

SESSION ONE:

OVERVIEW OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA



IN this opening session, I want to begin the course by conveying a sense of the size and scope of the *Mahābhārata*. This is truly a work of vast proportions that not only presents a complex narrative with many different strands and subplots, but also contains extensive passages of religious, philosophical, moral, and practical instruction. So the main aim here is to provide an outline of the contents of the text by presenting a review of all of its eighteen books, which are known as *parvans*, meaning a limb or a section. Before that, however, there are a few points of a more general nature to be considered, such as what sort of text this is, who wrote it, when it was written, and why it was written. What is it really about and what are its principal roles in the religious, cultural, and social life of India? It is to these primary questions that we must first turn our attention.

As will be known to many people, the *Mahābhārata* is a great epic tale from the Hindu tradition that tells of the quarrel and conflict between two branches of the same royal family, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, culminating in the sanguinary conflict at Kurukṣetra in North India. It is, however, much more than an epic tale. The *Mahābhārata* is not just the story of an inter-dynastic conflict, it is also about the struggle between good and evil, and whilst many Indian people will regard it as historical truth, some commentators, ancient and modern, have taken it as an allegory for the confrontation between right and wrong that takes place within each and every individual. Moreover, the conflict between the two sides is by no means a straightforward triumph of virtue over iniquity, for on the righteous Pāṇḍava side we have both the gentle virtue of Yudhiṣṭhira and the assertive aggression of his younger brother, Bhīma, which leads to clashes and debates of

a more subtle nature.

Then on the other side, amongst the Kauravas, we have the sagacious Bhīṣma, a great warrior and teacher of religion, and the mighty Droṇācārya, a Brahmin who takes up arms and, like Bhīṣma, disapproves of the vicious conduct of Duryodhana and the other leaders of his faction. Set in the middle are Karṇa, a righteous man who is forced to do evil out of a sense of duty to Duryodhana, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind elder of the dynasty who longs to be virtuous but is led astray by his intense attachment to his son, Duryodhana. Alongside these male protagonists, we also have the women of the dynasty, Gāndhārī, Draupadī, and Kuntī, who frequently bewail their impotence in the face of the misdeeds wrought by their male counterparts, but show little hesitation in coming forward to offer words of advice and even condemnation towards them.

This mighty tale of conflict, virtue, loyalty and iniquity is on a vast scale, consisting of around 80,000 verses of metrical Sanskrit poetry written for the most part in the śloka or *anuṣṭubh* form. This size makes it possibly the longest work ever composed, greater in extent than the Iliad or the Bible. Why is it so long? First of all, the story itself is told at length with numerous twists and turns and extensive descriptions of individual confrontations on the battlefield where most of the heroes are shot down one by one, their deaths each due to a complex set of circumstances which are narrated in full detail.

Alongside this extensive central narrative, we also have numerous sub-plots revealing how each of the main characters was forced to accept his or her own fate. Then there are other stories, generally narrated by sages of the forest, which are not directly related to the principal characters but which provide instruction based on persons of the past who faced similar dilemmas. In this category, we find well known tales such as that of Nala and Damayantī, and Sāvitrī and Satyawat. Here is a list of the main 'sub-narratives', which appear at different points in the *Mahābhārata*. This list is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and there are other instructive tales told that are not mentioned here:

1. The Story of Śakuntalā and Duṣmanta and the birth of their son Bharata
2. The Story of Kacha, Śukra and Devayānī
3. The Story of Yayāti and Devayānī

4. The Story of the conflict between Viśvamitra and Vasiṣṭha.
5. A description of the assembly halls of the gods
6. The Story of Nala and Damayantī
7. The Story of Agastya
8. The Story of the Descent of the Gaṅgā to Earth
9. The Story of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga
10. The Story of Paraśu-Rāma
11. The Story of Cyavana and Sukanyā
12. The Story of Aṣṭavakra
13. The Story of the Birth of Kārttikeya
14. An Abbreviated Version of the Story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*
15. The Story of Sāvitrī and Satyavat
16. The Story of Indra's Sin and his Release from Sin.
17. The Story of Galava, Garuḍa and Yayāti
18. The Story of the Origin of Death
19. Nārada's Account of the Great Kings of the Past
20. The Story of Śiva's Destruction of the Three Cities (Tripura)
21. The Story of Śiva's Destruction of Dakṣa's Yajña
22. The Story of King Rantideva

Furthemore, at least half of the content of the *Mahābhārata* is given over to passages of religious and ethical debate, which, it could be argued, provide us with a basis for most strands of Hindu religious thought. In the later books, we find the dying Bhīṣma giving instruction to the Pāṇḍavas on subjects such as the duties of a king, the philosophy of Sāṃkhya, the practice of Yoga, and numerous other topics as well. The text itself declares that whatever exists is covered in this work and if anything is not here, then it does not exist. This is undoubtedly an exaggeration, but nonetheless if one is looking for sources for Hindu doctrines, beliefs and practices, then it is advisable to turn first to the pages of the *Mahābhārata*. Here is a list of some of the main passages of instruction that appear at various junctures within the central narrative:

1. A description of holy places (*tīrthas*) and the merit achieved by visiting them
2. Draupadī's teachings on a woman's *dharma*
3. Mārkaṇḍeya's extensive teachings on the position of Viṣṇu as the Supreme Deity.

4. Yudhiṣṭhira's teachings on *dharma* to free his brothers from a *yakṣa* and from a serpent.
5. Vidura's teachings on morality—the *Vidura-Nīti*.
6. Sānat-Sujāta's teachings on religious philosophy.
7. The *Bhagavad-gītā* instructed by Kṛṣṇa
8. Saṁjaya's account of the geography of the world and of past kings
9. Bhīṣma's teachings on the descent of *avatāras*.
10. Vyāsa's teachings on the divine nature of Śiva.
11. Kṛṣṇa's teachings on the true nature of *dharma*
12. A description of the holy *tīrthas* along the banks of the River Sarasvati

Furthermore, when the battle is over and when Duryodhana is finally slain and his death has been avenged by Aśvatthāman, the story is completely suspended. In the *Śānti*, *Anuśāsana* and *Aśvamedhika-parvans* (Books 12, 13 and 14), the story is hardly taken forward at all and instead we have a huge block of religious teachings that covers a remarkable range of topics. The principal speaker here is Bhīṣma who is still lying on the field of battle, mortally wounded and awaiting an auspicious moment to die. Yudhiṣṭhira then repeatedly questions his grandfather and listens to the innumerable discourses that are then presented to him. This section of the text contains almost five hundred chapters and constitutes about one third of the *Mahābhārata*'s entire content. Bhīṣma's teachings are divided into four sections:

1. The *Rāja-dharma*
2. The *Āpad-dharma*
3. The *Mokṣa-dharma*
4. The *Anuśāsana*

The *rāja-dharma* teaching is actually begun by Vyāsa before the Pāṇḍavas approach Bhīṣma and focuses primarily on the appropriate way for a king to rule his domain. These teachings contain a number of stories of the lives of kings, which illustrate the point under discussion. Here we find the following topics being considered:

1. Vyāsa's teachings on *dharma* and destiny to pacify the grieving Yudhiṣṭhira
2. Bhīṣma's teachings on the four social classes (*varṇas*) and

the four stages of life (*āśramas*)

3. *Kṣatriya-dharma*, the essential duties of a king
4. Respect for the Brahmins
5. Appropriate forms of punishment
6. How to appoint reliable ministers and advisors
7. How to construct cities and fortresses
8. The times to make war and to seek peace
9. The efficient use of spies
10. How to form battle arrays and command armies
11. How to deal with the nobility, internal enemies, and treason
12. The need to protect the citizens of the kingdom
13. How to act if one suffers a defeat

The *Āpad-dharma* literally refers to a king's *dharma* during times of emergency, when the rules that would generally govern his conduct are relaxed and he is permitted to behave in a manner that would otherwise be regarded as adharmic. In fact, apart from in the opening few chapters there is not that much difference of emphasis here from the teachings given under the heading of *rāja-dharma*. Here are some of the topics discussed in this section:

1. How to acquire wealth and power
2. The rules of taxation for the kingdom
3. How to deal with enemies of different types
4. How to make alliances and when they should be broken
5. How to deceive a rival over one's intentions
6. Who should be trusted and who should not
7. Giving protection to the citizens
8. The sword as a weapon of war

After the teachings on kingship, at Yudhiṣṭhira's request, Bhīṣma then speaks extensively on the subject of gaining *mokṣa*, liberation from rebirth. This marks a dramatic change of emphasis in the discourse away from the proper way to live in this world towards a world-denying philosophy of renunciation and spiritual absorption. The *Śānti-parvan* is followed by the *Anuśāsana-parvan*, literally the 'Book of Instruction', which follows the same pattern of Bhīṣma giving teachings to Yudhiṣṭhira, although on occasion he asks Kṛṣṇa to speak on a subject on which he is not an expert. Here the topics covered are far more wide ranging but the emphasis is more towards the

execution of religious ritual and the rules governing the working of society. We will look in more detail at the *Mokṣa-dharma-parvan* and the *Anuśāsana-parvan* later in the course, but at this point I wanted to give some insight into the diverse types of material contained within the *Mahābhārata* in addition to the better known passages which form a part of the central narrative.

