

# The Mahabharata

## a synopsis of the great epic of India



### INTRODUCTION

The *Mahabharata* (composed between 300 BC and 300 AD) has the honor of being the longest epic in world literature, 100,000 2-line stanzas (although the most recent critical edition edits this down to about 88,000), making it eight times as long as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* together, and over 3 times as long as the Bible (Chaitanya vii). According to the Narasimhan version, only about 4000 lines relate to the main story; the rest contain additional myths and teachings. In other words, the *Mahabharata* resembles a long journey with many side roads and detours. It is said that “Whatever is here is found elsewhere. But whatever is not here is nowhere else.”

The name means “great [story of the] Bharatas.” Bharata was an early ancestor of both the Pandavas and Kauravas who fight each other in a great war, but the word is also used generically for the Indian race, so the *Mahabharata* sometimes is referred to as “the great story of India.”

The work is divided into 18 books (concerning an 18-day war among 18 armies). The main narrative concerning the war is contained in the first ten books.

#### Pronunciation guide of the main characters:

Vyasa [Vee-YA-sha]: narrator of the story and father of Pandu and Dhritarashtra

BHISH-ma: half-uncle by marriage of Pandu and Dhritarashtra

Dhri-ta-RASH-tra: blind king, father of Duryodhana and the Kauravas

GAN-dhari: wife of Dhritarashtra

**KUN-ti:** wife of Pandu and mother to the five Pandavas and Karna

**Yu-DHISH-thira:** leader of the Pandavas, rightful heir to the throne

**BHI-ma:** strongest of the Pandava brothers

**AR-juna:** mightiest of warriors

**NA-kula and Saha-DE-va:** Pandava twins

**DRAU-pa-di:** wife to the five Pandavas

**Du-ry-ODH-ana:** leader of the Kauravas

**Duh-SA-sa-na:** brother to Duryodhana

**KRISH-na:** supporter of the Pandavas and avatar of Vishnu

**DRO-na:** teacher of the Pandavas and Kauravas

**KAR-na:** warrior, secret son of Kunti, ally of the Kauravas

**Note:** quotations throughout are from versions by C. V. Narasimhan [CN], Krishna Dharma [KD] or the play by Jean-Claude Carriere. Portions of the following summary have been adapted from David Williams, *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives*, 1991.

## **PART ONE: THE GAME OF DICE**

In the first two books of the *Mahabharata*, we learn the background of the Bharatas (also called the Kurus) leading up to the conflict between the five sons of Pandu and their cousins the Kauravas. This story is told by the sage Vyasa, whose name came to mean the “compiler.” (Actually, the author of the epic is unknown, probably many authors over centuries.) Vyasa's mother is Satyawati, whose name means truth, so he is the “son of truth.” In telling his story to a descendant of the Pandavas, Vyasa says, “If you listen carefully, at the end you’ll be someone else.” (play) Vyasa appears infrequently throughout the story, giving advice and also fathering Pandu and Dhritarashtra.

### **Ancestors of the Pandavas and Kauravas**

Santanu, king of Hastinapura, was married to the beautiful Ganga, who was the river goddess in disguise. She agreed to marry him as long as he never questioned her actions. Over the years they had seven sons, but Ganga threw each one into the river. Santanu was distressed but he kept his promise. Finally, when their eighth son was born, Santanu asked his wife who she really was and why she had done this. Ganga revealed herself and told that her children had once been celestial beings, but were cursed to become human. She had ended their “punishment” quickly by drowning them immediately at birth. But since Santanu had questioned her actions, she left him, along with his last son Devarata.

Devarata is better known by his later name Bhishma. He receives this name, which means “of terrible resolve,” after vowing never to marry or have children. His father wanted to marry again (Satyawati, mother of Vyasa), but the conditions of the marriage were that the second wife would be the mother of a king someday. Honoring his father's wishes, Bhishma makes his vow, guaranteeing that neither he nor a son of his will challenge the claim to the throne.

Years later, one of Bhishma’s half-brothers dies in battle, and the other becomes old enough to marry. On behalf of his half-brother, Bhishma abducts three sisters and fights off all their suitors. On returning home, he learns that one of the sisters, Amba, had already chosen a suitor. Bhishma allows her to leave, but her betrothed does not want her any more. Now abandoned, she returns to Bhishma and demands that he marry her. Ever faithful to his vow, Bhishma refuses. Amba then vows that one day she will kill him, even though the gods have granted Bhishma the power to choose the day of his death, because of his vow.

The importance and power of vows are evident throughout the epic. Once stated, a vow becomes the truth and must be fulfilled, no matter what else may happen. When his father and both his half-brothers die prematurely without children, Bhishma refuses to marry his step-brother's widows (Amba’s sisters). He will not relinquish his vow, even though his celibacy makes no difference anymore.

The young princesses must be given children, but who can father them? There are no other men in the family besides Bhishma, and he has renounced women. So Satyawati, the king's second wife, asks her first-born son, Vyasa the poet, to give children to the two princesses. He goes to them, but the princesses dislike him, for as an ascetic who has taken a vow of poverty, he is filthy and smells. He explains to them that they will each bear a son: however, the first will be born blind because the first princess closed her eyes when seeing him, and the second will be pale-skinned because the second princess became pale at his touch. The blind son is called Dhritarashtra, the pale one is Pandu. Vyasa has a third son Vidura by a handmaiden.



