



# *A Royal Thief-Catcher*

Hindu Tales From The Sanskrit

Indian

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*Intermediate*  
*24 min read*

## Chapter I

In one of the smaller cities of India called Sravasti the people gathered together on a very hot day to stare at and talk about a stranger, who had come in to the town, looking very weary and walking with great difficulty because his feet were sore with tramping for a long distance on the rough roads. He was a Brahman, that is to say, a man who devoted his whole life to prayer, and had promised to give up everything for the sake of pleasing the god in whom he believed, and to care nothing for comfort, for riches, or for good food.

This Brahman carried nothing with him but a staff to help him along, and a bowl in which to receive the offerings of those who thought it their duty to help him and hoped by doing so to win favour in the sight of God. He was naked, except for a cloth worn about his loins, and his long hair was all matted together for want of combing and brushing. He made his way very slowly and painfully through the crowds, till he came to a shady corner, and there he sank down exhausted, holding out his bowl for the gifts of the people. Very soon his bowl would have been full of all sorts of good things, but he made it clear that he would accept nothing to eat except rice still in the husk, and nothing to drink but pure water. He was however willing to take money; and when the people who wished to help him found that out, they brought him a good many silver and gold pieces. Some who had no money to spare gave him jewels and other things which could be sold for money.

1. Can you explain why the Brahman would only accept such food as rice in the husk and water?
2. Do you think it was right or wrong of the Brahman to take money and jewels?

## Chapter II

As time went on, the Brahman became very well known in Sravasti. His fame indeed spread far beyond the town, and people came from far away to consult him about all sorts of things, and he gave them good advice, for he was a very wise man. Those who wanted him to tell them what to do paid him for his advice, and as some of them had plenty of money and were glad to help him, he soon became quite rich. He might have done a great deal of good with all this money by helping the poor and suffering, but unfortunately he never thought of doing so. Instead of that, he got to love the money for its own sake. At night, when all those who had come to see him had gone to rest, and there was no fear of his being found out, he used to steal away into the forest, and there he dug a deep hole at the root of a great tree, to which he took all his money and jewels.

In India everybody has a siesta, that is to say, a sleep in the middle of the day, because the heat is so great it is difficult to keep well and strong without this extra rest. So, although it is quite light at the time, the streets are deserted, except for the dogs who prowl about, trying to find something to eat. Now the Brahman loved his money and other treasures so much, that he used very often to do without this siesta and go to the forest to enjoy the pleasure of looking at them. When he got to the tree, he would bend down, clear away the earth and leaves with which he had hidden his secret hole, take out the money and let it slip through his fingers, and hold

up the jewels to the light, to watch how they gleamed and glistened. He was never so happy as when he was alone with his riches, and it was all he could do to tear himself away from them when the time came to go back to his shady corner. In fact he was becoming a selfish miser instead of the holy man the people of Sravasti thought he was. By the time the siesta was over he was always back again in his place beneath the tree, holding out his bowl and looking as poor and thin as ever, so that nobody had the least idea of the truth.

3. Why was it wrong for the Brahman to hide away his money and jewels?

4. Can anyone be a miser about other things as well as money and jewels? If so, what other things?

### Chapter III

For many months the Brahman led this double life; until one day, when he went as usual to his hiding-place, he saw at once that some one had been there before him. Eagerly he knelt down, full of fear of exactly what had actually happened. All his care in concealing the hole had been wasted, for it was quite empty. The poor man could not at first believe his own eyes. He rubbed them hard, thinking that there was something the matter with them. Then he felt round and round the hole, hoping that after all he was mistaken; and when at last he was obliged to believe the terrible truth that there really was not a sign of his money and jewels, he became almost mad with misery. He began to run from tree to tree, peering into their roots, and when there was nothing to be seen, he rushed back again to his empty hole, to look into it once more. Then he wept and tore at his hair, stamped about and cried aloud to all the gods he believed in, making all kinds of promises, of what he would do if only they would give him back his treasures. No answer came, and he began to wonder who could have done such a terrible thing. It must, he felt sure, have been one of the people of Sravasti; and he now remembered he had noticed that a good many of them had looked into his bowl with longing eyes, when they saw the money and precious stones in it. "What horrible, wicked people they are," he said to himself. "I hate them. I should like to hurt them as they have hurt me." As he thought in this way he got more and more angry, until he became quite worn out with giving way to his rage.

