

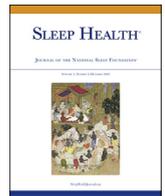


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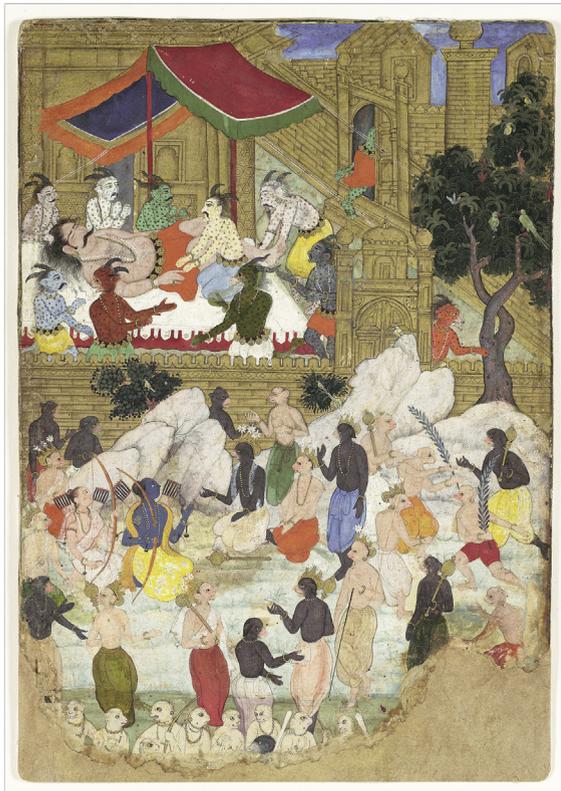
Sleep Health

Journal of the National Sleep Foundation

journal homepage: [sleephealthjournal.org](https://www.sleephealthjournal.org)

Cover Art

When sleep can be a curse



The Awakening of Kumbhakarna in the Golden City of Lanka, Folio from a Ramayana, ca 1605, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Credit for the journal cover image and the image above: Public domain via Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The *Ramayana* is one of the most important epic poems of ancient India. The story depicts Prince Rama and his beautiful wife, Sita, as they pursue a journey of “dharma,” described as the universal truth, order, and personal duty that make life and society possible.¹ The poem, made up of 25,000 verses, begins with Prince Rama’s heroic renunciation as he is forced to abdicate his claim to the throne. As a result, he is sent into exile from the kingdom with his wife and brother. However, their peaceful existence in the forest takes a turn as the vengeful Ravana kidnaps Sita, which begins

a series of fierce battles for winning Sita back and the ultimate triumph of good over evil.²

In one of the triumphant battles, the antagonist Ravana is noted to summon his giant-size brother Kumbhakarna to assist in the war. According to the legend, Kumbhakarna endures the curse of sleep, where he sleeps for great lengths at a time and is very difficult to arouse.³ When attempts to awake him were successful, Kumbhakarna had a voracious appetite, often devouring anything immediately within reach, and had an uncontrollable temper, which was feared by many. Once his insatiable appetite was appeased, he was seen to fall back asleep again for impressive stretches.

This watercolor piece dates back to 1605 and illustrates a scene from the *Ramayana* portraying Kumbhakarna in slumber within the palace walls. Ravana’s men, represented by spotted skin, horns, and mustaches, attempt to wake him up for war but are unable to do so. They cause commotion by striking gongs, blaring trumpets, poking his feet, and tugging on his hair. However, according to the legend, Kumbhakarna ultimately awakens purely out of hunger and engages in the war.⁴

Outside of Ravana’s palace gates is a figure in blue-toned skin with a bow and arrows, which are characteristic features associated with Rama. Beside him is his dutiful protector and brother Lakshmana, also seen with a set of bow and arrows. They are protected by an army of monkeys and bears, led by Sugriva who joined Rama and formed an alliance to combat evil. The placement of Rama and Lakshmana across from Sugriva, his seniority denoted by the adornment of a garment scarf, hints a discussion of military tactics as Rama often sought advice from Sugriva. Perhaps, there is a sense of wonder among the army as the battle is on standstill while attempts to awaken Kumbhakarna persist within the palace walls. Another painting in the British Museum shows a sleeping Kumbhakarna snoring with demons trying to awaken him by hitting him with paddles and tridents.

This folio of watercolor and gold on paper presents as a unique masterpiece because it lends from Persian models while incorporating Indian styles. The Mughal empire, which ruled approximately from 1526 to 1707, was an era where artistic and architectural inventiveness was encouraged and flourished.⁵ An example of this innovation can be seen here by the use of depth and tiered landscape as well as the restrained use of color, both common in Persian painting styles, whereas bursts of color exemplified in the palace tent and trees reflect a strong palette seen in many Indian Rajput paintings.⁶

Art has played a vital role in not only documenting stories, whether it be historical or mythical. Here it also provides a window

into culture, history, and medicine. The curse of Kumbhakarna is seen to play a fundamental role in the *Ramayana* and perhaps reveals an ancient diagnosis of Kleine-Levin syndrome or a hypothalamic syndrome. Unquestionably, as we peruse and appreciate some of the world's most renowned classics, we realize the importance of sleep for our health and perhaps in the triumph of good over evil.

Disclosure

The authors have declared that they have nothing to disclose.

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