As his brother is blind and unfit for the throne, Pandu becomes the new king of Hastinapura. One day while hunting in the forest, Pandu shoots a gazelle in the act of mating. The gazelle was actually a brahmin priest in disguise, who curses him saying that should Pandu make love to either of his two wives (Kunti and Madri), he will die instantly. Knowing he can never have children, Pandu resigns the throne, and

goes to live with his wives in the mountains. Kunti, his first wife, informs him that she possesses a magic power. By reciting a secret formula, she can invoke a god at will and have a child by him. The mantra's power is put to the test, and three sons are born to her: Yudhishtira, the first-born, truthful and virtuous, son of the god Dharma; Bhima, the strongest of men, son of Vayu, god of the wind; and Arjuna, an irresistible warrior, son of Indra. Madri, Pandu's second wife, makes use of this power too. She gives birth to twin sons, Nakula and Sahadeva. Thanks to his two wives, Pandu now has five sons directly descended from the gods, the Pandavas, the heroes of the epic.

Years later, Pandu one day surrenders to his passion for Madri. Fearing for his life, Madri tries to push him away but her struggles only inflame his desire more. Once they make love, Pandu falls dead, fulfilling the curse, and Madri, devoted to him always, joins him on the funeral pyre.

Meanwhile, Dhritarashtra has become king, despite his blindness. He weds Gandhari in an arranged marriage. When she learns of her husband's infirmity, she decides to cover her eyes with a blindfold which she will never remove, to join him in his world of darkness. Then, after an abnormally long pregnancy of two years, she gives birth to a ball of flesh. Vyasa tells her to split up the ball into 100 parts and put them in jars of ghee (Indian butter); in this way she becomes the mother of one hundred sons, the Kauravas.

The first born is called Duryodhana. Sinister omens of violence greet his arrival into the world: jackals howl, strong winds blow, fires rage through the city. Dhritarashtra worries about what all this means. Vidura tells him that his first son brings hate and destruction into the world. He will one day destroy their race. Vidura urges the king to get rid of the child, but Dhritarashtra ignores his advice.

Dhritarashtra is a weak ruler. He allows physical blindness to become a refusal to face reality and unwillingness to confront hard decisions, being easily led by

Duryodhana in later years. He continually blames fate, excusing his own inaction: "Irrevocable were all the things that have happened. Who could have stopped them? What then can I do? Destiny is surely all-powerful" [KD 69]. But one of Dhritarashtra's advisors tells him: "O king, surely a man who meets with calamity as a result of his own acts should not blame the gods, destiny, or others. Each of us receives the just results of our actions." [KD 538]

### Growing Rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas

Bhishma, now an old man, takes the responsibility of raising the two sets of cousins. They fight constantly, and even try to kill each other. One day a teacher and master of arms, Drona, appears and offers his services to train the boys. He has a secret mission: to avenge an insult made by a former friend. When young, Drona was close to Drupada, but years later, when Drona went to see his childhood companion, now a great king, he was scorned by Drupada because "only equals can be friends." As payment for his training, Drona asks the Pandavas to avenge him. Being mighty warriors, they conquer Drupada's kingdom, and hand it over to Drona. He promptly gives his former friend half his kingdom back, saying "now we are equals."

- For revenge, Drupada has children by sorcery, born out of flames: son Dhrishtadyumna is fated to kill Drona; an oracle says daughter Draupadi will "bring destruction on an unrighteous ruler;" a third child Sikhandi is Amba reborn.
- Later in the war, Drona and Bhishma will fight on the side of the Kauravas not so much out of loyalty but because their mortal enemies (Dhrishtadyumna and Sikhandi) fight with the Pandavas.

Drona recognizes Arjuna's superiority as a master of arms, especially the bow, and favors him with special training. In a contest of skill, he tells each of the Pandavas to strike a target, the eye of a wooden bird in a tree. He asks each one in turn, "O prince, tell me what you see." One by one they respond, "I see my teacher, my brothers, the tree and the bird." Drona tells them, "Then you will not hit the mark." Arjuna, however, says he sees only the bird, and in fact, only the eye of the bird. Thus, focused on his target alone, he strikes with total accuracy. Drona rewards Arjuna by giving him a supreme weapon, the Brahmasira, only to be used against celestial beings, or else it will destroy the world.

Drona stages a tournament to display all the Pandavas' skills, but a stranger appears who challenges Arjuna and equals him in archery. This is Karna, who the reader learns is Kunti's first son by Surya the sun god, whom she bore before she married Pandu and abandoned in a basket on the river (like Moses). Thus Karna is the older brother of the Pandavas. However, Karna does not know his real mother, being raised by a chariot driver. The Pandavas mock his lowly social status and will not fight with someone who is not of royal birth, but their cousin Duryodhana sees the chance to make an ally. Ignoring the strict rules of caste, he

says, “Birth is obscure and men are like rivers whose origins are often unknown” (play). Duryodhana gives Karna a small kingdom, and Karna swears eternal friendship to the Kauravas.

- Karna's lowly caste (social status) will haunt him throughout the epic; later at a contest for the hand of Draupadi, she rejects him outright because he is from a servant family. For a person who desires to be measured by his accomplishments, living under this shadow is unbearable.
- As the child of the sun, Karna was born with golden armor over his skin. Later, the god Indra tricks Karna into giving this divine protection away.
- After Karna was born, Kunti remained a virgin

The Pandavas narrowly escape a plot by Duryodhana to burn them in a house made of highly flammable materials. For months afterward, they live in hiding in the forest. One night as Bhima keeps watch while the others sleep, there appears a *rakshasa* named Hidimbi (a man-eating ogre, one type of demon). Assuming the form of a beautiful woman, she falls madly in love with Bhima, who fights and kills her venomous brother. Bhima and the magical creature then have a powerful demon child called Ghatotkacha; he swears to come to the aid of his father whenever necessary.