Another important point to notice is that the *Mahābhārata* cannot simply be regarded as a single piece of literature. It is much more than one book. First of all, we have the issue of the differing manuscript sources. As early as the 13th century CE, the great Vedāntist Madhvācārya was bewailing the fact that he could not arrive at any definitive version of the *Mahābhārata*, as he obtained the text in different manuscript forms, each of which differed from all of the others. This textual diversity existed down to the 20th century when the task of compiling a Critical Edition of the Sanskrit text was undertaken by a team of Indian scholars who worked on comparing all the available manuscript versions and determining as far as possible which passages were authentic and which were later additions. This task took several decades to complete but the result is that today we have a single version of the Sanskrit text, which can be referred to. The problem with this is that there are a large number of important passages that were excluded from the Critical Edition on text critical grounds but which have for centuries held a significant position in the *Mahābhārata* tradition, the prayers of the Pāṇḍavas to the Goddess being one notable example.

But beyond the issue of arriving at an agreed textual form for the written *Mahābhārata*, we must also be aware that the *Mahābhārata* exists as a wider tradition that permeates most layers of Indian culture. The fact is that many Indian people will have a detailed knowledge of the *Mahābhārata* without ever having read a single word of the textual version. Rather, the tradition is passed on primarily through parents and grandparents telling stories, through comic books, through dance and drama, and more latterly through film and television. Hence when we speak of the *Mahābhārata* we cannot think purely in terms of a single written text but of a much wider tradition that is passed on primarily through oral means of transmission and which may include episodes that are nowhere to be found in the manuscript versions. Many a time I have had Hindu friends refer me to episodes of the

Mahābhārata, which I know do not appear in the Critical Edition, or, as far as I am aware, in any of the extant manuscripts.



Katakali dance performance of Arjuna's fight with Śiva in the form of a kirāta

There are several English versions of the *Mahābhārata* currently available, all abbreviated to a greater or lesser extent. These provide a valuable insight into the progression of the central narrative, but in almost all cases the extensive passages of religious and ethical instruction are omitted. There are also two full English translations, one completed in the 19th century by Kisari Mohan Ganguli and the other more recently by Bibek Debroy. The Critical Edition of the text was not available in Ganguli's time and so his translation is of the manuscript used by Nilakantha, a 16th century commentator on the *Mahābhārata*, but Bibek Debroy has presented us with a translation that corresponds to the chapters of the Critical Edition.

When we come to consider when and why the *Mahābhārata* was composed, and the genre of literature to which it should be assigned, then some discussion of trends in scholarly debate must be referred to. The traditional Hindu view is that the *Mahābhārata* was composed by the sage Vyāsa around 5,000 years ago, shortly after the events it describes took place, and many Hindus hold firmly to that view. Modern scholarship has suggested a later date though without a clear

consensus emerging. Early in the 20th century, E. Washburn Hopkins argued that the *Mahābhārata* was not composed as a single work but began as an oral warrior epic that was gradually expanded and added to over a period of centuries. In Hopkins's view, the original *Bhārata* was a secular work, composed around 400BCE, telling epic tales of kings, warriors, and battles. Over the ensuing centuries, a religious and spiritual dimension was added to the original story, with Kṛṣṇa being later represented as a manifestation of God on earth. Then, later still, the lengthy passages of religious, philosophical and ethical instruction, including the famous *Bhagavad-gītā*, were inserted into the text so that it became a sort of library of ancient wisdom. This whole process, it was hypothesised, took place over a period of around 800 years so that the *Mahābhārata* as we know it today was more or less complete by around 400CE. Furthermore, Hopkins regarded the didactic passages as not integral to the *Mahābhārata* and categorised them as the 'pseudo-epic,' a designation that will appear to many to be somewhat ridiculous.

Subsequent scholarship, with some notable exceptions, has tended to accept Hopkins's opinion that the *Mahābhārata* was not composed as a single unit but took shape over a period of several hundred years, a process that was concluded by around 400 or 500CE. Moreover, a text-critical approach was adopted in order to gain insight into the structure and meaning of its content. The exceptional work of John Brockington is probably the best example of this line of scholarship. There are, however, dissenting voices. Writing in 2001, Alf Hiltebeitel, one of the leading contemporary scholars of the *Mahābhārata*, wrote:

... since no one is close to proving anything let us be all the more cautious about what we are trying to disprove ... I would only argue that even these axiomatically late portions must be looked at with an eye fresh to the possibility that they are not any later—or at least not much later: hours, weeks or months rather than centuries—than the rest, once the rest, and its principles of composition and design are better understood.

Alf Hiltebeitel is of the opinion that the *Mahābhārata* was compiled in full by a team of scholars working under the direction of a single author over a relatively short period, some time around 200BCE.

Another dissenting voice was that of V.S. Sukthankar, the senior editor of the Critical Edition. Writing in 1942, Sukthankar launched a withering attack on Hopkins's ideas and those of all who adhered to his 'atomistic' approach. For Sukthankar, Hopkins's work is, 'as good as useless—as indeed it was bound to be.' It was not that Sukthankar was a precursor of Hiltebeitel in denying that the *Mahābhārata* contained different types of material from different eras, and indeed he does speak of early and late passages, but he was adamant that the Western preoccupation with dividing the epic text into chronological strata served only to obscure its true meaning. This was because he saw within the *Mahābhārata* clear lines of thematic continuity, which transcended the rigid lines of demarcation that most Western scholarship insisted on maintaining. He therefore concludes his criticism in a forceful manner:

Let me emphasise with all the power at my command that it is only from this one point of view that you will be able to understand and interpret the *Mahābhārata*, and that all attempts to explain it merely as an evolute of some hypothetical epic nucleus are merely examples of wasted ingenuity.

For Sukthankar, the *Mahābhārata* is to be understood as possessing specific themes that are pursued in different ways and from different perspectives throughout its course. If we persist in dividing the text up into different units of pseudo-epic and epic proper, then we will lose sight of what the *Mahābhārata* as a whole and each of its passages is saying. More recently, James Fitzgerald, another of the leading contemporary writers on the *Mahābhārata*, has reasserted Sukthankar's essential point, stating that, '... most good scholarship now being done on the text undertakes to understand that text which the tradition itself finalized and appropriated at least fifteen hundred years ago.' He further speaks of 'clear lines of ideological continuity joining the mythic epic narrative of the *Great Bhārata* and the greater part of its didactic components.'

The reason why I have rehearsed this debate quite fully is that it serves to support the understanding of the *Mahābhārata* that will be followed throughout this course. After this fairly brief discussion, we will not concern ourselves with hypotheses about chronological strata, but will focus primarily on the unifying themes that represent

the central teachings that the work as a whole is seeking to convey. It is usual to refer to the *Mahābhārata* as an epic, and perhaps compare it to the *Odyssey* or *Iliad*. I would not necessarily disagree with that designation, but at the same time I would strongly assert the identity of the work as a sacred text, a scripture that is revered and referred to by the contemporary Hindu community, who represent the true proprietors and owners of the whole *Mahābhārata* tradition.

