meanwhile, Lakshmana thought that it was not wise to keep Sita there, since there would be an encounter between Rama and the demons. He took Sita to a cave and stood guard at its entrance, while Rama fearlessly faced the forty thousand demons. He discharged an arrow, which multiplied itself into forty thousand arrows and attacked the demons, annihilating them all in no time.

The Cause for the *Ramayana*

Surpanakha's anger and frustration increased on seeing the death of the vast army of demons at the hand of Rama, and she now resolved to bring about the death of Rama and Lakshmana at any cost. She said to Ravana, "Brother, Sita, the wife of Rama, is the most beautiful lady I have ever seen. She is a lady worthy to be your wife. Somehow or other, bring her to your

palace. This would be the greatest achievement in your life.”

*People do not hear noble words,
But they eagerly hear evil words.
How can these people ever realise You?
Of what avail is all their intelligence?*

Evil people easily succumb to evil words. The words of Surpanakha created a storm in the mind of Ravana. He worked hard at hatching a plot to abduct Sita and make her his wife. He summoned Maricha to help in the abduction of Sita. He asked him to don the guise of a golden deer and draw Rama away from Sita, so that he could abduct Sita.

Maricha, who had earlier witnessed the prowess and sanctity of Rama, tried to reason with Ravana, saying, “Ravana, you do not know the matchless strength and prowess of Rama. There is none equal to Him in the world. Your power and prowess are infinitesimally small when compared with the infinite power of Rama. You will only bring about the destruction of your life and kingdom!”

The Golden Deer

Inflamed by the words of Maricha, Ravana roared, “O Maricha! You are giving too much credit to the hapless and helpless humans who are roaming in the forest. Sita is fit to be with me for I am omnipotent and omniscient.” Ravana then sternly warned Maricha that he would kill him if he did not obey him. Maricha thought to himself: “If I do not obey Ravana I will definitely die at his hands. On the other hand, if I come to

You, Rama, as a golden deer, You will chase me and I will certainly die at Your hands. Either way, death is inevitable. It is better to die by Your hands than by those of wicked Ravana.” So praying, he agreed to carry out the wish of Ravana. Maricha then turned himself into an enchanting golden deer and played about in the vicinity of Rama’s hut in Panchavati. Sita was fascinated by the deer. She told Rama,

*Hear my prayer, O my Lord! I love this
golden deer.
Fetch it for me, O Rama, and fulfil my de-
sire thereby.
I will play with this golden deer,
In this lovely hut that my brother-in-law
has built for me.*

Sita had never before asked for the fulfilment of any wish. Rama went after the golden deer to capture it for her.

In the meantime, Ravana abducted Sita. He then mortally wounded Jatayu, when the bird obstructed him in the sky to prevent the abduction of Sita. Rama and Lakshmana returned to find the empty cottage. They searched the forest thoroughly. Every bush and corner, every valley and every dale was searched for Sita. Rama, the all-knowing One, knew the whereabouts of Sita but pretended as though He did not. While searching for Sita, Rama and Lakshmana entered a forest. There they saw a strange monster, with its head in the place of its stomach.

They could not help laughing at the sight of this monster. Becoming curious, they began to observe him.

Suddenly, Kabhanda, the strange monster, caught both of them in his hands. Both the brothers struggled to free themselves from the iron grip of Kabhanda but they failed. Lakshmana, who thought that death was inevitable at the hands of Kabhanda, said to Rama that he would become the food of Kabhanda so that Kabhanda would release Rama. He said, "Rama, allow me this favour of helping You in this way." But Rama refused to listen to the words of Lakshmana. He said, "O Lakshmana, you are the most virtuous one in this world. One can never get a brother like you. Let Me become the food for Kabhanda. You go and find Sita and protect her." In this way, each brother vied with the other to sacrifice himself for the sake of the other. One can never find such ideal love between brothers anywhere in the world. While there was hatred between brothers like Vali and Sugriva, Vibhishana and Ravana, there was only pure love between Rama and Lakshmana. In the end, the brothers decided to destroy Kabhanda and axed both his hands.