### Arjuna wins the hand of Draupadi



The Pandavas attend the *swayamvara* of Draupadi, a ceremony where she will pick her husband from a number of suitors. Arjuna wins the archery contest easily and Draupadi chooses him. When Arjuna announces to his mother that he has won the “prize,” Kunti tells him to share with his brothers, before seeing Draupadi. Like an irrevocable vow, her statement, even by mistake, can’t be undone, so all five brothers marry Draupadi, the daughter of Drupada.

This unusual marriage fulfills karma, for in her former life, Draupadi had prayed to the god Shiva for a husband five times, and thus is rewarded for her devotion in this life.

In the *Mahabharata* Shiva is not the “destroyer” of the later Puranas, but has more to do with blessings of fertility: he also granted Gandhari her 100 sons.

The brothers agree to respect the privacy of each other when with Draupadi, but one day Arjuna enters the tent to retrieve his weapons and finds Yudhishtira and Draupadi in bed together. Even though Yudhishtira forgives him, Arjuna insists on keeping the vow. As penance, Arjuna goes into exile for a year; while away he marries three other wives, one Krishna’s sister, mostly for political alliances.

As tension mounts between the cousins, Krishna makes his appearance. It is said he may be an incarnation of the god Vishnu, the preserver, come down to save the earth from chaos. The appearance of Krishna introduces a major theme in the epic: dharma (cosmic order) menaced by chaos, so Krishna must step in, indicating that this is not just a family rivalry, but a conflict with universal consequences.

- In the medieval Puranas, the story developed that Vishnu had appeared on earth nine times in the past as an avatar or incarnation, in order to set the world back on the right path, and would appear again at the end of the age.
- Krishna's deification in the *Mahabharata* may be based on later interpolations into the text, as there is considerable tension in the epic between the depiction of the divine Krishna and the human prince who acts as counselor to the Pandavas, gives devious advice, and eventually dies.

On Krishna's advice the Pandavas present themselves to the blind king. To make peace, Dhritarashtra offers them half the kingdom, but in a region which was nothing but jungle and desert. Yudhishtira accepts his offer in the hope of averting a war.

Meanwhile, Arjuna and Krishna agree to assist a hungry brahmin, who reveals himself to be Agni, god of fire. He wants to consume a nearby forest which is protected by Indra's rain. Agni rewards Krishna with his discus and Arjuna with Varuna's bow Gandiva along with an inexhaustible supply of arrows. With these he is able to create a canopy of arrows to keep the rain from putting out Agni's fire. Even Indra cannot defeat Arjuna, because Krishna is with him (an indication of Vishnu's superiority over Indra by this time). Maya (not god of illusion but an asura or demon who escaped the fires) out of gratitude builds the great hall of Indraprastha.

Living in their new territory of Indraprastha, Yudhishtira turns poor land into a wealthy kingdom, and declares himself King of Kings. Duryodhana is jealous and humiliated on his visit to the magnificent palace, where he mistakes a glass floor for a pool, then later falls into a pool thinking it is glass. Draupadi and Bhima laugh at him. He returns home bent on devising their destruction.

### The Dice Game and the Humiliation of Draupadi

Duryodhana follows the advice of his uncle, the cunning Shakuni, an infamous dice player, and invites Yudhishtira to a game, knowing full well that gambling is his cousin's one weakness. Yudhishtira accepts.

- Duryodhana is not an original thinker, always relying on other's ideas. His uncle gave him the idea for the arson and the dice game. (Later during the



war Duryodhana suggests capturing Yudhishtira and playing another game, which Drona calls stupid.)

- Duryodhana always threatens to commit suicide when things don't go his way (almost comical): "Excessive self-centeredness leads to unrealistic demands and unreasonable expectations from life" (Chaitanya 67).
- Kunti: "Duryodhana is a blind man's son, living blindly." (play)

Both Dhritarashtra and Yudhishtira ignore Vidura's warning to avoid the game, leaving the results to "supreme and unavoidable" fate. Krishna warns Bhishma not to interfere with the dice game: "If your race must be destroyed to save dharma, would you allow it?" (play) Told by his father that a warrior's *dharma* is to fight honorably, not to win at all costs, Duryodhana says, "The way of the warrior is fixed on victory, whether there's *dharma* or *adharma* on his way."

Carried away by the intoxication of the game, Yudhishtira wagers and loses all that he possesses: his lands, his kingdom, his brothers, even himself, and eventually Draupadi, who is dragged before the company by her hair, a special insult since a married woman's hair was sacred.

She challenges the Kauravas with a question: how can someone who has lost himself wager someone else in a game, but no one can answer her. Even Bhishma is confounded: "The ways of dharma are subtle." When even the wise Bhishma cannot resolve the question, she says, "I think time is out of joint. The ancient eternal dharma is lost among the Kauravas." Instead, they insult her, displaying her during the time of her period. Karna, still stinging from his rejection at the *swayamvara*, calls her a harlot who services five men. Duryodhana seeks to entice her by uncovering his thigh (obscene in that culture). Enraged at this treatment of his wife, Bhima vows that he will one day drink Duhsasana's blood and break Duryodhana's thigh.



Draupadi is about to be stripped naked when she invokes Krishna, who comes to her rescue and creates an endless supply of cloth around her. She swears that one day she will be avenged. There will be a great war, a war without mercy. At her curse a jackal howls. Frightened, Dhritarashtra apologizes to her and gives her husbands' back everything they lost, but Draupadi asks nothing for herself, saying, "Greed devours all beings and is *dharma's* [righteousness] ruin. I refuse greed." (CN 55)



Seeing his advantage given away, Duryodhana insists on one more throw of the dice. Yudhishtira agrees to a final game, but once again, he loses. The Pandavas and Draupadi are condemned to spend twelve years in exile in the forest, and a thirteenth year in an unknown place, disguised so that no one may recognize them. If anyone does, then they must spend another twelve years in exile.