In relation to Christianity, Brevard Childs made similar points regarding critical scholarship and the Bible, arguing for a 'canonical approach' that insisted that we should understand a religious text in the form it is accepted by the tradition that reveres it, regardless of text critical arguments. In the same way, this line of thought can readily be applied to our understanding of the *Mahābhārata* in accepting its primary identity as a Hindu scripture and seeking to establish the main themes of religious thought that justify such a designation. At some risk of over-simplification, I would suggest that we can identify three principal themes that highlight the predominant religious dimension of the *Mahābhārata's* discourse and it is around these three elements of religious debate that this course has been structured. They are as follows:

1. The identity of Kṛṣṇa as a divine *avatāra*. Throughout the *Mahābhārata's* narrative, and in the *Bhagavad-gītā* in particular, it is made known that Kṛṣṇa, the cousin of the Pāṇḍavas who accepts the role of Arjuna's charioteer, is in fact a manifestation of Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu), the Supreme Deity, who has appeared in this world to restore the rule of *dharma* through the kingship of Yudhiṣṭhira. Today Kṛṣṇa is one of the main forms of the Supreme Deity who is worshipped by Hindus.
2. The teachings on *dharma*. The whole of the *Mahābhārata* narrative forms a reflection on the nature of *dharma*, considering how far it is possible to live in human society whilst adhering to the ideal of pure virtue. When must pragmatism come to the fore? Is telling a lie ever justified? These and other questions repeatedly resurface throughout the principal narrative and are frequently taken up in the didactic passages as well.
3. Throughout the *Mahābhārata*, and in the later books in

particular, we find extensive didactic passages that focus on virtually all aspects of religious thought. Particularly notable here is the *Mokṣa-dharma* section of Book Twelve, the *Śānti-parvan*, which contains extensive discussion of religious philosophy and the earliest passages of Yoga teachings that still exist today.

KṚṢṆA, THE AVATĀRA

We will review each of these topics in some detail later in the course, but I think it would be useful to say a little more about them at this preliminary stage in order to give a fuller response to the question, ‘What is the *Mahābhārata* about?’ So let us first briefly consider the character of Kṛṣṇa as he is represented in the text. It is true to say that in some passages Kṛṣṇa appears to act like an ordinary human being, with all the limitations that this implies. Repeatedly, however, we are reminded that this display of humanity is nothing but a show, and the more sagacious characters recognise the divinity that moves amongst them in human guise.

Specific passages of the text reveal that Duryodhana and his party are in fact *asuras*, representing the forces of evil and chaos, who have appeared on earth to disturb the equilibrium of the creation. For this reason, Nārāyaṇa, the Supreme Deity, appears on earth to assist the righteous Pāṇḍavas in their conflict with these forces of evil. Thus we learn that the outcome of the conflict will be a certain victory for the Pāṇḍavas because they are assisted by Nārāyaṇa himself who has appeared on earth as an *avatāra*, literally one who has descended. Kṛṣṇa is hence the aloof controller of all the events that occur, for despite his human appearance he retains his divine omnipotence. Unlike the Christian doctrine of incarnation, Kṛṣṇa’s humanity is purely an illusion; he is wholly divine, a full manifestation of God, and therefore possessing and displaying the omniscience and omnipotence of the Supreme Deity.

We must therefore note that it is in the *Mahābhārata* that we have the earliest expression of the Hindu doctrine of *avatāra*, which is clearly enunciated in Chapter 4 of the *Bhagavad-gītā* and in other passages of the *Mahābhārata* as well. Later Indian scriptures such as the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* expand upon the idea of *avatāra* and include a number of stories of the different forms of Nārāyaṇa

who have appeared on earth to save the situation at times of universal crisis. It is in the *Mahābhārata*, however, that we encounter the first representation of this major theme of Indian religious thought. Others among the more well-known *avatāras* are occasionally mentioned in *Mahābhārata*, but the narratives are not developed and the doctrine of *avatāra* relates overwhelmingly to the activities of Kṛṣṇa described in different parts of the text. In contrast to the position of Rāma within the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the main focus of the *Mahābhārata* narrative is always on the Pāṇḍavas and their struggle for justice against their vicious cousins, but to some extent the whole of the *Mahābhārata* can be taken as an *avatāra* story similar to those encountered in Purāṇic literature.

One final point we must notice in the context of any consideration of the *avatāra* in the *Mahābhārata* is the revelation of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, which is located early on in Book Six, the *Bhīṣma-parvan*. There are some who would argue that the *Bhagavad-gītā* should be regarded as an independent work and not as an integral part of the *Mahābhārata*, but based on the reasoning presented above I think we can safely disregard this point of view. The point here would be that the *Bhagavad-gītā* pursues the same themes as the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, most notably in terms of the need to adhere to one's dharmic duty. In relation to the ongoing discussion of the descent of the *avatāra*, the *Bhagavad-gītā* makes an important contribution. As well as outlining the doctrine of *avatāra*, the *Gītā* also has much to say about Kṛṣṇa's divine nature, emphasising the omnipotence of the Deity, the extent of God's love, and the importance of divine grace in achieving liberation from this world. This discussion of the nature of God culminates in Chapter 11 of the *Gītā* where we have the stupendous vision of the glory of God, as he is revealed as not just the creator of the world but also the pervasive presence that sustains the universal order.

WHAT IS DHARMA?

We can thus say that the idea of *avatāra*, the activities of Kṛṣṇa as an *avatāra*, and the eternal presence of God in this world comprise one of the principal themes pursued throughout *Mahābhārata*'s narrative and didactic passages. The next major theme I wish to consider relates to the concept of *dharma*, what it is and how the people of this world should live in accordance with the concept. I think the best equivalents for the word *dharma* would be 'proper action', 'right living', or perhaps

‘duty’. The central narrative offers us the character of Yudhiṣṭhira who is referred to consistently as the *dharma-rāja*, the king who adheres strictly to *dharma*, and at the end of the *Mahābhārata* we learn that he performed only one unrighteous act in his life, and even that was based on advice given by Kṛṣṇa! Yudhiṣṭhira’s understanding of *dharma* is of pure virtue: compassion, kindness, forgiveness and absolute benevolence towards all living beings. He abhors the warfare he has to take part in and even after the victory of the Pāṇḍavas he is overwhelmed by remorse for the suffering and loss of life he may have caused.

There is no doubt that the *Mahābhārata* has great admiration and sympathy for Yudhiṣṭhira’s understanding of *dharma*, and the way he puts his principles into practice throughout his life, but at the same time it also has misgivings about its practicality, particularly for a man whose duty it is to administer justice and protect the kingdom through might of arms. It may well be that the character of Yudhiṣṭhira is based on Aśoka, the Mauryan emperor who ruled most of India in the 3rd century BCE, and vowed to renounce violence after witnessing the horrors of warfare. Whether or not this is the case, we can observe how the *Mahābhārata* reflects on the practicality of pure virtue in a world beset by violence and iniquity without presenting us with simplistic answers to complex questions. Where I think the greatness of the *Mahābhārata* lies is in the fact that it does not give us such simplistic responses, but rather develops and illustrates both sides of the debate whilst leaving us to use our own integrity and intelligence to determine each issue as it arises.

We are clearly meant to admire Yudhiṣṭhira’s kindness, compassion, honesty, and virtue, and similarly to reject Duryodhana’s opposite characteristics as a man of war and aggression who sees greed and competition as proper stimuli for human endeavour. Hence we are shown Yudhiṣṭhira’s treatment of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī, the father and mother of Duryodhana, after all their sons have been slain in battle. Rather than condemning them for supporting their son, Yudhiṣṭhira shows them all the respect due to elders of the family, providing for their every want, and granting as much largesse as they require to give charity on behalf of their dead sons, and thereby assist them in their passage to the next world. Bhīma, the second of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, has a different perspective, however, and cannot forgive Dhṛtarāṣṭra for the wrong the old man has done them. He taunts him

and his wife for their loss of status, and on one occasion shows his thigh to remind them of how he killed Duryodhana.

At this juncture we are drawn to Yudhiṣṭhira's compassion and forgiveness, and somewhat repulsed by Bhīma's vindictiveness. Earlier in the narrative, however, we have another incident that occurs while the Pāṇḍavas are living in exile and have adopted disguises to conceal their identity. In the court of King Virāṭa, Draupadī, their beautiful wife, is harassed and almost raped by Kīcaka, the commander of Virāṭa's army. Draupadī approaches Yudhiṣṭhira to tell him of the problems she is facing but he advises her that they must learn to tolerate all the misfortunes that have befallen them. She then informs Bhīma of her plight and he immediately takes robust action against the sexual predator, luring him into an assembly hall on the pretext of meeting Draupadī and then doing him to death.

