

HUNDRED QUESTIONS

from the Mahabharata

translated by

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Read to the end of the paragraph that begins “He wept and lamented aloud,” on page 463. Do you predict that Yudhistira will suffer the same fate as his brothers?



Yudhistira (right), in a scene from *The Mahabharata*, a film by Peter Brook.

THE FIVE PANDAVA BROTHERS

Yudhistira (yōō-dē'stē-rə): the eldest and most capable brother.

Bhima (bē'mə): second son of Pandu.

Arjuna (ār'jōō-nə): the third son and greatest warrior of the epic.

Nakula (nā'kōō-lə): one of the twins born to Madri, second wife of Pandu.

Sahadeva (sā-hā-dā'və): the other twin born to Madri.

The Pandavas were in a hopeful mood when they came back to their original starting point, Dwaitavana,¹ after their prolonged pilgrimage. Dwaitavana was rich in fruits and roots, and the Pandavas lived on sparse diets, performing austerities² and practicing rigid vows.

They managed to live, on the whole, a

1. **Dwaitavana** (dwā-ta'və-nə): a place in the forest.

2. **austerities** (ō'ster'ə-tēz): practices of self-denial and self-discipline.

tranquil life—until one day a brahmin³ arrived in a state of great agitation. He had lost a churning staff and two faggots⁴ of a special kind, with which he produced the fire needed for his religious activities. All his hours were normally spent in the performance of rites. But that day, he wailed, "A deer of extraordinary size, with its antlers spreading out like the branches of a tree, dashed in unexpectedly, lowered its head, and stuck the staff and the faggots in its horns, turned round, and vanished before I could understand what was happening. I want your help to recover those articles of prayer, for without them I will not be able to perform my daily rites. You can see its hoof marks on the ground and follow them."

As a *kshatriya*,⁵ Yudhistira felt it his duty to help the brahmin, so with his brothers, he set out to chase the deer. They followed its hoof marks and eventually spotted it, after a long chase. But when they shot their arrows, the deer sprang away, tempted them to follow it here and there, and suddenly vanished without a trace. They were by this time drawn far into the forest and, feeling fatigued and thirsty, they sat under a tree to rest.

Yudhistira told his youngest brother, Nakula, "Climb this tree and look for any sign of water nearby."

Presently, Nakula cried from the top of the tree, "I see some green patches and also hear the cries of cranes . . . must be a water source." He came down and proceeded towards a crystal-clear pond, sapphire-like, reflecting the sky. He fell down on his knees

and splashed the water on his face. As he did this, a loud voice, which seemed to come from a crane standing in the water, cried, "Stop! This pond is mine. Don't touch it until you answer my questions. After answering, drink or take away as much water as you like." Nakula's thirst was so searing that he could not wait. He bent down and, cupping his palms, raised the water to his lips. He immediately collapsed, and lay, to all purposes, dead.

After a while, Yudhistira sent his brother, Sahadeva, to see what was delaying Nakula's return. He too rushed forward eagerly at the sight of the blue pond, heard the warning, tasted the water, and fell dead.

Arjuna followed. On hearing the voice, he lifted his bow, shot an arrow in the direction of the voice, and approached the water's edge. The voice said, "Don't be foolhardy. Answer me first before you touch the water."

Arjuna, surveying with shock and sadness the bodies of his younger brothers, replied, "When you are silenced with my arrows, you will cease to question. . . ." Driven to desperation with thirst and enraged at the spectacle of his dead brothers, he sent a rain of arrows in all directions. As the voice continued to warn, "Don't touch," he stooped and took the water to his lips and fell dead.

Next came Bhima. He saw his brothers lying dead, and swung his mace and cried back when he heard the voice, "O evil power, whoever you may be, I will put an end to you presently, but let me first get rid of this deadly thirst. . . ." Turning a deaf ear to the warning, he took the water in the cup of his palm and with the first sip fell dead, the mace rolling away at his side.

Yudhistira himself presently arrived, passing through the forest where no human being had set foot before except his brothers. He was struck by the beauty of the

3. *brahmin* (brä'min): person of the highest, priestly caste; also, *brahman*.

4. *faggots*: bundles of sticks.

5. *kshatriya* (kə-shat'rē-yə): person of the warrior caste.



Yudhistira's brothers Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva, and their wife Draupadi. From *The Mahabharata*, a film by Peter Brook.

? What happens to Yudhistira's brothers when they drink from the lake?

surroundings—enormous woods, resonant with the cry of birds, the occasional grunt of a bear, or the light tread of a deer on dry leaves—and then he came upon the magnificent lake, looking as if made by heavenly hands. There on its bank he saw his brothers.

He wept and lamented aloud. Both the poignancy and the mystery of it tormented him. He saw Arjuna's bow and Bhima's mace lying on the ground, and reflected, "Where is your promise to split Duryodhana's thigh?"⁶

6. **Duryodhana's thigh:** a promise made by Bhima at the end of the game of dice after the Pandavas had lost everything to their cousins.

What was the meaning of the gods' statement at Arjuna's birth that no one could vanquish him?" How was he to explain this calamity to Kunthi?⁷

A little later he said to himself, "This is no ordinary death. I see no marks of injury on any of them. What is behind it all?" Could it be that Duryodhana had pursued them, and had his agents at work? He observed the dead faces; they bore no discoloration or sign of decay. He realized that his brothers could not have been killed by mortals, and concluded that there must be some higher power responsible. Resolving not to act hastily, he considered all the possibilities, and stepped into the lake to perform the rites for the dead.