## **PART TWO: EXILE**

Books 3-5 tell of the twelve years of living in the forest, preceding the great war. The Pandavas are not alone in the wilderness but are followed by many loyal brahmins and servants. The gods give them an inexhaustible plate of food to feed all of them.

Throughout the epic, the importance of brahmins, the priestly caste, is emphasized. Yudhishtira wants to regain his kingdom so that he can provide for 10,000 brahmins. One must never refuse a brahmin anything (see the incident between Karna and Indra below).

### **The Importance of Dharma**

Draupadi and Bhima reproach Yudhishtira for his inaction and resigned passivity. Since it is obvious that Shakuni cheated at dice, wouldn't it be better to stand up and fight? Yudhishtira flatly refuses. He will keep his word: he resolves to follow his dharma. Dharma (variously translated as social duty, righteousness, or universal order) is the moral obligation which each human being should recognize and follow. Failure to do so could endanger the course of the cosmos as a whole.

Draupadi cannot understand why they are suffering so, if they are the righteous ones. If everything happens by the will of god, then why do the good suffer? It seems only the powerful escape harm, not the righteous. Yudhishtira corrects her: "None should ever perform virtue with a desire to gain its fruits. Such a sinful trader of virtue will never reap the results. ... Do not doubt virtue because you do not see its results. Without doubt, the fruits of virtue will be manifest in time, as will the fruits of sin. The fruits of true virtue are eternal and indestructible" (KD 245-6).

### **Preparations for War**

Arjuna then leaves, aiming for the highest mountains to look for the celestial weapons they will need during the war. He meets the god Shiva who gives him powerful weapons. Arjuna then spends five years with his father the divine Indra learning to use the weapons fighting demons.

Meanwhile Karna decides he too must acquire a celestial weapon, so for many months he serves a powerful brahmin, Parasurama, who hates warriors. As a reward, he bestows upon Karna, whom he takes to be a servant, a formula for the supreme weapon. But Karna reveals himself to be a warrior by an excess of bravery, as he does not cry out when a worm bores a hole into his thigh. Parasurama curses him so he will forget the secret formula at the moment he wishes for the weapon, and that will be the moment of his death.

- In the Medieval Puranas, Parasurama becomes one of the avatars of Vishnu, but there is no indication of that aspect in the epic.

Karna later meets Indra (Arjuna's divine father) in the disguise of a brahmin. Having sworn never to refuse a brahmin's request, he agrees to surrender his divine covering of golden armor given him at birth. He tears off the armor from his skin, bleeding, and trades it for another mighty weapon, which will kill any being but can only be used once.

During their exile, the Pandavas rescue Duryodhana who is captured during battle, to his great humiliation. Honor bids him swear to repay Arjuna one day. (During the war, Arjuna asks Duryodhana to surrender five arrows of Bhishma's meant to kill the Pandavas, and he does so, to keep his vow.) Duryodhana is so depressed after his rescue that he intends to kill himself. The Danavas (a family of demons) need him as their champion (he was born at their request) and appear before him. The demons promise they will possess his armies during the coming war, which will continue to give him false hope.

One day, four of the Pandavas are killed by drinking the water from a poisonous lake. However Yudhishtira brings his brothers back to life by correctly answering the questions which Dharma, disguised as a crane, puts to him.

### The Thirteenth Year

According to the conditions of the game of dice, the thirteenth year which the Pandavas are to spend in disguise has now arrived. Yudhishtira (who presents himself as a poor brahmin), his brothers and Draupadi (who pass for wandering servants) all find refuge at the court of King Virata. Kicaka, a general in Virata's court becomes infatuated with Draupadi. He goes to great lengths to possess her, even threatening her life. Draupadi implores the mighty Bhima to help her; dressed in woman's clothes, he goes in her stead to a secret rendezvous, and pulverizes the over-amorous general into a bloody mass of flesh.

Meanwhile Duryodhana has launched an attack on Virata's kingdom. The king entrusts his troops to his young son who needs a chariot driver. Draupadi, who seeks war with the Kauravas at all costs, points out Arjuna as the world's best charioteer, despite the fact that he has disguised himself as a eunuch. Arjuna

cannot refuse to fight and is decisively victorious, one man against countless armies.

War draws even closer. Duryodhana refuses to give his cousins back their kingdom because he claims they came out of hiding before the appointed time. He tries to win Krishna's support, as does Arjuna. Krishna offers Arjuna first choice: either he can have all of Krishna's armies, or he can have Krishna alone. Arjuna chooses Krishna, allowing Duryodhana to have the armies. When Arjuna asks him to drive his chariot, Krishna accepts.

In the Kaurava court, the blind king also senses the imminence of war. He asks the elderly Bhishma, an unparalleled warrior, to take the supreme command. His duty to the family outweighs his feelings toward the Pandavas, and he reluctantly accepts, but on one condition: that Karna does not fight. Although displeased, Karna bitterly agrees to fight only after Bhishma's death.

Dhritarashtra sends an envoy to Yudhishtira and begs not to fight since he loves righteousness. It would be better to live without his kingdom than risk the lives of so many. Yudhishtira responds that each caste has its own duty, and his is to be a warrior/king, not a brahmin/beggar. However, even he has reservations: "War is evil in any form. To the dead, victory and defeat are the same" (CN 101).

Krishna arrives as an emissary in a final attempt to safeguard peace. He speaks to Duryodhana who does not listen to him, but orders his guards to seize him. Krishna reveals his divine form: "Krishna laughed and as he did, his body suddenly flashed like lightning. He began to grow in size and various gods issued from him. Brahma sprang from his forehead and Shiva from his chest" (KD 492). Krishna allows even the blind Dhritarashtra to see his glory. Finally, he speaks to Karna, going so far as to reveal that he is the brother of those with whom he intends to fight. But Karna feels abandoned by his mother in his very first hours of life; furthermore he senses the end of this world. He will fight alongside the Kauravas, even though he can already foresee their defeat and his own death.

