Seven Stories of Diwali

A storytelling companion for HPN community gatherings and families.

Diwali celebrates the victory of light over darkness, Dharma over Adharma, and knowledge over ignorance. These seven stories reflect different traditions associated with the five days of the festival. They can be told independently or together.

Storytelling note: These are accessible retellings, not literal translations of scripture. Regional traditions sometimes differ, and the Lakshmi story is a folktale. Names use simple English spellings without IAST marks.

1 Bhagavan Dhanvantari Appears from the Ocean of Milk

DHANTERAS

Long ago, the devas and asuras joined together to churn the great Ocean of Milk. They hoped to obtain amrita, the nectar of immortality. Using Mount Mandara as a churning rod and the serpent Vasuki as a rope, they worked together as the ocean swirled.

As they churned, many extraordinary treasures and beings emerged. At last, a radiant figure appeared, holding a pot of amrita. He was Bhagavan Dhanvantari, revered as a manifestation of Vishnu and associated with Ayurveda, the traditional science of life and health.

The sight of the nectar caused great excitement. The asuras seized the vessel, and the struggle over who would receive it continued. Vishnu later took the form of Mohini to restore order and ensure that the nectar was distributed to the devas.

For families celebrating Dhanteras, the appearance of Dhanvantari is a reminder that prosperity is not only measured in gold or possessions. Good health, knowledge, and the ability to care for others are also precious blessings.

Connection to Diwali

Dhanteras honors Bhagavan Dhanvantari and is associated with prayers for health and well-being. His appearance during Samudra Manthan is described in the Bhagavata Purana. The association of his appearance with the festival date is traditional.

Ask the audience

Why might good health be considered a kind of wealth? How can we care for our own health and the health of others?

2 Shri Krishna and Satyabhama: The Defeat of Narakasura

NARAKA CHATURDASHI

Another Diwali story is connected with Naraka Chaturdashi, celebrated in many Hindu communities just before the main Diwali night. It tells of a powerful ruler named Narakasura, who became arrogant and caused suffering. He took precious possessions by force and kept many women captive in his palace. People longed for an end to his cruelty.

The devas sought help from Shri Krishna. Krishna set out to confront Narakasura, accompanied by Satyabhama. They traveled toward the fortified city of Pragjyotisha, where guards, barriers, and powerful warriors defended the ruler.

Krishna overcame the defenses and faced Narakasura in battle. In widely told Puranic accounts, Krishna defeated Narakasura while Satyabhama accompanied him. In a popular regional version, Satyabhama herself strikes the decisive blow. These versions differ in details, but both remember their role in ending Narakasura's cruelty.

After the battle, those who had been held captive were released from Narakasura's control. The story is remembered as a victory over injustice and fear, and as a celebration of freedom and protection for those who suffered.

Many families mark Naraka Chaturdashi with early-morning bathing, new clothes, lamps, and festive gatherings. Customs vary from region to region. For them, the day recalls the joy that follows the removal of injustice and the coming of light after darkness.

Connection to Diwali

Naraka Chaturdashi recalls the defeat of Narakasura and the liberation of those held captive. Presenters can explain that traditions differ about Satyabhama's role in the final battle.

Ask the audience

Why is freedom something worth celebrating? How can people stand up for someone who is being treated unfairly?

3 Shri Rama's Homecoming: The Victory of Dharma

DEEPAVALI

Long ago, in the kingdom of Ayodhya, lived Shri Rama, the eldest son of King Dasharatha. Rama was prepared to become king, and the people of Ayodhya looked forward to his coronation. But an unexpected promise changed everything. To honor a pledge made by his father, Rama left the palace to live in the forest for fourteen years. Devi Sita and his brother Lakshmana accompanied him.

During their years in exile, they faced many hardships. Then Ravana, the powerful ruler of Lanka, abducted Sita and took her far from the forest. Rama and Lakshmana searched for her. With the help of Hanuman, Sugriva, and the Vanara allies, they learned where she was being held. Hanuman crossed the sea to Lanka, found Sita, and assured her that Rama was coming.