In this incident, we find Yudhiṣṭhira's 'virtuous' response to be weak and insipid, and our sympathy is drawn towards Bhīma's warrior ethos. In this way, and throughout its narrative, the *Mahābhārata* explores the contradictions and complexities involved in trying to properly appreciate what is *dharma*. Karṇa is presented as a man separated at birth from his real parents but given shelter by Duryodhana to whom he owes a debt of loyalty. When conflict arises, he knows that Duryodhana is in the wrong and he knows that Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Deity, and that the Pāṇḍavas' triumph is thus inevitable, but so great is his sense of loyalty that he fights and dies for Duryodhana, shot down by Arjuna, the third of the Pāṇḍava brothers. Similarly, in Dhṛtarāṣṭra we are shown a man who longs to adhere to *dharma*, but is drawn away from the righteous path because of his affection for his own sons. Throughout the epic narrative we are shown incidents and characters that highlight the nature of *dharma* and also the difficulties involved in applying the precepts of *dharma* consistently throughout one's life. In the didactic passages as well, we find various statements that give direct indications of what is the truth about *dharma*. To illustrate this point, a few examples must suffice at this preliminary stage of our discussion:

Never displaying malice towards any living being through thoughts, words or deeds; acts of kindness; giving charity. This the eternal *dharma* adhered to by righteous persons (Book 3.281.34)

Not harming; truthfulness; remaining free from anger; charity; these are the four principles you must adhere to, Yudhiṣṭhira. This is the eternal *dharma*. (Book 13.147.22)

The wise say that *dharma* is whatever is based on love for all beings. This is the characteristic mark of *dharma* that distinguishes it from *adharma*, Yudhiṣṭhira. (Book 12.251.24)

These quotations serve to illustrate the point that was made above in asserting that there is thematic unity between the narrative and didactic portions of the *Mahābhārata*. In the narrative, we have various characters illustrating the precepts of *dharma*, and indeed the problems inherent in attempting to implement those precepts in all situations of life, and here we have those precepts laid out before us. The wisdom of the *Mahābhārata* is in its refusal to accept a simplistic dichotomy between good and evil, between *dharma* and *adharma*, and it illustrates this point most aptly in the scenes from the narrative in which the different characters are placed in a variety of situations that challenge them to determine what course of action is most proper.

PASSAGES OF RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS

Let us now move on to the third of the points mentioned above regarding the position of the *Mahābhārata* as primarily a religious scripture. By the end of the *Strī-parvan*, Book 11 of the eighteen books of the *Mahābhārata*, the narrative is more or less complete. The battle is over and Yudhiṣṭhira is triumphant. All that remains to be told is a brief account of Yudhiṣṭhira's reign, a description of the great sacrifice he performs to atone for his sins, and then the departure of the Pāṇḍavas to the Himalayas and their elevation to the realm of the gods. Still, however, almost half of the text remains and most of this is given over to words of practical, ethical, and spiritual instruction given firstly by the dying Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira and then, in Book 14, by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna. It will not be possible for the course to provide a full account of the topics covered in these passages, but they are certainly wide-ranging and provide invaluable source material for any inquiry into Hindu religious teachings. In summary, Yudhiṣṭhira is first instructed in the duties of a king, *rāja-dharma*, then how a king may act in times of emergency, *āpad-dharma*, and finally how a person may pursue the spiritual goal of attaining liberation from rebirth, *mokṣa-dharma*. This

is followed by Book 13, which is known as the *Anuśāsana-parvan*, the book of instruction, in which Yudhiṣṭhira receives guidance on a range of subjects, some secular and some religious.



Bhīṣma instructs Yudhiṣṭhira prior to his death

Previous to these lengthy expositions, we have a number of shorter but extremely significant passages of religious teaching interjected within the central narrative, the most notable of which is surely the *Bhagavad-gītā*, which has been mentioned several times already. It is probably no overstatement to assert that the *Bhagavad-gītā* is the most widely-studied passage of scripture within the Hindu religious tradition. As mentioned above, some scholars may choose to regard the *Bhagavad-gītā* as a separate work that should not be regarded as an integral part of the *Mahābhārata*, and there is some justification for this view as several of the great Hindu teachers presented detailed commentaries on the *Gītā* alone without giving the same prominence to other passages of the *Mahābhārata*, although they do frequently cite verses from these passages in their commentaries. Overall, however, I am strongly of the view that the *Bhagavad-gītā* is best understood within the wider context of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, primarily on the grounds of the thematic unity of the entire *Mahābhārata*.

Hence when we consider the position of the *Mahābhārata* as a text that includes lengthy and significant passages of instruction on the nature of God, on the relationship of God to the created world, and on the way that liberation from rebirth may be attained, then the *Bhagavad-gītā* must be assigned a salient position within that discussion.

If we return to the teachings presented in Books 12, 13 and 14, the *Śānti*, *Anuśāsana* and *Aśvamedhika-parvans*, we can observe that apart from the practical and ethical guidance they contain, which is varied and manifold, the teachings on *mokṣa-dharma* that are presented there are of particular significance in the development of Indian religious thought. It is in the third section of the *Śānti-parvan* that we encounter ideas that form the basis of the Sāṃkhya system, and which have a major influence on Yoga teachings such as those found in Patañjali's *Yoga-sūtras*. The *Upaniṣad* portion of the Vedas presents a mystical doctrine of absolute unity, which asserts that there is no distinction to be drawn between the ultimate divine principle (Brahman), the eternal spiritual entity existing within every being (ātman), and the world of matter that we inhabit. This is succinctly stated in the words of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (3.14.1) *sarvaṃ khalv idaṃ brahma* 'All this world is Brahman alone.' Within the *Mahābhārata*, however, we find a radically different strand of Indian thought that emphasises distinction rather than the unity of the soul with the world it is forced to inhabit.

Generally speaking, it is the Upaniṣadic philosophy of absolute unity that receives more prominence, particularly in the Western world, but in terms of Hindu belief and practice the Sāṃkhya ideas of the *Mahābhārata* are equally important, as these provide a basis for theistic and devotional forms of religion wherein the ātman and the Deity are distinct, at least to some degree. The Sāṃkhya teachings of our text are generally non-theistic, but there are important passages that represent devotional religion dedicated to both Śiva and Nārāyaṇa, including the *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma-stotram*, the thousand names of Viṣṇu (Nārāyaṇa), and the *Śiva-sahasra-nāma-stotram*, the thousand names of Śiva, both of which are employed in Hindu temple ritual.

The expositions of Sāṃkhya thought are frequently followed immediately by teachings on the practice of Yoga, as the two are regarded as complementary, the former providing the theoretical basis and the latter the concomitant forms of practice. At this early stage, Yoga did not include the range of bodily postures and exercises that are so

widely practised today, but focused almost exclusively on the technique of deep meditation. The ultimate goal of this meditation was to withdraw the mind and senses from external perception and thereby to turn the focus inwards, eventually to the point where the mind was so controlled that it could be fixed on the spiritual entity, the ātman that is our true transcendent identity.

The Sāṃkhya teachings discuss the elements of which matter is comprised and then insist that the ātman is of a different, spiritual nature and is therefore eternal and unchanging. In the *Upaniṣads*, it is asserted that realisation of the absolute unity of our own identity with the ultimate reality is the means by which liberation from the material domain may be achieved. The Sāṃkhya teachings are somewhat similar, but they reveal that it is realisation of distinction that is the gateway to liberation, that being the distinction between the true self and its material and psychical embodiments. Here there is no idea of unity, only of distinctiveness and individuality. The Yoga teachings that are found in close proximity to those on Sāṃkhya offer techniques of meditation whereby this theoretical revelation becomes realisation, as the eternal self becomes known through direct perception.

Hence when we consider the overall purview of Hindu religious thought, and the sacred texts that reveal the main ideas, we must be aware of the importance of the *Mahābhārata* as the earliest work in which highly significant strands of Indian religious thought are located. We have the Sāṃkhya ideas that form a parallel strand to the Vedāntic ideology of the *Upaniṣads*, we have the earliest extant teachings on the practice of Yoga, and we also have foundational passages expounding some of the earliest known expressions of monotheistic and devotional Hinduism, dedicated both to Nārāyaṇa and to Śiva. Moreover, there are numerous considerations of other areas of doctrine and belief such as the tension between destiny and free will, the sacred nature of cows, the importance of charity, the possibility of fully implementing the ideal of non-violence (*ahimsā*), and many others as well.

SUMMARY OF THE EIGHTEEN PARVANS OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

As was mentioned earlier, the *Mahābhārata* contains a total of eighteen *parvans*, or sections, which are named according to the principal content. These *parvans* vary enormously in length from the *Mahā-prasthānika-parvan*, Book 17, which contains only three chapters,

to the *Śānti-parvan*, Book 12, which contains over three hundred. Moreover, some of the longer *parvans* are further divided into sub-*parvans*; so, for example the *Bhagavad-gītā* appears in the *Bhīṣma-parvan*, Book 6 of the *Mahābhārata*, which thus has a sub-*parvan* that is named the *Bhagavad-gītā-parvan*. With this in mind, I want now to carry on to a consideration of the content of the *Mahābhārata* as it is set out in each of its eighteen books. This is, of necessity, a wholesale abbreviation of the content, but nonetheless does provide a valuable insight into the progression of the narrative structure as well as the different types of material that are to be encountered within the vast scope of the work.