Duryodhana will not listen to warnings. He convinces himself that since the gods had not blessed the Pandavas thus far, they would not protect them during the war. "I can sacrifice my life, my wealth, my kingdom, my everything, but I can never live in peace with the Pandavas. I will not surrender to them even as much land as can be pierced by the point of a needle" (KD 453). He makes excuses for his nature: "I am whatever the gods have made me" (KD 482).

### **PART THREE: THE WAR**

Books 5-10 recount the 18-day war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

The Kauravas have eleven divisions to stand against the seven of the Pandavas. The two armies are described as two oceans, crashing against each other. Briefly it's described as a "beautiful sight" (CN 125-6). Kunti tells the narrator Vyasa (in play): "You find too much beauty in men's death. Blood decorates your poem, and the cries of the dying are your music."

Bad omens appear prior to battle as thousands of carrion birds gather "crying in glee" (KD 539). Karna prophesies that his side will lose, that this is nothing but "a great sacrifice of arms" with Krishna as high priest.

Both sides agree to abide by certain rules of war: no fighting humans with celestial weapons, no fighting at night, do not strike someone who's retreating or unarmed, or on the back or legs. All these rules will eventually be broken.



### The Bhagavad Gita ("The Lord's Song")

Just as the battle is about to start, Arjuna falters at the sight of his relatives and teachers, now his sworn enemies. He breaks down and refuses to fight. "How can any good come from killing one's own relatives? What value is victory if all our friends and loved ones are killed? ... We will be overcome by sin if we slay such aggressors. Our proper duty is surely to forgive them. Even if they have lost sight

of *dharma* due to greed, we ourselves should not forget *dharma* in the same way.” (KD 544-5)

Arjuna fears that acting out his own dharma as warrior will conflict with universal dharma: how can killing family members be good, and not disrupt the social order? Herein lies an unresolved conflict in Hinduism between universal dharma and svadharma (an individual's duty according to caste and station in life). A warrior must kill to fulfill his duty, whereas a brahmin must avoid harming any living creature. Even demons have their own castes and svadharma, which may run counter to human morality. One person's dharma may be another's sin. This doctrine distinguishes Hindu thought from religions such as Judeo-Christianity and Islam which teach universal or absolute moral codes.

His charioteer Krishna addresses him as they pause in the no-man's land between the two armies. This passage is the celebrated *Bhagavad Gita*, the guide to firm and resolute action.

- Unlike many epic heroes, at this point Arjuna thinks before he acts. Arjuna hesitates before such killing, wanting to retreat from life and responsibility (tension between dharma and moksha), but Krishna tells him as a warrior it's his dharma to fight. The real conflict today is with the self on the “battlefield of the soul.
- Don't worry about death, which is only one small step in the great and endless cycle of life. One neither kills or is killed. The soul merely casts off old bodies and enters new ones, just as a person changes garments. Death is only illusion (maya).
- How does a warrior perform his duty without doing wrong, polluting himself with the blood of his enemies? The secret is detachment: do your duty without concern for the personal consequences. “Victory and defeat, pleasure and pain are all the same. Act, but don't reflect on the fruits of the act. Forget desire, seek detachment.” (play)
- We must always do what is right without desiring success or fearing defeat. “Work without desire for the results, and thus without entangling yourself in karmic reactions.” (KD 550) Krishna tells Arjuna that good deeds will not get one to heaven if the desire for heaven is the sole motivation for good deeds. Desire is responsible for rebirth; if any desire remains when we die, we must return to another life.
- Likewise, Yudhishtira told Draupadi during the exile that he performs *dharma* not for reward but because it is what a good person does; after the battle he has a similar crisis when he temporarily refuses to rule, despairing at all the carnage he has caused.

- “Actions performed under the direct guidance of the Supreme Lord or His representative are called *akarma*. This type of activity produces neither good nor bad reactions. Just as a soldier may kill under the command of his superior officer and not be held responsible for murder, though if he kills on his own accord he is liable for punishment, similarly, a Krishna-conscious person acts under the Lord's direction and not for his own sake.” (*BG as it is: online*)
- “Such a person takes no delight in sensual pleasures. He is ever satisfied within himself. No miseries can disturb him, nor any kind of material happiness. He is without attachment, fear and anger, and remains always aloof to the dualities of the world. ... His mind is fixed upon the Supreme and he is always peaceful.” (KD 551)
- There are two paths to liberation: renunciation (*moksha*) and performing one's duty without desire. Since no one can truly renounce all action in life (this is a pretense of asceticism), it is better to work without attachment (KD 551). Some scholars think that the *Bhagavad Gita* was composed to combat a religious challenge from Jainism and Buddhism which arose in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, both teaching salvation through renouncing the world, the former by asceticism, the latter by monastic life (Kinsley 31).
- Krishna explains that the knowledge he imparts is ancient, just as he told it millions of years ago. Arjuna asks, “How can I accept this? It appears that you were born in this world only recently.” Krishna explains, birth too is an illusion, as men are born countless times. But in Krishna's case, he comes into every age: “Whenever righteousness (*dharma*) becomes lax, O Arjuna, and injustice (*adharma*) arises, then I send myself forth to protect the good and bring evildoers to destruction. For the secure establishment of *dharma*, I come into being age after age. ... I was born to destroy the destroyers.”
- Krishna then reveals his divine, universal nature to Arjuna in a magnificent vision of a multitude of gods, stretching out to infinity. Resolved now to perform his duty to his lord, Arjuna leads his troops into battle.