5. What would you have done if you had been the Brahman when he lost his treasure?

6. Is it wrong to be angry when any one has done you an injury?

## Chapter IV

After roaming about in the forest for a long time, the Brahman went back to the house in Sravasti where some kind people had lent him a room, glad and proud to have such a holy man, as they thought he was, living under their roof. He felt sure they had had nothing to do with the loss of his treasure, because they had given him many proofs of their goodness and honesty. Soon he was pouring out all his grief to them, and they did all they could to comfort him, telling him that he would very soon have plenty more money and jewels. They let him see however that they thought it was mean of him to hide away his riches, instead of using them to help the poor and suffering; and this added very much to his rage. At last he lost all self-control and cried, "It is not worth while for me to live any longer. I will go to some holy place of pilgrimage by the banks of the river, and there I will starve myself to death."

A place of pilgrimage, you know, is one where some great event, generally connected with religion, has taken place, to which pilgrims go to pray in the hope of winning some special favour from God. The word pilgrim means a wanderer, but it has come in course of time to signify any traveller who comes from a distance to some such place. Benares in India is a very famous place of pilgrimage, because it is on the River Ganges, which the Hindus worship and love, believing that its waters can wash away their sins. Hundreds and thousands of Hindus go there every year to bathe in it, and many who know that they have not long to live wait on its banks to die, so that after their bodies have been burnt, as is the custom with the Hindus, their ashes may be thrown into the sacred stream.

7. Can you name two other places of pilgrimage, one held sacred by Christians and one by Hindus?

8. Will you explain exactly why the two places you have thought of are considered holy?

## Chapter V

The news of the Brahman's loss spread very quickly through Sravasti; and as is so often the case, every one who told the story made it a little different, so that it became very difficult to know what the truth really was. There was great distress in the town, because the people thought the Brahman would go away, and they did not want him to do that. They were proud of having a man they thought so holy, living amongst them, and ashamed that he should have been robbed whilst he was with them. When they heard that he meant to starve himself to

death, they were dreadfully shocked, and determined to do all they possibly could to prevent it. One after another of the chief men of Sravasti came to see him, and entreated him not to be in such a hurry to be sure that his treasure would never be found. They said they would all do everything they possibly could to get it back for him. Some of them thought it was very wrong of him to make such a fuss about it, and blamed him for being a miser. They told him it was foolish to care so much for what he could not take with him when he died, and one specially wise old man gave him a long lecture on the wickedness of taking away the life which had been given to him by God to prepare for that in the other world. "Put the idea of starving yourself out of your head," he said, "and whilst we are seeking your treasure, go on as you did before you lost it. Next time you have any money and jewels, turn them to good account instead of hoarding them up."

9. Do you think the Brahman was of any real use to the people of Sravasti?

10. In what qualities do you think the Brahman was wanting when he made up his mind to starve himself to death?

## Chapter VI

In spite of all that any one could say to him, the Brahman was quite determined that he would not live any longer. He set off to the place of pilgrimage he had chosen, taking no notice of any one he met, but just marching steadily on. At first a number of people followed him, but by degrees they left off doing so, and soon he was quite alone. Presently however he could not help noticing a man approaching from the direction in which he was going. Very tall, very handsome, very dignified, this man was one whom no one could fail to admire, even if he had been only an ordinary person. But he was the king of the whole country, whose name was Prasnajit; and a little distance behind him were a number of his attendants, waiting to obey his orders. Everybody, even the Brahman, loved the king, because he took such a very great interest in his people and was always trying to do them good. He had heard all about the loss of the money, and was very much vexed that such a thing should have happened in his land. He had also heard that the Brahman meant to kill himself, and this distressed him more than anything else, because he thought it a very wicked and terrible thing to do.

The king stood so exactly in the path of the Brahman that it was impossible to pass him by without taking any notice of him, and the unhappy man stood still, hanging down his head and looking very miserable. Without waiting for a moment, Prasnajit said to the Brahman: "Do not grieve any more. I will find your treasure for

you, and give it back to you; or if I fail to do so I will pay you as much as it was worth out of my own purse: for I cannot bear to think of your killing yourself. Now tell me very carefully where you hid your gold and jewels, and everything about the place, to help me to make sure of it.”