An angel immediately emerged from the body of Kabhanda and said, "Rama, today I am freed from my curse by the touch of Your Divine body! Once upon a time, I was the son of a Sage. But I was turned into a monster by a curse that I earned due to my evil deeds. You have now freed me from my curse, and I am eternally grateful to You. Not far from this place is the hermitage of Sage Matanga. There, an old devoted lady is eagerly awaiting Your arrival."

The two brothers then traveled north and sighted the hermitage of Sage Matanga. There they saw Sabari, a great devotee of Rama. Her master, Sage Matanga, at the time of casting away his body, had told her that Rama and Lakshmana would come there, and that she should wait for their arrival. Though extremely old, she held on to life in order to obey the command of Sage Matanga and to receive Rama and Lakshmana in the hermitage. She offered them her humble hospitality, washed their feet with water, and sprinkled the water on her head. Satisfied, she then cast off her body. However, while dying, she directed Rama to move in the northern direction, to meet Sugriva at the mountain Rishyamuka. From the mountain top Sugriva observed them approaching and wondered whether they were sent by Vali, his enemy. He then sent Hanuman, his minister, to discover the identity of the two visitors.

Befriending Sugriva

Hanuman was the embodiment of peace, virtue, strength and wisdom. He had mastered the four *Vedas* and was well versed in the scriptures. Hanuman was a past master in etiquette and courtesy and went as an emissary to meet the brothers. Assuming the guise of a Brahmin, he began talking to them. He heard their story from the beginning to the end, and decided to take them to Sugriva, who lived on the mountain top. Hanuman volunteered to carry Rama and Lakshmana to the mountain top on his shoulders. There, Hanuman related to Sugriva the story of the two brothers.

When Sugriva heard about the abduction of Sita, he summoned a soldier to bring a bundle of ornaments that some monkeys had found in the forest. Rama asked Lakshmana to find out if the ornaments in the bundle belonged to Sita or not. Lakshmana opened the bundle and started shedding tears. He said, "O brother! I can identify only the toe rings that sister-in-law wore, since I always noticed them when I used to prostrate before her feet every day in the morning." Lakshmana was the embodiment of purity and virtue. He is a worthy ideal to be emulated by students. Though he lived for thirteen years in the company of Rama and Sita, he had never looked at the face of Sita.

Rama would always praise Lakshmana for his great virtues, but Lakshmana would modestly say "Rama! I am Your servant. You are Lord Narayana Himself. This is the effect of Your company." Virtuous people are always modest and humble.

On the Rishyamuka mountain, Rama and Sugriva set the seal of friendship. Rama promised to help Sugriva in exchange for the help he would render to Him in searching for Sita. Sugriva decided to test the strength of Rama, to find out whether He was stronger than his brother Vali. Once, Vali shot an arrow that pierced through five trees, one after the other. Sugriva asked Rama whether He would be able to emulate this feat. Rama felt pity for Sugriva, since he could not recognise Rama's Divinity. Only equals can judge equals; small ones can never grasp the powers of the great. Since Rama needed Hanuman for His mission, and

since Hanuman belonged to the clan of Sugriva, He agreed to face the trial of strength set by Sugriva.

Rama discharged His arrow. It not only pierced through five trees but even crossed the mountains beyond. Sugriva immediately felt repentant for doubting the strength of Rama and sealed his friendship with Rama, with fire as the witness. Rama assured him that He would stand by him and crown him as king. Rama felt that Sugriva was punished by Vali, for no fault of his. Vali had committed the most heinous act of appropriating the wife of Sugriva, when one should actually consider the wife of one's younger brother as one's own daughter. Hence, Rama decided to punish Vali for his unrighteousness. On the strength of the promise given by Rama, Sugriva dashed to the mansion of Vali and challenged him to a fight. But poor Sugriva had to flee, severely battered by the blows of Vali.