- For more information, see [Bhagavad Gita On-Line](#) and [Bhagavad Gita home page](#)

On a hill overlooking the battlefield, Dhritarashtra hears the words of Krishna through his aid Sanjaya, who has been granted the ability to see and hear everything that happens in the battle, to relate these things to the blind king. Dhritarashtra shudders when he hears of Krishna's theophany, fearing that nothing can stop the Pandavas with such a powerful being on their side. But he takes some comfort in knowing that Krishna cannot accomplish everything he wants, as he failed to arrange a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Before the battle, Yudhishtira goes to both his teachers, Bhishma and Drona: "O invincible one, I bow to you. We will fight with you. Please grant us your permission and give us your blessing." For this sign of respect, both men pray for the Pandavas' victory, even though they must out of loyalty fight on the side of the Kauravas.

### The Battle Begins

Bhishma compares the invincible Arjuna to "the Destroyer himself at the end of the Yuga." (CN 126) In one confrontation, Arjuna splits Bhishma's bow with four arrows, and Bhishma praises him: "O son of Pandu, well done! I am pleased with you for this wonderful feat. Now fight your hardest with me" (KD 581). However, he is unable to overcome Bhishma. After nine days of fighting, the Pandavas visit Bhishma by night; they tell him that, unless he is killed in the war, the carnage will carry on until the end of the world.

When asked how he can be defeated, he advises them to place Sikhandi in the front line, from where he will be able to fire freely at Bhishma. Sikhandi is actually a woman, Amba whom Bhishma had refused to marry and who vowed to be his death. Amba practiced asceticism, standing on one toe in the snow for 12 years to learn the secret of Bhishma's death. Amba threw herself into the fire and was reborn from flames as Drupada's second daughter, later changing sex with a demon to become a man

The next day, confronted by Sikhandi, Bhishma refuses to fight a woman, and he abandons his weapons. Against the rules of war, the Pandavas strike the unarmed warrior with thousands of arrows. There is no space on his body thicker than two fingers that is not pierced. He falls from his chariot, and lies fully supported by the arrows, with no part of his body touching the earth. Bhishma does not actually die until much later, at his choosing. He remains lying on a bed of arrows until the end of the battle.

### Drona takes command



Drona positions the armies in a formation known only to him, the iron disc of war, which nobody knows how to break open, apart from Arjuna. If only Arjuna can be diverted away from the central battle, Drona promises victory. Arjuna has a 15-year old son, Abhimanyu, who, by listening to his father while still in his mother's womb, has learned to force an entry into Drona's battle formation. As Arjuna is called to a diversionary battle far away, Yudhishtira entrusts Abhimanyu with the task of opening a breach in the disc. Abhimanyu succeeds, but when Bhima and Yudhishtira try to follow him into the opening, they are stopped by Jayadratha, a brother-in-law to the Kauravas, and the breach closes behind the young Abhimanyu. In spite of his bravery, he is killed.

- Earlier during the time of exile, Jayadratha had tried to kidnap Draupadi, thus another reason for the Pandavas to hate him.

At this point Arjuna returns to the camp. Inflamed with rage and grief at the sight of his son's body, he vows to kill Jayadratha before sunset on the following day. He solemnly swears to throw himself into the sacrificial fire, should he fail. Even Krishna is alarmed by this terrible oath. On the next day, Jayadratha is heavily guarded, and Arjuna is unable to reach him. Krishna causes a momentary eclipse of the sun, convincing the enemy that, since night has come, Arjuna must have killed himself because he hasn't kept his vow. Rejoicing, they lay down their arms, leaving Jayadratha vulnerable to Arjuna's arrow.

Jayadratha's father had pronounced a curse on anyone who killed his son, saying that whoever caused his son's head to fall to the ground would die. Using magical mantras, Arjuna causes his arrow not only to sever Jayadratha's head, but to carry it miles away to fall into his father's lap. Being in prayer, he doesn't realize what's happened; he stands up and the head falls, thus he dies from his own curse.

The following day, Karna hurls himself into the battle. Kunti tries to persuade him to join the Pandavas, but Karna is inflexible. However, he does promise Kunti that he will only kill Arjuna, for one of them must die. In this way, she will still have five sons after the war.

Karna possesses a magic lance, the gift of Indra, which will kill any living being but can be used only once. He keeps it in reserve for Arjuna. To dispose of this lance, Krishna calls upon Ghatotkacha, son of Bhima and the *rakshasa*. During the night, he fights an epic battle against Karna, who can destroy the demon only by resorting to his magic lance. Ghatotkacha is killed, but Krishna dances for joy. With his lance now expended, Karna is vulnerable and Arjuna can kill him.

Drona continues to challenge the Pandava armies, slaying thousands. But the Pandavas know his weakness: the love of his only son Ashvatthama. Bhima slays an elephant, also called Ashvatthama, then deceitfully tells Drona of the death of his son. Suspecting a lie, Drona asks Yudhishtira for the truth: is his son dead

or not? Drona will lay down his arms the day an honest man lies. Krishna tells Yudhishtira: "Under such circumstances, falsehood is preferable to truth. By telling a lie to save a life, one is not touched by sin" (CN 157). Yudhishtira speaks a half-lie, "Ashvatthama – (and muttering under his breath) the elephant – is dead." Before his lie, Yudhishtira's chariot rode four inches off the ground, but now it sinks back to earth. Drona lays down his arms. Drupada's son Dhrishtadyumna cuts off Drona's head, having sworn to avenge his father's humiliation.