Book 1. The Ādi-parvan. (225 Chapters)

The *Ādi* (Beginning) *Parvan* presents an introduction to the whole *Mahābhārata* and sets the scene for the events to follow, introducing us to all of the major characters. It opens with a glorification of the religious significance of the *Mahābhārata* before describing the circumstances of its first recitation by Vaiśampāyana, a disciple of the author of the work, Vyāsa himself. We are then told of Viṣṇu's descent as Kṛṣṇa in order to assist the gods in maintaining the order of creation, before the story proper begins with an account of King Śāmtanu's marriage to the goddess Gaṅgā and the birth of their son Devavrata, later known as Bhīṣma. After Śāmtanu questions why Gaṅgā has drowned all her sons bar one, she renounces him and returns to the heavens. Śāmtanu then marries the Satyawatī, who has previously given birth to Vyāsa as the son of the *rishi* Parāśara. Only when Devavrata agrees to renounce his claim to the throne and remain celibate for life will Satyawatī's father permit the marriage, and because of this great vow Devavrata is henceforth known as Bhīṣma. He is blessed by his father to meet with death only when it is his desire to do so.

Śāmtanu and Satyawatī have two sons, Vicitravīrya and Citraṅgada, both of whom die young without offspring. Satyawatī then summons her other son Vyāsa to beget children by their widowed queens, but because of their unwillingness to accept him, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is born blind, Pāṇḍu is born very pale, and Vidura is born as the son of a maid sent by the queen in her place. Although he is the eldest, Dhṛtarāṣṭra cannot become king because of his blindness and so after Śāmtanu's death Pāṇḍu is crowned instead and by his prowess he establishes a great kingdom. Whilst hunting, however, he kills a *rishi* who has taken the form of a deer and is cursed to die if he ever indulges in a sexual

act. Pāṇḍu then renounces his throne, but his first wife, Kuntī, reveals that she has the power, granted by the *rishi* Durvāsas, to summon any of the gods and to beget a son by them. On Pāṇḍu's urging, she begets Yudhiṣṭhira as the son of Dharma the god of justice, Bhīma as the son of Vāyu the wind god, and Arjuna as the son of Indra the lord of the gods. Pāṇḍu's other wife, Mādrī, makes use of Kuntī's gift to give birth to the twins Nakula and Sahadeva as sons of the Aśvins. Just after the birth of Yudhiṣṭhira, Gāndhārī, the wife of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, gives birth to a hundred sons, the eldest of whom is Duryodhana. Some time later Pāṇḍu passes away due to the *rishi's* curse when he falls prey to sexual desires which he attempts to fulfil with Mādrī.

Returning from their forest abode to the city of Hastināpura, the sons of Pāṇḍu receive military training alongside the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, firstly from Kṛpācārya and then from Droṇācārya. This culminates in the display of military prowess in which Arjuna first encounters Karṇa and Bhīma faces Duryodhana. As the rivalry between the two sets of brothers develops, the Pāṇḍavas are sent to live in a house of shellac, which is burned down on Duryodhana's instruction. The Pāṇḍavas escape from the fire and then live in hiding, while the world thinks that they are dead. During this time Bhīma kills the *rākṣases* Hidimba and Baka, and Arjuna wins Draupadī as their joint wife at a competitive wedding ceremony. Thereby an alliance is forged with King Drupada, her father, who is the ruler of the Pañcāla kingdom. When the Pāṇḍavas then return home, the kingdom is divided between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana, with the Pāṇḍavas getting a deserted wilderness as their share. With Kṛṣṇa's aid they develop this desolate region into a flourishing domain. Whilst travelling abroad, Arjuna develops a relationship with his cousin Kṛṣṇa, marries Kṛṣṇa's sister Subhadrā, and assists Agni, the fire god, in the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest.

Book 2. The Sabhā-parvan (72 Chapters)

As the title suggests the main action recounted in the *Sabhā* (Assembly Hall) *Parvan* takes place in the assembly halls of the kings. It opens with Yudhiṣṭhira, now firmly established as the ruler of half the kingdom, wishing to regain his father's predominance over all the other kings of India. This can be achieved when he performs a *rājasūya-yajña*, the ritual of kingship. The main obstacle to this goal is Jarāsandha, King of Magadha, but with Kṛṣṇa's guidance Jarāsandha is killed in single combat by Bhīma.

The *rājasuya-yajña* then goes ahead and at its completion Kṛṣṇa is proclaimed as the leading guest amongst all the kings present. When Śiśupāla, the King of Chedi, challenges this and insults Kṛṣṇa, he is killed by Kṛṣṇa who is revealed as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, the Supreme Deity. Duryodhana is also present, but becomes envious of the splendour of the Pāṇḍava domain and is mocked by Draupadī when he falls into a pool of water. This envy leads to the gambling match in which Yudhiṣṭhira is defeated by Duryodhana's uncle, Śakuni, and loses all their possessions including their kingdom and even Draupadī, who is viciously insulted before the assembly. These events lead to an undeviating sense of enmity between the two factions. As a result of their defeat in the gambling match, the Pāṇḍavas are exiled in the wilderness for twelve years with a further year to be spent in hiding without being recognised. If they are discovered in this final year they will have to repeat the full duration of their banishment.

Book 3. The Vana- or Āraṇyaka-parvan (299 Chapters)

The lengthy *Āraṇyaka* (Forest) *Parvan* describes the sequence of extraordinary events that befall the Pāṇḍavas whilst they are enduring their years of exile in the forest. At the outset, we find the pious Yudhiṣṭhira delighted by the peace and tranquillity of forest life, but Bhīma and Draupadī criticise him for his lack of warlike tendencies. They wish to return immediately and attack their enemies, but Yudhiṣṭhira insists that there can be no breach of faith, for that is *dharma*. Arjuna then departs for the world of the gods to acquire the celestial weapons they will need for the upcoming conflict, which now seems inevitable. He first encounters Śiva in the form of a hunter and after fighting with him receives Śiva's blessing and the invincible Pāśupata weapon.

Ascending to the realm of the gods, Arjuna dwells with Indra, his true father, but when he spurns the advances of the beautiful Urvaśī he is cursed by her to lose his manhood for one year. Meanwhile the four other Pāṇḍavas hear the story of Nala and Damayantī from the *rishi* Bṛhadaśva and then travel with the *rishis* Pulastya and Lomaśa to all the sacred *tīrthas*, pilgrimage sites, in order to acquire the purity and strength of *dharma* that will assist them in their struggles. In the course of this journey, numerous stories are told to them relating to the places and persons they visit. In the foothills of the Himalayas, Bhīma meets his half-brother Hanumān and fights with the servants of Kuvera in order to obtain celestial lotus flowers for Draupadī. Here

also Arjuna descends from the abode of Indra and is reunited with his brothers. Yudhiṣṭhira then frees all four of his brothers from Nahuṣa, who is in the form of a serpent, by answering his questions on *dharma*.

The Pāṇḍavas then meet with the *rishi* Mārkaṇḍeya who instructs them at length about the glories of Nārāyaṇa who has appeared on earth as Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa himself comes to visit the Pāṇḍavas in the forest and at this time Draupadī instructs Satyabhāmā, one of Kṛṣṇa's wives, on the conduct of the perfect wife. Desiring to see the Pāṇḍavas in their state of disgrace and to mock them, Duryodhana comes with his supporters to the forest where his cousins are residing. However, they are defeated by the celestial *gandharvas* and Duryodhana is made their prisoner. Arjuna rescues Duryodhana who is humiliated by this act of grace and becomes even more inimical towards his rescuers. Draupadī is then kidnapped by King Jayadratha but is rescued by Bhīma; Jayadratha is forgiven by Yudhiṣṭhira but, as with Duryodhana, his hatred for the Pāṇḍavas is only increased as a result of this magnanimous act. Meeting again with Mārkaṇḍeya, the Pāṇḍavas first hear from him the story of Rāma and Sītā, and then learn about Sāvitrī's saving her husband from the clutches of death. Finally, the *Āraṇyaka-parvan* relates how Karṇa gave his celestial armour and earrings in charity to Indra and how Yudhiṣṭhira again saved his brothers by satisfying a *yakṣa*, a nature spirit, with a wonderful discourse on the subject of *dharma*.

