The air was rich with expectation. Though it was still early morning, the entire city was up in joy. It was indeed a special day. Today Rama, their beloved prince, was to be crowned. An embodiment of virtue and righteousness, Rama was the eldest among four princes. But fate had something else in store. Rama's father Dasharatha, himself a generous and popular king, was forced under oath by one of his three wives (Rama's stepmother), to banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years, and to crown her own son instead.

There is no doubt that the throne rightfully belonged to him. But what was Rama's reaction to these happenings? Not a slightest sign of disappointment or sorrow crossed his face. Smiling, he said: "Surely the king's promise must be fulfilled. My hair shall be twisted and I shall wear the bark and go to the forest this very day." Dasharatha recognizing the injustice of the situation requested Rama to disobey him, and seize the throne by force. But Rama, insisting that there was no joy in getting a kingship gained by the breaking of a promise or by the slaying of one's own brothers, declined to do so.

Rama's adventures give ample opportunity to a willing poet attempting to chronicle his exploits. All however point in the direction which portrays him as the quintessential hero. This is achieved by presenting him as spectacularly qualified to display his prowess across a variety of situations requiring heroic succor. These characteristics casting Rama in the complexion of the 'archetypal hero' can be classified as follows:

1) Facing the Unknown

2) Hero and the Goddess: Love and Sublimation

3) Heroic Nobility

4) The Path of the Karmayogi

Facing the Unknown

The story of Rama is the story of the archetypal hero who lies within the depths of our own psyche. His journey to the forest is the unique voyage all of us must make. It is an adventure into the mysterious and the unknown. The jungle or forest is an apt and well recognized Jungian symbol for the unconscious self, and entering the dark forest is a threshold symbol. It represents the soul entering the perils of the unknown, a quest for the secrets of nature, and the spiritual world which man must penetrate to find the meaning. According to Joseph Campbell:

The heroic life is living the individual adventure.

There is no security in following the call to adventure.
Nothing is exciting
If you know
What the outcome is going to be.

To refuse the call
Means stagnation.

You enter the forest
At the darkest point,
Where there is no path.

Where there is a way or path,
It is someone else's path.

You are not on your own path.

If you follow someone else's way,
You are not going to realize
your potential.

The goal of the hero trip
Down to the jewel point
Is to find those levels in the psyche
that open, open, open,
and finally open to the mystery
of your Self being
Buddha consciousness
Or the Christ.

That's the journey.

Thus Rama set off on this supreme adventure. He entered the realm of uncertainty. Indeed it was a wise choice. Certainty implies limitation, while uncertainty means stepping into the unknown, which holds within it a million opportunities. The unknown is the field where all possibilities might occur. It is ever fresh, ever new, and a fertile ground for the germination of new ideas. Creative imagination here is not stifled and limited by what is known, but stimulated by the boundless possibilities open before it. This means that in every moment of life, there will be excitement, adventure, and mystery. Thus without uncertainty and the unknown, life is but a stale repetition of earlier, outworn memories. The path of Rama hence is a headlong journey into life's great adventures, a quest into the unknown. This is the true path of the hero.
Hero and the Goddess: Love and Sublimation

Having made themselves comfortable in the dense forest, Rama and Sita continued to live as man and wife, enjoying all the pleasures that attend to a married and devoted couple.

Once after a particularly exhausting session of sport among the perfumed jungles on the banks of the full and flowing Ganges, Sita settled down on Rama's lap. Just then a mischievous crow came and nibbled at Sita with his beak. Disturbed, Sita flung at him a pebble, trying to scare him away. But the unscrupulous scoundrel would have none of it and continued with his irritating activity. Angered she got up, attempting to chase it away. In the awkwardness of the situation, Sita's lower garment slipped off, prompting a derisive laughter from her husband. Ashamed and sullen, she hurried back to rest her head on Rama's chest, her only refuge, and shed tears.