Meanwhile Bhima sees Duhsasana coming towards him. Bhima had sworn to drink the blood of this avowed enemy for what he had done to Draupadi. Bhima knocks Duhsasana to the ground with his mace and rips open his chest. He drinks his blood, saying that it tastes better than his mother's milk. Bhima, who kills many Rakshasa (and has a son by one), often acts like the man-eating ogres himself—the bloody deaths of Kicaka and Duhsasana, both to avenge Draupadi; Bhima is her most passionate defender. Bhima kills most of the 100 Kauravas, who were demons incarnate.



### The Death of Karna

Duryodhana asks Karna to avenge his brother Duhsasana, and he finally meets Arjuna in the decisive confrontation.

Arjuna and Karna both have celestial weapons (for example, one shoots arrows of fire to be quenched by arrows of water). Karna has an arrow possessed by a Naga (serpent) spirit who holds a grudge against Arjuna (his family had died in the forest consumed by Agni). When Karna shoots at Arjuna, his charioteer warns him that his aim is too high, but he refuses to listen, and hits Arjuna's coronet only. When the spirit-possessed arrow returns to him and says try again, this time he will not miss, Karna won't admit failure by shooting the same arrow twice, even if he could kill 100 Arjunas.

As the fight continues, the earth opens up and seizes Karna's chariot wheel, in fulfillment of a curse. In desperation, Karna tries to invoke his ultimate weapon, but the magic words escape him. He remembers Parasurama's words: "When your life depends on your most powerful weapon, you will not be able to summon it." In his last moments, Karna questions his beliefs: "Knowers of *dharma* have always said, '*Dharma* protects those devoted to *dharma*.' But since my wheel sank today, I think *dharma* does not always protect" (CN 165).

As he struggles to release his chariot, he cries out to Arjuna: "Do not strike an unarmed man. Wait until I can extract my wheel. You are a virtuous warrior. Remember the codes of war." But Krishna taunts him: "Men in distress always call on virtue, forgetting their own evil deeds. Where was your virtue, O Karna, when Draupadi was brought weeping in the Kuru assembly? Where was it when Yudhishtira was robbed of his kingdom?" (KD 780) Karna's head sinks to his chest, and he remains silent, while continuing to struggle with the chariot wheel. Krishna commands Arjuna to shoot, and Karna dies. A bright light rises out of Karna's body and enters the sun.

- Stubborn but loyal, Karna could have been king, as eldest of the Pandavas, but he remained with the Kauravas. He always fights fair, and keeps his promise to Kunti not to kill any brothers but Arjuna. Their rivalry echoes the mythic conflict between their divine fathers Indra and Surya.

### The Death of Duryodhana

Over the eighteen-day war, Duryodhana has seen his generals and their armies fall to the Pandavas, but to the very end he refuses to surrender. He hides in the waters of a lake, which he has solidified over him by magic. Ever the gambler, Yudhishtira tells Duryodhana that he can fight any brother he chooses, and if he wins, the kingdom will be his again. It says something of Duryodhana that he fights with Bhima rather than one of the weaker brothers. In a close battle between equals, Bhima wins only by treacherously striking Duryodhana on the legs, forbidden in the rules of war. Gandhari had put a protective spell over Duryodhana's body, but because he wore a loin cloth for modesty before his mother, his thighs were not protected.

Duryodhana accuses Krishna of taking sides unfairly and encouraging Bhima's treachery. Krishna responds: "Deceit in battle is acceptable against a deceitful foe. Even Indra used deceit to overcome the mighty asuras Virochana and Vritra." An onlooker remarks, "Bhima has sacrificed *dharma* for the sake of material gain. This can never lead to success and happiness." Krishna replies that Bhima was merely keeping his earlier vow, a sacred duty: "There is no unrighteousness in Bhima. He has carried out his promise and requited the debt he owed his enemy. Know that the terrible age of Kali is at hand, marked by fierce acts and the loss of *dharma*." (KD 811-13)

Duryodhana responds bravely: “I am now dying a glorious death. That end which is always sought by virtuous warriors is mine. Who is as fortunate as me? With all my brothers I will ascend to heaven, while you Pandavas will remain here, torn by grief and continuing to suffer.” (KD 816)

As Duryodhana lies dying, Ashvatthama, Drona's son, tells him how he sneaked into the camp of the victorious Pandavas at night to perpetrate a hideous massacre, killing the remaining warriors and all the children while asleep, leaving the Pandavas without any heirs. Rather than welcoming the news, Duryodhana dies disheartened that the race of the Kurus appears to have no future.

Thus all those on both sides die in the war, except the five Pandavas. When Yudhishtira learns of the massacre, he mourns: “We the conquerors have been conquered.”

When the Pandavas seek revenge, Ashvatthama launches the most fearsome celestial weapon in his arsenal. Arjuna counters with his own weapon, which Drona taught both of them; it was only to be used against divine beings, or else it could destroy the world. Ashvatthama deflects his into the wombs of the remaining Pandava women, making them sterile, but Krishna promises that Arjuna will nonetheless have descendants. As punishment, Ashvatthama is cursed to wander the earth in exile for 3000 years.

### The Aftermath

Books 11-18 contain events following the war and teachings by Bhishma.

After the war, when Krishna exits the chariot, it bursts into flames; only his presence kept the celestial weapons from destroying it earlier. Krishna reveals that the gods allowed this war to relieve Earth of her great burden (similar to Troy). Duryodhana was the incarnation of Kali, lord of the 4th age.

Yudhishtira reports the death toll at six million. Appalled at such losses, he has a personal crisis similar to Arjuna before the battle. He doesn't want to rule because it requires the use of force and more violence. He sees that life itself is painful, as men are always searching for more material wealth and power, never satisfied. The man who prizes gold and dirt equally is happiest. The others convince him he must rule and fulfill his duty.