The voice now said, "Don't act rashly; answer my questions first and then drink and take away as much water as you like. If you disregard me, you will be the fifth corpse here. I am responsible for the deaths of all these brothers of yours; this lake is mine and whoever ignores my voice will die. Take care!"

Yudhistira said humbly, "What god are you to have vanquished these invincible brothers of mine, gifted and endowed with inordinate strength and courage? Your feat is great and I bow to you in homage, but please explain who you are and why you have slain these innocent slakers of thirst? I do not understand your purpose, my mind is agitated and curious. Please tell me who you are."

At this request he saw an immense figure materializing beside the lake, towering over the surroundings. "I am a yaksha.⁸ These brothers of yours, though warned, tried to force their way in and have paid for it with

7. **Kunthi** (kōon'tē): the mother of Yudhistira, Arjuna, and Bhima.

8. **yaksha** (yak'shə): forest divinity or nature spirit.

their lives. If you wish to live, don't drink this water before you answer my questions."

Yudhistira answered humbly, "O yaksha, I will not covet what is yours. I will not touch this water without your sanction, in spite of my thirst. I will answer your questions as well as I can."

The yaksha asked, "What makes the sun rise? . . . What causes him to set?"

Yudhistira answered, "The Creator Brahma⁹ makes the sun rise, and his dharma¹⁰ causes the sun to set. . . ."

Yudhistira had to stand a grueling test. He had no time even to consider what to say, as the questions came in a continuous stream. Yudhistira was afraid to delay an answer or plead ignorance. Some of the questions sounded fatuous, some of them profound, some obscure but packed with layers of significance. Yudhistira was constantly afraid that he might upset the yaksha and provoke him to commit further damage, although one part of his mind reflected, "What worse fate can befall us?"

Without giving him time to think, the questions came, sometimes four at a time in one breath. Their range was unlimited, and they jumped from one topic to another.

"What is important for those who sow? What is important for those who seek prosperity?" Before Yudhistira could complete his sentence with "Rain," he also had to be answering the next question with "Offspring. . . ."

The yaksha went on to ask, "What is weightier than the earth?"

"Mother."¹¹

"Higher than the heavens?"



Detail from the wall of an Indian temple.

HRW Photo by Richard Weiss

"Father."¹²

"Faster than the wind?"

"Mind."

"What sleeps with eyes open?"

"Fish."

"What remains immobile after being born?"

"Egg."

"Who is the friend of the exile?"

"The companion on the way."

9. **Brahma** (brä'mə): a Hindu creator god.

10. **dharma** (där'mə): rule or law.

11. **Mother**: possibly because "mother Earth" personified is thought to live deep inside the earth.

12. **Father**: possibly because "Father" is conceived of here as a sky-god.

"Who is the friend of one about to die?"

"The charity done in one's lifetime."

"Who is that friend you could count on as God given?"

"A wife."

"What is one's highest duty?"

"To refrain from injury."

To another series of questions on renunciation, Yudhistira gave the answers: "Pride, if renounced, makes one agreeable; anger, if renounced, brings no regret; desire, if renounced, will make one rich; avarice, if renounced, brings one happiness. True tranquility is of the heart. . . . Mercy may be defined as wishing happiness to all creatures. . . . Ignorance is not knowing one's duties. . . . Wickedness consists in speaking ill of others."

"Who is a true brahmin? By birth or study or conduct?"

"Not by birth, but by knowledge of the scriptures and right conduct. A brahmin born to the caste, even if he has mastered the Vedas,¹³ must be viewed as of the lowest caste if his heart is impure."

There were a hundred or more questions in all. Yudhistira felt faint from thirst, grief, and suspense, and could only whisper his replies. Finally, the yaksha said, "Answer four more questions, and you may find your brothers—at least one of them—revived. . . . Who is really happy?"

"One who has scanty means but is free from debt; he is truly a happy man."

"What is the greatest wonder?"

"Day after day and hour after hour, people die and corpses are carried along, yet the onlookers never realize that they are also to die one day, but think they will live for ever. This is the greatest wonder of the world."

"What is the Path?"

"The Path is what the great ones have trod. When one looks for it, one will not find it by study of scriptures or arguments, which are contradictory and conflicting."

At the end of these answers, the yaksha said, "From among these brothers of yours, you may choose one to revive."

Yudhistira said, "If I have only a single choice, let my young brother, Nakula, rise."

The yaksha said, "He is after all your step-brother. I'd have thought you'd want Arjuna or Bhima, who must be dear to you."

"Yes, they are," replied Yudhistira. "But I have had two mothers. If only two in our family are to survive, let both the mothers have one of their sons alive. Let Nakula also live, in fairness to the memory of my other mother Madri."¹⁴

The yaksha said, "You have indeed pleased me with your humility and the judiciousness of your answers. Now let all your brothers rise up and join you."

The yaksha thereafter revived all his brothers and also conferred on Yudhistira the following boon: "Wherever you may go henceforth, with your brothers and wife, you will have the blessing of being unrecognized." The yaksha was none other than Yama,¹⁵ the God of Justice, and father of Yudhistira, who had come to test Yudhistira's strength of mind and also to bless him with the power to remain incognito—a special boon in view of the conditions laid down for the last year of exile.¹⁶

13. **Vedas** (vā'dez): sacred collection of Hindu wisdom.

14. **Madri** (mā'drē): The twins Nakula and Sahadeva were born to Madri, second wife of Pandu. Madri was thus the "other mother" of the three elder brothers.

15. **Yama** (yā'mə): In most versions of the epic, the father of Yudhistira is Dharma ("right" or "law" personified), and Yama is the god of death.

16. **conditions . . . exile**: The Pandavas had agreed to spend the last year of their exile outside the forest and in disguise.