Rama persuaded Sugriva to challenge Vali once again, assuring him that He would definitely kill Vali this time. While the two brothers were locked in mortal combat, Rama, hiding behind a tree, discharged an arrow at Vali and killed him. Many denounce this act of Rama, asserting that it was not proper on His part to have killed Vali while hiding behind a tree. All said and done, Rama's act can be justified on three counts: Firstly, hunters shoot an animal by hiding themselves. Secondly, no one could defeat Vali face to face, since he had earned a boon by which half of the strength of his opponent would flow into him in a face-to-face fight. Thirdly, if Vali were to fall at Rama's feet when Rama

appeared in front of him, Rama would be forced to give him shelter and consequently break the promise given to Sugriva. The justification for the act of Rama lies in these three reasons. Vali himself, while dying, caught hold of the hands of Rama, admitted his mistake, and said that what Rama did was justified. He prayed to Rama to crown his brother Sugriva as the King of Kishkindha and to make his son Angada the Crown Prince. Later, Rama fulfilled the promise given to Vali.

After Vali's death, two months passed, but no action was taken by Sugriva to help Rama. Rama then sent Lakshmana to warn Sugriva. Lakshmana told Sugriva, "You have forgotten to honour your word after receiving help from Rama." Sugriva humbly said to Lakshmana, "It is the rainy season now. The climate is not conducive for the monkeys to move about searching for Sita. I can never forget the help rendered to me by Rama. Very soon my emissaries will comb every forest and valley for Sita."

Hanuman in Lanka

Sugriva sent the soldiers of his army in the four directions, in search of Sita. He selected Hanuman, who merited the titles *Balavantha* (the powerful one) and *Dheemantha* (the intellectual one), for the task of searching for Sita in Lanka. Hanuman had all the qualifications to be Rama's emissary to Lanka since he was strong, steady and intelligent. He firmly resolved that he would find Sita at any cost and work on the task with one-pointed attention, devotion, and dedication. Nothing would deter the iron resolve of Hanuman to trace Sita's whereabouts. He even looked

into the bed chamber of Ravana, to find if Sita was held a prisoner there. Though, he moved in the bedrooms of the people in Lanka, his mind never wavered. He found women sleeping in all sorts of postures and positions, but never once did an evil thought enter the mind of Hanuman.

At one place, he found an extremely beautiful woman, sleeping in the bedchamber of Ravana. For a moment he thought that she might be Sita, for she was extremely beautiful. Immediately he regretted having had such a thought. He knew for certain that Sita would never agree to occupy the bedchamber of the evil Ravana. Hanuman then made a thorough search of Lanka to trace out Sita, but he failed. Deeply frustrated, he climbed to the top of a tree on the sea shore and he desired to commit suicide by plunging into the sea. The very thought that he was not able to perform the task assigned by Rama gnawed deeply at his heart. Then all of a sudden, he realised that he had not searched for Sita in the Ashoka grove, which he spotted from his vantage point. He leapt toward the grove.

While Hanuman was trying to enter the garden, he was captured by the eldest son of Ravana and brought to the court of Ravana, who sat on a high throne. Finding Ravana, who was full of evil, seated so high, Hanuman thought that being a devotee of Rama he should not be at a lower level. He increased the length of his tail, coiled it like a seat, sat on it, and rose much higher than Ravana's throne. Hanuman then felt satisfied that he had occupied a pedestal higher than that of Ravana.

There then ensued a furious exchange of words between Ravana and Hanuman.