Finally she entered the realm of sleep, awakening only after some time had elapsed. Now it was Rama's turn to rest in the lap of his beloved. Suddenly the black and feathered creature returned. This time his impudence crossed all bounds of decency and he struck straight at the space between Sita's breasts. His repeated actions caused her to cry out in pain, waking Rama from his peaceful slumber in the most joyful of beds. Observing her plight he asked enraged, to name the doomed creature who had marked the place between her breasts. Looking around, his eyes rested on the crow even then intently looking at Sita. Infuriated Rama, in the spur of the moment, threw at the mere crow the mightiest weapon in his arsenal the 'brahmastra.' This weapon mapped the same trajectory as the crow and followed him, however hard he tried to evade the missile. Finally he succumbed to the weapon and fell to the ground. This sight re-ignited in Rama his benevolence and mercy, qualities for which he was known far and wide. Taking him into his refuge he forgave the wretched creature.

The love of Rama and his lawfully wedded wife Sita is the theme and substance of the Ramayana. True to the image of the mythic hero, both the carnal and the sublime aspects are highlighted in this epic, as in the majority of heroic lore across the world.

Celebrating another aspect of their affection is the appreciation that theirs was a love in conformance with Dharma. Such a love is but a manifestation of god. For those who interpret Ramayana in a symbolic manner regard Sita as the individual soul and Rama as the Supreme Being. God sees and pursues the human soul till He secures it. Thus did Rama follow Sita's trail across astronomical distances to unite himself with her. Verily is the Supreme Lord eager to save us.

Present in Ramayana is the twin theme of love opposed to Dharma. This is the love Ravana felt for Sita and which prompted him to abduct this chaste lady. He coveted the wife of another, which was deemed a sin. Here it must be noted that labeling Ravana's intentions towards Sita as love is paradoxical to say the least. Not once during her captivity (twelve months) did Ravana make a physical advance towards Sita. Not that he couldn't have done so. She was far away from
any of her sympathizers, and was but a prisoner in his kingdom on which he held a authoritative and unquestionable sway. Ravana was obsessed with the idea of generating in her heart an inking of love for him. A fat chance he had. With her commitment to her Lord as adamantine and devoted as always, Sita, even during periods of extreme tribulations, never for a moment let any other man enter her thoughts other than Rama.

There are also other interpretations of the love story of Rama and Sita. In one such insight Sita is believed to be the female counterpart of the Highest Being, an embodiment of compassion and grace. Compassion is the Supreme Mother who rests enthroned in the heart of the Lord. When she casts her merciful glance on us, we reach the feet of god. Parvati’s function in relation to Shiva and Lakshmi’s in relation to Vishnu are both identical, and are thought to point to the same truth namely that God as father and God as mother are not distinct. Indeed if the Lord were to be parted from his compassion, our plight would be like that of Ravana, who separated Sita from her Lord Rama.

**Heroic Nobility**

Nobility is always a defining quality of the mythic hero. His actions are severe and punishing, or gentle as per the demand of the situation. Hence even as he faced the mighty Ravana in battle, Rama did not lose sight of the highest ideals. Though valiant and brave, Ravana couldn't match the prowess of Rama who sorely wounded him in battle, breaking his golden crown and chariot. Thus deprived of every weapon, he stood helpless before Rama. Rama addressed him: "You may go now, You have fought well today. Go away and rest and come back tomorrow, refreshed and with weapons."

This was the perfect opportunity for the hero to slay Ravana. But it also would have been a conduct against the Dharma of a true warrior. Harming an unarmed opponent was not considered an act of courage by the truly brave.

In a second and decisive battle between these two titans the evil one was slain.

All his kin having been killed earlier, it fell on his surviving brother Vibhishana to perform his last rites. Vibhishana had crossed over to Rama's side before the war began, recognizing correctly that his brother was in the wrong. Vibhishana was reluctant to perform Ravana's funeral
rites recalling his evil deeds. It was at this moment that Rama made one of the most profound statements to emanate from the Ramayana. He said:

"Ravana fought like a true warrior and fell fighting like a hero! Death has washed his sins. Ravana has entered heaven. It is for you now, his brother, to do the rites. I, his former foe, even I can rightly perform his obsequies. Your brother is my brother too, is he not?"