Book 4. The Virāṭa-parvan (67 Chapters)

The *Virāṭa-parvan* tells of how the Pāṇḍavas passed the final year of their exile in disguise, living secretly in the realm of Virāṭa, the King of the Matsyas. After the twelve years of exile in the forest are over, the Pāṇḍavas travel to the land of the Matsyas. They first hide their weapons in a tree and then take up employment in the service of King Virāṭa. Yudhiṣṭhira becomes a Brahmin advisor to the king, Bhīma becomes his chief cook, Arjuna (who has lost his manhood for a year due to Urvaśī's curse) becomes a dancing instructor to the princess, Draupadī becomes a lady-in-waiting to the queen, Nakula takes charge of the king's horses, and Sahadeva supervises his herds of cows.

The arrangement runs into trouble when Kīcaka, the king's brother-in-law and the commander of his army, begins to harass Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhira tells her to tolerate his advances, but Bhīma takes assertive action and beats Kīcaka to death. When Duryodhana and his

allies come to hear about this, they suspect that the Pāṇḍavas may be residing with King Virāṭa and decide on a cattle raid against the Matsyas. They steal away Virāṭa's cows but are defeated by Arjuna who has now resumed his true identity. Recognising Arjuna, the Kauravas claim that the terms of the agreement have been breached, but Bhīṣma rules that a whole year has in fact passed and that the Pāṇḍavas have kept their side of the bargain intact.

Book 5. The Udyoga-parvan (197 Chapters)

The *Udyoga* (Preparations) *Parvan* tells of the negotiations and preparations that take place before battle is joined at Kurukṣetra. After the thirteen years of exile are complete, Duryodhana still refuses to return the Pāṇḍavas' kingdom to them. Even when Yudhiṣṭhira asks for just five villages to rule, Duryodhana refuses. Then the Pāṇḍavas begin to call upon their friends and allies and to gather an army for war. Firstly, Śalya, the King of the Madras and the maternal uncle of Nakula and Sahadeva, comes to join the Pāṇḍava host but he is welcomed and flattered by Duryodhana and as a result joins his faction. However, King Drupada of the Pañcālas and King Virāṭa of the Matsyas bring armies to support the Pāṇḍavas. Dhṛtarāṣṭra sends his minister, Saṁjaya, to urge the Pāṇḍavas to give up their preparations on the grounds that making war is always evil, but Yudhiṣṭhira rejects this disingenuous embassy.

Within the Pāṇḍava camp, however, there are significant debates over the nature of *dharma* and righteous action, with Yudhiṣṭhira speaking out against warfare and *kṣatriya-dharma*, the duties of the warrior class. In these debates he is opposed by his brothers, by Draupadī, and by Kṛṣṇa who has joined the Pāṇḍava side but only as an advisor and chariot driver. He will not bear arms as he is related to both sides. After hearing the Pāṇḍavas' reply to Saṁjaya's embassy, Dhṛtarāṣṭra then receives instruction on moral conduct from Vidura (the *Vidura-nīti*) and on spiritual wisdom from the sage Sanat Sujāta.

In the Kuru assembly, Bhīṣma, Kṛpa, Droṇa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and even Gāndhārī all urge Duryodhana to make peace but he will not listen to their advice even when it is revealed to him that Kṛṣṇa is an *avatāra* of Nārāyaṇa. Saṁjaya then instructs Dhṛtarāṣṭra further about Kṛṣṇa's divine identity. Meanwhile, the Pāṇḍavas decide to send Kṛṣṇa as a peace emissary to the city of Hastināpura. Although he is graciously received by the Kauravas, Duryodhana rejects his words and then

attempts to make him a prisoner. This attempt is baffled by Kṛṣṇa who displays his *viśva-rūpa*; all the gods and all the warriors are seen as being present within his own person. Kṛṣṇa then reveals to Karṇa the secret of his birth as the first son of Kuntī; he is hence a brother of the Pāṇḍavas. But even when Kuntī herself begs him to do so, Karṇa will not give up his loyalty to Duryodhana. As the armies gather and move towards Kurukṣetra, it is clear that war cannot be avoided. Bhīṣma is an incomparable warrior but now we are told of his one weakness. He will not fight the Pañcāla prince Śikandhin, for he knows that in a previous birth he was the princess Ambā who gave up her life when she was kidnapped by Bhīṣma as a wife for Vicitravīrya.

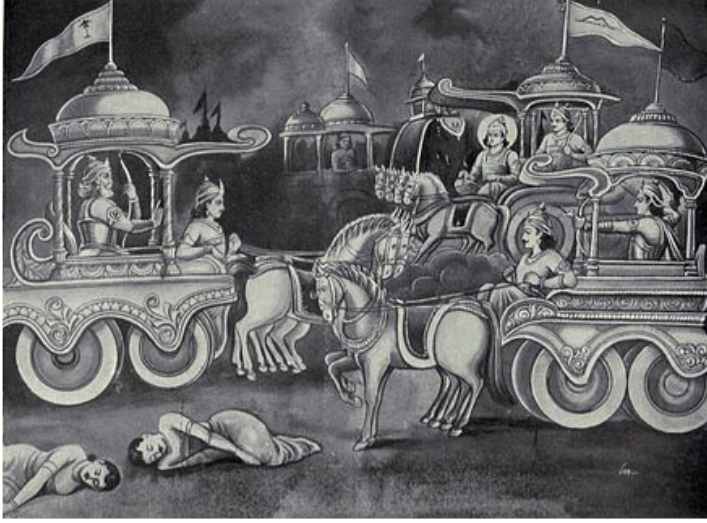
Book 6. The Bhīṣma-parvan (117 Chapters)

As the name suggests, this book of the *Mahābhārata* gives an account of the first ten days of the battle when Bhīṣma commanded Duryodhana's army. We first hear of how Vyāsa granted divine vision to Saṁjaya so that he could relate to Dhṛtarāṣṭra everything that takes place at Kurukṣetra. This power is first used by Saṁjaya to describe all the different regions of the world. As the fighting is about to commence, we hear of Arjuna's unwillingness to fight with his relatives and elders, which is followed by Kṛṣṇa's instruction in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

Meanwhile Bhīṣma derides the prowess of the boastful Karṇa and the latter withdraws, saying that he will not fight under the command of Bhīṣma. The battle then begins with extensive descriptions of the fighting and individual encounters between the great warriors of both sides. We hear that Arjuna is still fighting mildly and will not encounter Bhīṣma. On the first day, the Kauravas prevail and Yudhiṣṭhira is dispirited, but thereafter the Pāṇḍavas gain the upper hand and on each day drive back the Kaurava host. After the fifth day's fighting, Duryodhana questions Bhīṣma as to why they are not victorious despite their mighty commanders and superior numbers. Bhīṣma then instructs Duryodhana about Kṛṣṇa's divine nature and his identity as an *avatāra* of Nārāyaṇa.

Bhīma kills several of Duryodhana's brothers, but Arjuna still will not fight against Bhīṣma to the full limit of his strength. On two occasions Kṛṣṇa becomes so frustrated with Arjuna that he begins to attack Bhīṣma himself and has to be restrained by Arjuna in order to keep intact Kṛṣṇa's vow not to fight. Bhīṣma finally decides to give up the fight; he gives permission for the Pāṇḍavas to kill him and tells

them that Śikhandin should be stationed in front of Arjuna. Bhīṣma will not shoot arrows at Śikhandin and from this position Arjuna is able to pierce Bhīṣma with innumerable arrows until the latter falls to the ground. Lying mortally wounded on the field, Bhīṣma urges Duryodhana to make peace, but his words are ignored. He is also finally reconciled with Karṇa.



Bhīṣma refuses to fight with Śikhandin

Book 7. The Droṇa-parvan (173 Chapters)

The *Droṇa-parvan* gives an account of the events that take place in the five days of the battle during which Droṇācārya commands Duryodhana's army. After the fall of Bhīṣma, Karṇa rejoins the Kaurava host and Droṇa is installed as their commander. Under Droṇa's grim leadership the fighting of the Kaurava army becomes more intense and the commander himself inflicts terrible casualties upon the Pāṇḍava host. Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna travel by night to Mount Kailāsa where they receive the blessing of Śiva. Whilst Arjuna is fighting elsewhere, his son Abhimanyu penetrates to the heart of the Kaurava army but is surrounded and slain by six mighty warriors including Droṇa and Karṇa. The other Pāṇḍavas cannot help him because they are checked by Jayadratha. When Arjuna learns of his son's death, he vows that he will either kill Jayadratha the next day or else enter a fire and kill himself. Learning of this from spies, the Kauravas position Jayadratha

so that he is protected by the entire army, but with Kṛṣṇa's aid Arjuna is still able to kill him at the very end of the day.