Yudhishtira has a vision of the age to come: “I see the coming of another age, where barbaric kings rule over a vicious, broken world; where puny, fearful, hard men live tiny lives, white hair at sixteen, copulating with animals, their women perfect whores, making love with greedy mouths. The cows dry, trees

stunted, no more flowers, no more purity; ambition, corruption, the age of Kali, the black time” (play).

Bhima asks, why has he come this far only to quit, like a man climbing a honey tree but refusing to taste it, or a man in bed with a woman but refusing to make love? Draupadi questions his manhood, as only eunuchs seek tranquility and avoid violence. Arjuna says refusing to rule will only cause more disorder and create for him great amount of bad karma to face in next life of lowly birth. We should accept our role depending on where we are in life: a father has obligation to his family while they are young, likewise a king must first rule, then in the last years of life he may abandon the world, but to do so earlier would be an act of selfishness.

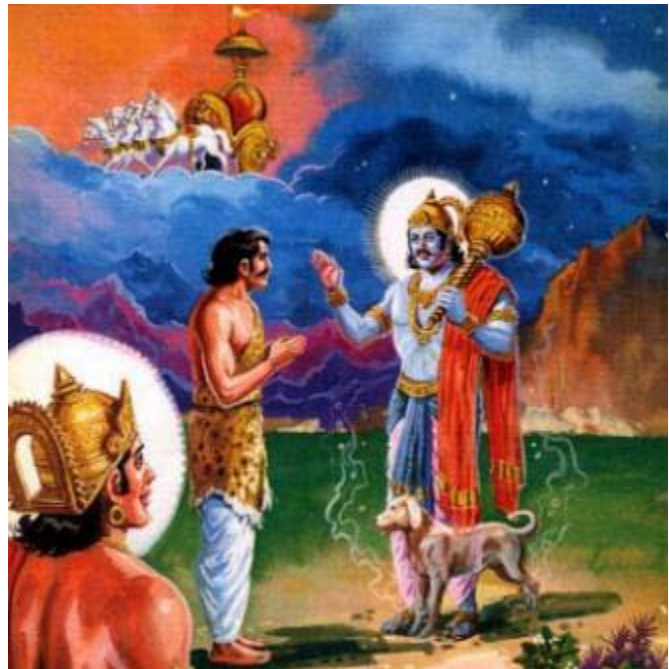
In his dying speech, pierced by many arrows, Bhishma tells Yudhishtira that in the fourth age (our present age), “*dharma* becomes *adharma* and *adharma*, *dharma*.” Somewhat paradoxically, he continues, “If one fights against trickery, one should oppose him with trickery. But if one fights lawfully, one should check him with *dharma* ... One should conquer evil with good. Death by *dharma* is better than victory by evil deeds.”

Bhishma's dying advice to Yudhishtira lasts 50 days and covers two of the longest books in the epic (12-13); some of the topics:

- "There is no duty higher than Truth," but five falsehoods are not sinful: lying in jest, lying to a woman, lying at wedding, lying to save a teacher, lying to save one's life.
- The foremost duty of kings is to revere Brahmins.

- "No creature is more sinful than woman; women are the root of all evil; she is poison, she is a snake, she is fire," but at the same time, "Righteousness of men depends on women. All pleasures and enjoyments depend on women."
- Cows constitute the stairs that lead to heaven; cows are goddesses able to grant every wish; nothing in the world superior; one should never go to bed or rise in the morning without reciting the names of cows." Cows provide cleansing from sin. "There is nothing unattainable for one who is devoted to cows" (this goes on for about 50 pages).
- 1000 names of Vishnu (26 pages)
- Shortly after, Arjuna tells Krishna that he has forgotten his teaching (contained in the *Bhagavad Gita*) so for 36 chapters this advice is repeated.

Now that all her sons are dead, Gandhari's eyes are so charged with grief that, by looking under her blindfold, her emotion sears the flesh of Yudhishtira's foot. She curses Krishna, whom she holds responsible for all of the tragedy that has befallen them: the Pandava kingdom will fall in 36 years. Even Krishna will die; he shall be killed by a passing stranger. Krishna calmly accepts this curse, then tells her that a light has been saved, even if she cannot see it. Yudhishtira agrees to reign.



Thirty-six years pass, and Yudhishtira arrives at the entrance to paradise, carrying a dog in his arms. His brothers and Draupadi, who left the earth with him, have fallen from the mountains into the abyss along the way. A gatekeeper tells him to abandon the dog if he wants to enter paradise. He refuses to leave a creature so faithful, and is permitted to enter, for this was a test, the dog was the god Dharma in disguise. In paradise, further surprises await him. His enemies are there, smiling and contented. His brothers and Draupadi, on the other hand, seem to be in a place of suffering and torment. Why? Yudhishtira decides to stay with his loved ones in hell, rather than enjoy the delights of heaven with his enemies. This too was a test, the "final illusion." They are all permitted to enter paradise.

- In Hindu thought, neither heaven (svarga) or hell are eternal, but only intervals between rebirths. Everyone must first spend some time in hell (or



a hell, as there are many) to pay for the sins of the most recent life. Yudhishtira had to experience hell for only a moment, because of his lie to Drona. Heaven is obtained by good deeds, but only for a limited time until the accumulated merit runs out.

- According to one tradition, there are six planes of existence (*lokas*) above earth and seven lokas (hells) below. However, no action can occur in these other worlds, so that a person's karma doesn't change until he returns to earth.
- “Actions performed in accordance with scriptural injunctions ... lead the performer to the heavenly planets for prolonged sensual enjoyment. However, when a person's pious credits are exhausted, he must return to Earth, just as a person returns from a holiday and resumes his work.” (“BG as it is: Online”)

(latest revision: August 2008)

Digital Source:

Brown, Larry A. *Mahabharata: the Great Epic of India*.

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