The Brahman was greatly delighted to hear this, because he knew full well that the king would keep his word, and that, even if his own treasure was never found, he would have plenty of money given to him by the king. He at once told Prasnajit exactly where he had put his store, and offered to take him there. The king agreed to go with him at once, and he and the Brahman went straight away to the big hole in the forest, the attendants following them a little way behind.

11. If you had been the king, how would you have set about finding the treasure?

12. Was it a good or a bad thing for the Brahman to have secured the help of the king?

## Chapter VII

After the king had seen the big empty hole, and noticed exactly where it was, and the nearest way to it from the town, he returned to his palace, first telling the Brahman to go back to the house he lived in, and wait there till he received a message from him. He promised to see that he wanted for nothing, and sent one of his attendants to a rich merchant of Sravasti, who had already done a good deal for the Brahman, to order him to supply the holy man with all he needed. Very glad that after all he was not going to die, the Brahman obeyed willingly, and for the next few days he was taken care of by the merchant, who supplied him with plenty of food.

As soon as Prasnajit was back in his palace, he pretended that he was taken suddenly ill. His head ached badly, he said, and he could not make out what was the matter with him. He ordered a proclamation to be sent all round the town, telling all the doctors to come to the palace to see him. All the doctors in the place at once hastened to obey, each of them hoping that he would be the one to cure the king and win a great reward. So many were they that the big reception room was full of them, and they all glared at each other so angrily that the attendants kept careful watch lest they should begin to fight. One at a time they were taken to the king's private room, but very much to their surprise and disappointment he seemed quite well and in no need of help from them. Instead of talking about his own illness, he asked each doctor who his patients were in the town,

and what medicines he was giving to them. Of course Prasnajit's questions were carefully answered; but the king said nothing more, just waving his hand to shew that the interview was at an end. Then the attendants led the visitor out. At last however a doctor came, who said something which led the king to keep him longer than he had kept any of the others. This doctor was a very famous healer who had saved the lives of many of Prasnajit's subjects. He told the king that a merchant named Matri-Datta was very ill, suffering greatly, but that he hoped to cure him by giving him the juice of a certain plant called nagaballa. At the time this story was written, doctors in India did not give their patients medicine, or write prescriptions for them to take to chemists to be made up, because there were no chemists in those days, such as there are in all the towns of Europe, who keep the materials in stock for making medicines. A doctor just said to his patient, "you must take the juice of this or that plant"; and the suffering person had to go into the fields or woods to find the plant or else to send a servant to do so.

When the king heard that the doctor had ordered Matri-Datta to take the juice of the nagaballa plant, he cried "No more doctors need come to see me!" and after sending away the one who had told him what he wanted to know, he gave orders that Matri-Datta should be sent for at once.

13. Can you guess why the king sent for the doctors?

14. Do you think Matri-Datta had anything to do with stealing the Brahman's treasure?

## Chapter VIII

Ill and suffering though he was, Matri-Datta did not dare disobey the king: so he came at once. As soon as he appeared, Prasnajit asked him how he was, and said he was sorry to have to make him leave his home when he was ill, but the matter on which he wished to see him was of very great importance. Then he suddenly added: "When your doctor ordered you to take the juice of the nagaballa plant whom did you send to find it?"

To this Matri-Datta replied trembling with fear: "My servant, O king, sought it in the forest; and having found it, brought it to me."

“Go back and send that servant to me immediately,” was the reply; and the merchant hurried away, wondering very much why the king wanted to see the man, and hoping that he himself would not get into disgrace on account of anything he had done to make Prasnajit angry.

15. Have you any idea why the king wanted the servant sent to him?

16. From what the story tells you so far, do you think Prasnajit was a good ruler of his kingdom?

## Chapter IX

When Matri-Datta told his servant that he was to go to the palace to see the king, the man was dreadfully frightened, and begged his master not to make him go. This made Matri-Datta pretty sure that he had done something wrong and was afraid of being found out. “Go at once,” he said, “and whatever you do, speak the truth to the king. That will be your only chance if you have offended him.” Again and again the servant entreated Matri-Datta not to insist, and when he found it was no good, he asked him at least to come with him to the palace and plead for him with Prasnajit. The merchant knew then for certain that something was seriously wrong, and he consented to go to the palace with his servant, partly out of curiosity and partly out of fear for himself. When the two got to the palace, the attendants at once led the servant to the presence of the king, but they would not let the master go with him.