Enraged by this setback, Droṇa orders his forces to continue fighting all through the night and a terrible slaughter takes place in the confused battle that follows. Bhīma had previously married a *rākṣasa* woman named Hidimbā and begotten a son named Ghaṭotkaca by her. Fighting on behalf of the Pāṇḍavas, Ghaṭotkaca appears to be virtually invincible. Eventually Karṇa kills Ghaṭotkaca with the weapon he received from Indra; but this invincible weapon can be used only once and Karṇa had been saving it for his fight with Arjuna. Seeing the destruction caused by Droṇa and realising that there is no one who can kill him in battle, Kṛṣṇa suggests a strategy to remove him. If Droṇa learns that his son Aśvatthāman is dead, he will put aside his weapons in a state of grief. Yudhiṣṭhira is known as a man of *dharma* who is always truthful, and when he says that Aśvatthāman is dead, Droṇa believes the falsehood to be true. He puts aside his weapons and sits down on the battlefield to meditate. Taking this opportunity, Dhṛṣṭadyumna the son of Drupada and brother of Draupadī, cuts off Droṇa's head. On learning what has happened, Aśvatthāman launches a ferocious attack on the Pāṇḍava army. The *Droṇa-parvan* ends with a vision seen by Arjuna of the destructive form of Śiva, which precedes him wherever he goes on the battlefield.

Book 8. The Karṇa-parvan (69 Chapters)

The *Karṇa-parvan* recounts the events that take place over the two days during which Karṇa is the commander of Duryodhana's army. After the death of Droṇa, Karṇa is made general of the Kauravas and he takes a vow to kill Arjuna, his arch-rival. Somewhat against his will, King Śalya of the Madras is persuaded to be Karṇa's charioteer and some harsh words are exchanged between them. Karṇa launches a destructive attack against the Pāṇḍava army but is unable to gain complete victory. Except for Arjuna, each of the Pāṇḍavas in turn is defeated by Karṇa but he does not kill them because of a promise he had made earlier to his mother Kuntī. Whilst Arjuna is elsewhere, Karṇa afflicts Yudhiṣṭhira with many arrow wounds and forces him to flee from the field in a humiliating fashion. When Arjuna returns, insults and harsh words are exchanged with Yudhiṣṭhira and a quarrel ensues which is resolved by Kṛṣṇa's discourse on *dharma*.

Arjuna then goes to confront Karṇa directly. The two great archers

are evenly matched but Karṇa forgets the *mantras* he needs to fight effectively because of a curse from his guru, Paraśurāma. Due to another curse received by Karṇa, his chariot wheel becomes stuck in the ground and disabled. Karṇa begs Arjuna to follow the correct warrior ethos, the *kṣatriya-dharma*, and pause whilst he repairs his chariot, but Kṛṣṇa reminds him of the absence of *dharma* when Karṇa and five others killed Abhimanyu. On Kṛṣṇa's instruction, Arjuna kills Karṇa whilst the latter is thus disadvantaged.

Book 9. The Śalya-parvan (64 Chapters)

The *Śalya-parvan* describes events on the final day of the battle when Śalya is the commander of the Kaurava army. After the death of Karṇa, Śalya is installed as the new general and fights heroically against the Pāṇḍava captains. Yudhiṣṭhira then kills Śalya and the remnants of the Kaurava host begin to flee from the field of battle. Sahadeva kills Śakuni and the last of Duryodhana's surviving brothers are killed by Bhīma. When his army is thus vanquished and put to flight, Duryodhana uses magical powers and seeks his own safety by hiding in the depths of a nearby lake. Taunted by the Pāṇḍava chieftons, Duryodhana emerges and agrees to fight with Bhīma in single combat.

There is then a lengthy account of the tour of the holy *tīrthas* along the Saraswati River made by Baladeva, Kṛṣṇa's brother. He arrives at Kurukṣetra just in time to witness Bhīma's club fight with Duryodhana. They are evenly matched, but following the advice of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, Bhīma strikes down Duryodhana with a foul blow to the thighs. Baladeva's anger over this action is restrained Kṛṣṇa. Only three of the leading Kauravas survive the battle: Kṛtavarman, Kṛpācārya and Aśvatthāman.

Book 10. The Saṃvatsara-parvan (18 Chapters)

The *Saṃvatsara* (night time) *Parvan* records the events that take place during the night that follows the last day of the battle, when Aśvatthāman enters the Pāṇḍava encampment and massacres all the surviving warriors apart from Kṛṣṇa and the five brothers. Having met with the dying Duryodhana and been encouraged by him to act, Kṛpā, Kṛtavarman and Aśvatthāman decide gain vengeance on their victorious adversaries. Accompanied and empowered by a manifestation of Śiva, Aśvatthāman enters the camp of the Pāṇḍava army and slaughters the warriors who are sleeping therein. This includes the

five sons of Draupadī, one begotten by each of the five Pāṇḍavas. When the Pāṇḍava brothers learn of this terrible event, Bhīma and Arjuna set out in pursuit of Aśvatthāman who fires a mystic arrow to scorch the womb of Uttarā, the wife of Abhimanyu, and thereby destroy the embryo that is the last surviving heir of the Pāṇḍavas. Arjuna then captures Aśvatthāman, but his life is spared because he is a Brahmin by birth and is the son of their teacher.



*Aśvatthāman receives the blessing of Śiva
before his attack on the Pāṇḍava camp*

Book 11. The Strī-parvan (27 Chapters)

The *Strī* (Women's) *Parvan* describes the lamentations of wives and mothers as they gather on the battlefield to look upon the bodies of their loved ones. The *parvan* opens with words of wise instruction

being given to Dhṛtarāṣṭra by Vidura and Vyāsa to comfort him in his grief. Dhṛtarāṣṭra then goes to visit the battlefield with Gāndhārī; Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas meet them there. Gāndhārī then roams across the field accompanied by Kṛṣṇa, pointing out to him the corpses of the great men who lie there. In a mood of anger, she curses Kṛṣṇa to the effect that his family will die at his own hand, for she believes that Kṛṣṇa had the power to prevent the war but chose not to. All the women of the various royal families then grieve for those who have fallen and arrange for the funerals to be performed on the banks of the Gaṅgā.

Book 12. The Śānti-parvan (353 Chapters)

The extensive *Śānti* (Peace) *Parvan* does not carry the narrative forward to any great extent. It is mainly devoted to the teachings delivered by Bhīṣma to Yudhiṣṭhira and the other Pāṇḍavas. Following on from the lamentations of the *Strī-parvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira condemns himself for his wickedness in waging war. He wants to renounce the kingdom they have won but is dissuaded from doing so by Kṛṣṇa, Vyāsa, his brothers, and Draupadī. They then go to where the stricken Bhīṣma is still lying on the battlefield, his body shot through with arrows. Bhīṣma first glorifies Kṛṣṇa and praises him as Nārāyaṇa, the Supreme Deity. The first set of instructions follows on from Yudhiṣṭhira's questions as to how he should rule the kingdom. This passage is known as the *Rāja-dharma-parvan* and indicates the ideal conduct of a righteous king. This is followed by a passage known as the *Āpad-dharma-parvan* wherein Bhīṣma teaches that the rules of virtue may be broken in times of emergency. Yudhiṣṭhira is unhappy about this line of discourse and again criticises the *kṣatriya-dharma* for its wicked tendencies.

Yudhiṣṭhira then inquires from Bhīṣma about the means of gaining liberation from rebirth and is presented with the *Mokṣa-dharma-parvan*, a series of treatises spoken by Bhīṣma which deal with renunciation of the world, Sāṃkhya philosophy, the practice of Yoga, and devotion to Viṣṇu. He concludes with a passage known as the *Nara-nārāyaṇīyam*, which praises Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) as the Supreme Deity and emphasises the path of *bhakti*.



Bhīṣma gives his final instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira

Book 13. The Anuśāsana-parvan (154 Chapters)

In the *Anuśāsana* (Instruction) *Parvan*, Bhīṣma continues to give religious instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira. There is little, if any, action taking place here and the entire book is given over to teachings on a wide variety of subjects. Before Bhīṣma resumes his discourse, Kṛṣṇa describes his own personal devotion to Śiva, gives an account of his initiation into Śiva *bhakti*, and then reveals the *Śiva-sahasra-nāma* prayer. Bhīṣma's opening topic is the role of destiny in our lives, the law of karma and the limits of free will, but he quickly moves on to speak on the subject of *dharma-śāstra*, proper conduct, frequently quoting from the *Manu-smṛti*. He glorifies the Brahmins as the leaders and gods of humanity, he describes the duties of the four *varṇas*, the social classes, he discusses the role of women in society, and he outlines the laws of inheritance.