Rama and his allies reached Lanka. A great battle followed between Rama's forces and Ravana's army. At last, Rama defeated Ravana, and Sita was freed. When the fourteen years of exile came to an end, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana returned to Ayodhya.

The people were overjoyed. According to a cherished Diwali tradition, they welcomed Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana with rows of glowing lamps, filling the city with light. Their homecoming is remembered as a celebration of the restoration of Dharma and the victory of righteousness over wrongdoing.

Today, when families light diyas at Diwali, many remember that joyful return. The lamps are also a reminder that truth, knowledge, and right action can overcome darkness.

Connection to Diwali

Rows of lamps welcome Shri Rama home and symbolize the victory of Dharma. This is a central Diwali tradition, alongside other regional and devotional observances.

Ask the audience

Why might people choose to welcome someone home with light? What does “light over darkness” mean beyond the lamps?

4 Devi Lakshmi and the Only House with Lights

LAKSHMI PUJA

A traditional Diwali folktale tells of an elderly woman who lived in a modest home in a great kingdom. She earned her living through hard work and had little money, but she was honest and resourceful.

One day, the queen lost a precious necklace. News spread across the kingdom, and the king promised a generous reward to whoever returned it. The old woman happened to find the necklace. Instead of keeping it, she went straight to the palace and gave it back.

The king was delighted by her honesty. “Tell me what reward you would like,” he said. But the woman did not ask for gold or jewels. She requested something unusual: “On the night of Diwali, please let my house be the only home in the entire kingdom with lamps burning. Let every other house, even the palace, remain dark.”

The king was surprised, but he had promised her a reward, and he agreed. When Diwali arrived, darkness covered the streets. The old woman carefully cleaned and decorated her home, prepared a welcome, and lit her lamps. Her little house shone brightly in the night.

As the story goes, Devi Lakshmi traveled through the kingdom looking for homes bright with light and welcome. Everywhere she looked, she saw darkness. At last she noticed the lamps shining from the old woman’s home and approached her door.

The woman welcomed Devi Lakshmi with respect and devotion. Pleased with her hospitality, Lakshmi blessed the household with happiness and prosperity. In some tellings, the blessing lasts for seven generations; in others, Lakshmi asks the family to remain loving and united. Either way, the little home becomes a place of abundance.

The folktale reminds listeners that Diwali lamps are more than decorations. They express a heartfelt welcome to Devi Lakshmi and are associated with hope, generosity, gratitude, and prosperity.

Connection to Diwali

This is a popular folktale about Lakshmi Puja and the custom of cleaning, decorating, and illuminating homes. It should not be presented as a specific episode from the Ramayana or as a single universally accepted scriptural story.

Ask the audience

Why did the woman return the necklace? What do the lights symbolize in the story?

5 Shri Krishna Lifts Govardhan Mountain

GOVARDHAN PUJA AND ANNAKUT

In the green pastures of Vrindavan, people cared for cows and lived close to the forests and fields. Every year they prepared offerings for Indra, who was associated with rain. One day, young Shri Krishna asked his father Nanda and the elders why they were preparing this celebration.

Krishna reminded them of the gifts they received from Govardhan Mountain: grass for the cattle, water, shelter, and a place for their community to thrive. He encouraged them to honor Govardhan, the cows, and the land that sustained them. The families listened and prepared a generous offering of food.

When Indra learned that his customary worship had been set aside, he became angry. Fierce winds blew and torrents of rain began to fall. The villagers feared that their homes and cattle would be swept away.

Seeing their distress, Krishna lifted Govardhan Mountain with one hand, holding it like a great umbrella. He invited everyone beneath it: children, elders, families, and their animals. For seven days he held the mountain steady until the rain stopped and the people were safe.

