

Hanumanasana

Hanuman is known as the 'monkey-god' of the Ramayana, whose devotion to Ram, combined with his intelligence, physical strength and courage, is integral to this epic story. Ram, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, was exiled to the forest, along with his wife Sita and his brothers, following the machinations of one of their father's wives. When Ram's wife Sita was kidnapped from the forest by Ravana, the demon king of Sri Lanka, Ram appealed to Sugriva, the king of the Vanaras for help. The Vanaras are forest-dwelling humanoids, depicted with monkey-faces and tails and very powerful bodies, and there is archaeological evidence that they really inhabited the ancient forests of South India - though perhaps without the simian features.

In any case, Sugriva lent Ram his warrior general, Hanuman, who duly leapt across the sea which separates India from Sri Lanka in one mighty stride. Here he found Sita and commanded his Vanara-troops to build a bridge. In the ensuing battle with Ravana, Rama's brother Lakshmana was badly injured; it was said that the only cure was the juice of a certain herb which grew in the Himalayas. Hanuman, whose father was Vayu, the wind deity, duly leapt once again - this time to the Himalayas, from which he brought back the whole mountain-top on which the herb grew. Lakshmana's life was thus saved. Once the battle was over and peace restored, Hanuman asked to be allowed to serve Ram always; when given a pearl necklace, he famously bit the pearls, looking for Ram. Not finding Ram there, he ripped open his chest, to reveal Ram and Sita enshrined at his heart.

The story is of course an allegory for the confusion of separation and the transformation of the relative to the absolute. This asana constitutes 'the splits' with the hands in Anjali mudra, or prayer position, and celebrates Hanuman's prodigious combination of strength, flexibility, intelligence and devotion.

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