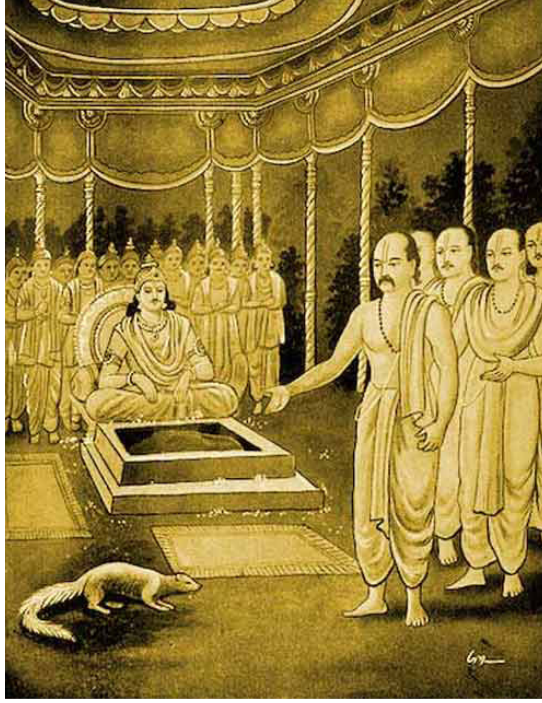
Bhīṣma then teaches Yudhiṣṭhira about the rituals for worshipping the gods and how the *śrāddha* rites should be performed for departed ancestors. He also discusses charity, the reasons for accepting

a vegetarian diet, veneration of the cow, and those persons from whom food may be freely accepted. From a Śaivite perspective, he tells of Śiva's giving instruction to the Goddess Umā, and then reveals the *Viṣṇu-sahasra-nāma* prayer. The final instruction given here to Yudhiṣṭhira is that he must always respect the Brahmins and regard them as his superiors. Finally, Bhīṣma glorifies Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Deity, and then as the sun has now moved into its northern transit, the *uttarāyaṇa*, he gives up his life in the presence of Kṛṣṇa.

Book 14. The Aśvamedhika-parvan (96 Chapters)

The *Aśvamedhika* (Horse Sacrifice) *Parvan* is concerned with the *yajña* Yudhiṣṭhira performs to atone for his sins, but in fact much of the book is devoted to further teachings delivered by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna. At the outset of the *parvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira is still grieving and again condemns his own wickedness in causing the frightful carnage at Kurukṣetra. He is advised by Vyāsa that a horse sacrifice can atone for any sins he may be guilty of. As they are preparing for the *yajña*, Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa to repeat the *Bhagavad-gītā* to him as he has now forgotten its teachings. Kṛṣṇa replies by giving a new pattern of instruction, beginning with a passage known as the *Anugītā*. The ideas presented here are similar in many ways to the teachings imparted by Bhīṣma in the *Mokṣa-dharma-parvan* of the *Śānti-parvan*.

As Kṛṣṇa is returning to his home in Dwarka he encounters the *rishi* Uttanka who threatens to curse him for not stopping the war even though he possessed the power to do so. Kṛṣṇa advises that such a curse would be futile and then once more manifests the *viśva-rūpa* before the *rishi*'s eyes. In Hastināpura, Yudhishtira prepares for the *aśvamedha* ritual; when Kṛṣṇa returns there he revives the stillborn son of Uttarā and Abhimanyu who was scorched in the womb by the weapon of Aśvatthāman. This heir to the Pāṇḍava dynasty is named Parīkṣit. Arjuna re-establishes the dominion of Yudhiṣṭhira over all the kings of the land and then the *aśvamedha* ritual is performed. At the end of the sacrifice, however, the god Dharma appears in the form of a golden mongoose and says that this ceremony was not equal in religious merit to an act of charity performed by a hungry Brahmin couple who gave away their food.



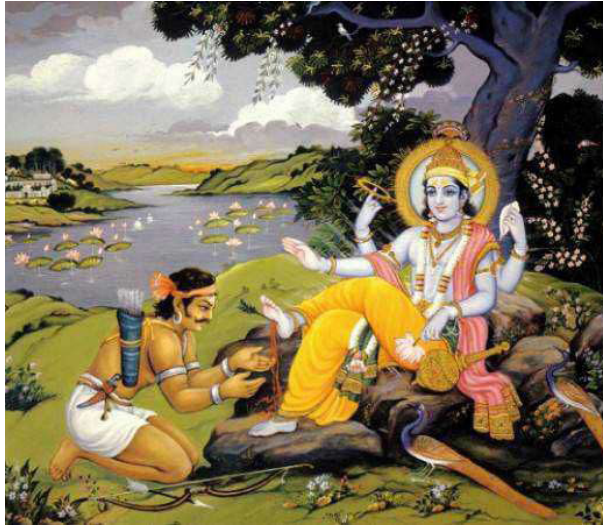
The appearance of the golden mongoose at Yudhiṣṭhira's yajña

Book 15. The Āśrama-vāsika-parvan (47 Chapters)

The *Āśrama-vāsika* (Living in an Āśrama) *Parvan* tells of how the surviving elders of the family departed from Hastināpura to live a life of religious simplicity. At the beginning of the *parvan*, Yudhiṣṭhira again shows his generosity of spirit by providing Dhṛtarāṣṭra with the means to perform *śrāddha* rites for his dead sons, though Bhima argues against this and mocks the old king. After these rituals have been performed, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura, Kuntī, and Gāndārī secretly depart for the Himalayas to practise religious austerity. Later the Pāṇḍavas and their followers go to visit the elders in their āśrama and meet with them again. By the grace of Vyāsa, the slain warriors are able to descend from heaven and meet with comrades and adversaries still living; the old enmities are gone and they greet each other as friends. At the end of the *parvan*, we learn that Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura, Kuntī, and Gāndhārī have all perished in a forest fire that swept through their āśrama.

Book 16. The Mausala-parvan (9 Chapters)

The *Mausala* (Club Fight) *Parvan* describes the destruction of Kṛṣṇa's family, and the death of Kṛṣṇa and his departure from this world. When Kṛṣṇa's sons play a trick on some *rishis* by dressing one of them as a pregnant woman, the *rishis* curse the family to destroy itself. Some time later when they are drinking liquor a quarrel breaks out between them and they begin to fight. The fight continues until all of Kṛṣṇa's clan is destroyed. A short time later Kṛṣṇa is shot and killed by a hunter who mistakes him for a black deer. Kṛṣṇa then returns to his original position, passing beyond the three worlds and entering the abode of Viṣṇu. Soon after the departure of Kṛṣṇa, the sea breaks through the city walls and Dwarka is flooded. Arjuna comes to provide protection for the women of the city, but in the absence of Kṛṣṇa his might is spent and he is defeated by a mere band of robbers.



The hunter begs for forgiveness after shooting Kṛṣṇa in the heel

Book 17. The Mahā-prasthānika-parvan (3 Chapters)

In the *Mahā-prasthānika* (Great Journey) *Parvan*, the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī renounce their kingdom and set out for the Himalayas. As they walk along the path into the mountains, they fall one by one as a result of a flaw in their character. Yudhiṣṭhira carries on alone, accompanied only by a dog that has joined them. Arriving at the summit, Yudhiṣṭhira is greeted by the charioteer of the gods who has come to

take him to the celestial sphere. However, he refuses to go without the dog that has become dependent upon him; this is the final test of his unlimited virtue.

Book 18. The Svargārohaṇika-parvan (5 Chapters)

In the *Svargārohaṇika* (Ascent to Svarga) *Parvan*, we are shown the main characters of the *Mahābhārata* residing in the celestial world in the company of the gods. Yudhiṣṭhira first sees his brothers and Draupadī in hell and Duryodhana and his faction enjoying the delights of this heaven. Due to his presence the others are released from hell, but still Yudhiṣṭhira will not accept that those who lived wickedly deserve a place amongst the gods just because they followed *kṣatriya-dharma* and died bravely in battle. At the very end of the *Mahābhārata* this tension over *dharma* is left without any conclusive resolution.



Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to enter the realm of the gods without his dog

This all too brief summarisation of the content of the *Mahābhārata* does no sort of justice to the full richness of this great work, but it does at least provide an insight into the form and structure of its

various component parts. I hope it has also served to highlight some of the more significant themes that run throughout the books, themes that are addressed directly in the numerous passages of instruction and illustrated in the principal events described in such detail in the central narrative and in the various subplots. With this basis now established, we can proceed to explore those themes more fully and, hopefully, begin to recognise the great lessons for life that the *Mahābhārata* has to offer us.