Indra realized his pride had led him astray. The people of Vrindavan celebrated Krishna's protection and remembered the importance of gratitude, humility, and care for every living being.

Today, many families and temples celebrate Govardhan Puja with Annakut, a beautiful offering of many foods to Shri Krishna.

Connection to Diwali

Govardhan Puja remembers Krishna's protection of the people and cattle of Vrindavan. The story is told in the Shrimad Bhagavatam, Canto 10, Chapters 24–25.

Ask the audience

Why did Krishna ask the community to honor the mountain? How can we show gratitude to nature and care for animals?

6 King Mahabali and the Promise of Return

BALIPRATIPADA / BALIPADYAMI

Long ago there lived a powerful king named Mahabali, also known as Bali. His people remembered him as a generous ruler, and his fame spread across the worlds. Yet his great power also disturbed the balance between the devas and asuras.

Bhagavan Vishnu appeared before Mahabali as Vamana, a young brahmachari of small stature, while the king was making generous gifts. Vamana asked for something that sounded very modest: just three steps of land. Mahabali agreed to grant the request.

Suddenly Vamana expanded into the immense form of Trivikrama. With one step he covered the earth, and with a second he spanned the heavens. There was no land left for a third step. Determined to keep his word, Mahabali bowed his head and offered it.

Vishnu recognized Mahabali's steadfast promise and devotion and granted him a place in Sutala, where he would be protected. In beloved regional retellings, Mahabali was also granted the chance to return and visit his people, who welcomed him with gratitude and joy.

In communities that observe Bali Pratipada or Balipadyami around Diwali, the day honors Mahabali and the values of generosity, humility, and keeping one's word. The story of his annual return is also especially beloved in Kerala's Onam tradition, celebrated at a different time of year.

Connection to Diwali

Balipratipada or Balipadyami is observed in several regional Diwali traditions. The Vamana–Mahabali episode is Puranic; the details and timing of his annual return differ across regional tellings.

Ask the audience

Why was it important to Mahabali to keep his promise? Can someone be powerful and still need humility?

7 Yama Visits His Sister Yamuna

BHAI DOOJ / YAMA DWITIYA

Yamuna loved her brother Yama very much. Though they were close in their hearts, they did not often see one another. Yama had many responsibilities, and Yamuna repeatedly invited him to visit her home for a meal.

At last, on the second day of the bright fortnight of Kartika, Yama came to see his sister. Yamuna welcomed him with great affection. She greeted him with a tilak, offered him food, and made him feel honored and loved.

Yama was deeply touched. He wanted to give his sister a gift. In the traditional story, Yamuna asked that brothers who visit their sisters on this day, and receive their loving welcome and prayers, be blessed with well-being and protection.

Yama granted her wish. From then on, the day came to be remembered as Yama Dwitiya, also called Bhai Dooj or Bhau Beej in different regions.

Today, sisters and brothers mark this occasion by meeting when they can, sharing sweets and meals, exchanging gifts, and wishing each other good health and happiness. Even families who live far apart can carry forward its spirit by calling one another and sharing love.

Connection to Diwali

Bhai Dooj honors the bond between siblings. The story of Yama and Yamuna is told in traditional accounts of Yama Dwitiya; its details and customs vary by region.

Ask the audience

Why did Yamuna keep inviting her brother? What are some ways to show siblings they matter, even when we live far apart?

Using These Stories

Primary school: Tell stories conversationally, pause at important moments, and choose one question per story. Middle school: Discuss the festival tradition after the story. High school: Compare the different ways Diwali celebrates the victory of light over darkness without treating all traditions as identical.

Scriptural and traditional references for further reading: Shrimad Bhagavatam 8.8 (Dhanvantari), 10.24–25 (Govardhan), and 8.18–23 (Vamana and Mahabali); traditional Yama Dwitiya accounts; the Ramayana; and regional Diwali traditions. The Lakshmi lamp story is a regional folktale