Ravana: *O monkey! Who are you? You have spoilt my grove. Who sent you to Lanka?*

Hanuman: *The great Rama, the King of kings, who had cut off the nose of your sister, has sent me.*

Ravana: *Why do you address me so disrespectfully?*

Hanuman: *I am the servant of Lord Rama. I am at liberty to address you, a sinner, thus.*

Ravana felt frightened, looking at the power and prowess of Hanuman. He thought that when a mere monkey had so much courage and strength, the followers of Rama must be much greater than him. Ravana decided to humble Hanuman by setting fire to his tail, for the tail is very dear to a monkey. Yards of cloth were brought to wrap around the monkey's tail, and it was set on fire. Hanuman leapt from mansion to mansion, setting fire to every house with his burning tail. After causing incalculable damage to Lanka, Hanuman plunged into the ocean to extinguish the flames on his tail.

When he surveyed Lanka burning furiously, Hanuman regretted his action. He thought that Sita might be burnt in the flames. Hanuman rushed to the Ashoka grove to find out if Sita was safe. Since he had never seen Sita before, he found it difficult to identify her amongst the numerous ladies in the grove. At last,

he noticed a lean lady with downcast eyes under a tree. He wondered whether she was Sita. He then started reciting the story of Rama to check if the lady under the tree was Sita or not. While he was reciting the story, the lady under the tree looked up with tears streaming down her face.

Hanuman sees Sita

At that time, Sita was in the company of Sarama, the wife of Vibhishana, and her two daughters, Ajata and Trijata. Hanuman found that these three ladies were the only friends of Sita in Lanka. It was due to the solace and assurance provided by them that Sita survived. Hanuman then dropped Rama's ring in front of the lady under the tree, to further confirm whether she was Sita. The lady grasped the ring with great ecstasy and showered a volley of questions at Hanuman. She asked him, "Are you the messenger of Rama, or are you a trickster sent by Ravana to deceive me? The demons here assume strange forms and indulge in strange deeds." To impress upon Sita that he was indeed the messenger of Rama, Hanuman then ripped open his heart to show Rama installed there. Looking at the image of Rama imprinted on the heart of Hanuman, Sita fainted. Hanuman then became completely certain that the lady was indeed Sita.

Without wasting any time, Hanuman instantaneously leapt across the ocean to convey the message of Sita's whereabouts, to Rama. While the monkeys were busy eating fruits in Madhuvana, Hanuman, forsaking food and sleep, hurried to Rama to convey the good news. He said, "Sri Rama! Sita is verily a jewel amongst women, chaste and virtuous. Her plight is like

that of a parrot confined in a cage of arrows. She was surrounded by many demons, who were brandishing their swords to kill her. I found Sita trembling at the sight of these terrible women.” Hearing these words of Hanuman, Rama, overcome with emotion, wanted to rush to Lanka to fight Ravana at once. Hanuman and Sugriva restrained Rama and told Him that it would take some time to make arrangements for the battle against Ravana. All the great warriors then rallied together to hold deliberations and devise strategies to defeat Ravana.

The battle between Rama and Ravana is the battle between righteousness and unrighteousness, truth and untruth. It is an eternal battle, which wages in the human heart. *Prema*, which represents Rama, *Atma*, which signifies Sita, *kama*, which stands for Ravana, are seated in the same human heart.

We should not confine the scope and significance of the *Ramayana* only to the physical plane. The inner *Ramayana* is most beneficent, for it is full of lessons for mankind.

Rama displayed great intellectual acumen and alertness in drawing up plans for defeating the enemy. The *Ramayana* is a manual of military strategies and astuteness. Rama, as the Leader, knew who should be given what responsibility and how it should be discharged. He had the ability to appoint the right person to the right position. While fighting the battle against Ravana, Rama observed the principles of *dharma*. He never took advantage of the weakness of his adversary,

but gave ample opportunity for the enemy to prove his strength. The example of Rama shines as an eternal star, even in the realms of the battlefield.

Hence, the story of Rama is sacred, ideal, nectarine and blissful. Love Rama, and through Love, realise Him. Be one with Him. That is true Liberation.