Ravana had carried away Sita, Rama's beloved wife, whom Rama valued more than his own life. Now after having vanquished the evil doer and having clinched victory, there remained in Rama's heart no residual hard feelings. Ravana's death had relieved him from the demerits of the heinous crime he had committed by carrying away the wife of another. But even then, his mission accomplished, Rama had nothing but tenderness in his heart for the fallen villain. This civilized behavior is worthy of emulation by parties engaged in modern warfare where not content with the annihilation of the enemy a perverse pleasure is often relished in the mutation and disfigurement of the foe. Rama's enmity ended with Ravana's death. His enemy was Ravana's evil deeds and not Ravana personally. He bore no personal animosity to the dead warrior but only followed the path of just and righteous karma by inflicting upon the erring individual the punishment due to him. When doing so, Rama the humble man he was, didn't proclaim a divine authority but only acknowledged that he was but a tool in the hands of fate, an instrument of destiny.

The Path of the Karmayogi

Ancient Indian philosophy stresses the path of karma. An interesting story from the Mundaka Upanishad illustrates the nuances of this principle:

"Two birds sit on the same branch of the same tree. One eats, and the other looks on."

This simple story has a profound underlying message, opening up and laying bare an entire way of life, completely in harmony with the rhythms of nature. The two birds which perch on the tree are respectively the ego and the inner self. These two dwell in the same body. While the ego eats both the sweet and sour fruits of our existence, the inner self which realizes its true nature, watches in complete detachment.

Rama sought out his wife with unmatched zeal and single-minded purpose. He who loved her like life itself bore the agony of separation for a year. Unable to reconcile himself to his loss he wandered in the forest like a man possessed. Accompanied only by his faithful brother Lakshmana, he managed to win the confidence of Sugriva, the monkey king at whose bidding the prodigious army of simians was made available to him. He fought a deadly battle where were lost thousands of lives, all to regain his charming and faithful Sita.

Yet, finally having vanquished Ravana, did he rush out to embrace Sita? Or make haste to utter sweet words of love into her ears. No. Rather this is what he said to her: "It was not for mere
attachment to you that I waged this grim battle but only in the discharge of the duty."

This supreme display of detached attachment was worthy of Rama, idolized as the ideal man. Never losing sight of his eventual purpose he nevertheless was not overtly attached to the result. On a practical level too this is a sensible strategy, considering that any decision we take during the course of our lives affects not ourselves but also those in our immediate environment. A healthy detachment is thus beneficial, nay essential for those who wish to take a comprehensive view of a situation. Too much obsession with the result of a particular undertaking sows the seeds of selfishness in our minds, blinding us to the interest of those near to us. It is hence not surprising that Rama was able to win the friendship of the monkey king Sugriva. A sound strategist, Rama secured Sugriva's friendship by helping him regain his lost kingdom, which rightfully belonged to him and had been unjustly appropriated. As a commander he was known to inspire the confidence of each and every individual who made up the army. If Rama, understandably tense at the loss of Sita, his most valuable possession, had focused solely on the final retrieval of his wife could he have applied the concentration required of a war strategist? The answer is no. Burdened by the import and weight of the result he wouldn't have been able to take the risks necessary to win any war. This is true as much as for the epic battle fought between Rama and Ravana, as it is for achieving success in any venture in life.

**Conclusion: Rama was a Man**

Rama was a man. He was also a god. As each of us is. This approach does not make him any less 'worshippable,' only more so. Setting an example by action of valor tempered by sacrifice, he inspires all of us 'ordinary' mortals to follow the path of a just and upright existence, unswerving in our faith of the correctness of it. This is the true inner journey of the hero, leading to the divine spark that blazes inside each of us, waiting to be discovered.

**References and Further Reading**


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