Directly the servant entered the room and saw the king sitting on his throne, he fell upon his face at the foot of the steps, crying, “Mercy! mercy!” He was right to be afraid, for Prasnajit said to him in a loud voice: “Where are the gold and the jewels you took from the hole in the roots of a tree when you went to find the nagaballa plant for your master?” The servant, who really had taken the money and jewels, was so terrified when he found that the king knew the truth, that he had not a word to say at first, but just remained lying on the ground, trembling all over. Prasnajit too was silent, and the attendants waiting for orders behind the throne looked on, wondering what would happen now.

17. Have you guessed what the nagaballa plant had to do with finding out who had stolen the money and jewels?

18. If you had been the king, what punishment would you have ordered for the thief?

## Chapter X

When the silence had lasted about ten minutes, the thief raised his head from the ground and looked at the king, who still said not a word. Something in his face however made the wicked servant hope that he would not be punished by death in spite of the great wrong he had done. The king looked very stern, it is true, but not enraged against him. So the servant rose to his feet, and clasping his hands together as he held them up to Prasnajit, said in a trembling voice: "I will fetch the treasure, I will fetch the treasure." "Go then at once," said the king, "and bring it here": and as he said it, there was a beautiful expression in his eyes, which made the thief more sorry for what he had done than he would have been if Prasnajit had said, "Off with his head!" or had ordered him to be beaten.

19. What do you think is the best way to make wicked people good?

20. What is the most powerful reason a man or woman or a child can have for trying to be good?

## Chapter XI

As soon as the king said, "Go at once," the servant started to his feet and hastened away, as eager now to restore what he had stolen as he had been to hide it. He had put it in another hole in the very depths of the forest; and it was a long time before he got back to the palace with it, for it was very heavy. He had thought the king would send some guards with him, to see that he did not run away, and that they would have helped him to carry the sack full of gold and jewels; but nobody followed him. It was hard work to drag the heavy load all the way alone; but at last, quite late in the evening, he was back at the palace gates. The soldiers standing there let him pass without a word, and soon he was once more in the room in which the king had received him. Prasnajit still sat on his throne, and the attendants still waited behind him, when the thief, so tired he could hardly stand, once more lay prostrate at the bottom of the steps leading up to the throne, with the sack beside him. How his heart did beat as he waited for what the king would say! It seemed a very long time before Prasnajit spoke, though it was only two or three minutes; and when he did, this is what he said, "Go back to your home now, and be a thief no more."

Very, very thankfully the man obeyed, scarcely able to believe that he was free to go and that he was not to be terribly punished. Never again in the rest of his life did he take what did not belong to him, and he was never

tired of telling his children and his friends of the goodness of the king who had forgiven him.

21. Do you think it would have been better for the thief to have been punished?

22. What lesson did the thief learn from what had happened to him?

## Chapter XII

The Brahman, who had spent the time of waiting in prayers that his treasure should be given back to him, and was still determined that, if it were not, he would starve himself to death, was full of delight when he heard that it had been found. He hastened to the palace and was taken before the king, who said to him: "There is your treasure. Take it away, and make a better use of it than before. If you lose it again, I shall not try to recover it for you."

The Brahman, glad as he was to have his money and jewels restored, did not like to be told by the king to make a better use of them. Besides this he wanted to have the thief punished; and he began talking about that, instead of thanking Prasnajit and promising to follow his advice. The king looked at him much as he had looked at the thief and said: "The matter is ended so far as I have anything to do with it: go in peace."

The Brahman, who was accustomed to be honoured by every one from the king on his throne to the beggars in the street, was astonished at the way in which Prasnajit spoke to him. He would have said more, but the king made a sign to his attendants, two of whom dragged the sack to the entrance of the palace and left it there, so that there was nothing for the Brahman to do but to take it away with him. Every one who has read this wonderful story would, of courses like to know what became of him after that, but nothing more is told about him.

23. Do you think that the Brahman learnt anything from his loss and recovery of his treasure?

24. Was the Brahman more wicked than, the thief or the thief than the Brahman?

25. Do you think the Brahman continued to be a miser for the rest of his life?

26. What were the chief characteristics of the king—that is to say, what sort of man do you think he was?

27. Which of the people who are spoken of in this story do you like and admire most, and which do you dislike

most?

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