

BEYOND THE EGO

Kumbh in the light of Vedanta: Truth beyond tradition

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Another Kumbh festival is here. There are several ancient stories behind Kumbh. If the stories are taken merely as tales or folklore, then religion risks becoming merely traditional ritualism. However, if these stories are understood through the lens of philosophy, particularly the illumination provided by Vedanta, they transform into wisdom. Unfortunately, India has mostly deprived itself of this profound understanding. But if we truly grasp the essence of these stories, it brings immense insight.

Immortality, and the meaning of life, is the theme of Kumbh. Seen with clarity, everything in the Kumbh narrative revolves around escaping death. Kumbh, literally, is the pot of Amrit (nectar of immortality) that promises immortality. Who is it that dies and seeks immortality? Vedanta tells us this is the ego, the "I" — the sense of self. We often say, "I will die," "I was born," "It is my life," "My death will come." This "I" is the one perpetually living in the fear of death. It constantly seeks to evade death, and this fear shapes human life profoundly. Everything around us, the entire universe, constantly reminds us of impermanence and death. Change is all around, something is always passing away, something is always transforming. What is here now will not remain tomorrow, and even if it does, it will change. This is death in a symbolic sense. And we are terrified of this impermanence; it is our fundamental anxiety—the fear of change and hence death.

KUMBH: THE NARRATIVE AND ITS DEEPER MEANING FROM PURANAS: The legend of Kumbh revolves around the perennial struggle between the *Devas* (demigods) and *Danas* (demons), the resident gods of heaven and the lords of the hell, respectively. The two keep jostling for superiority, and the demons are ever-eager to defeat the gods and occupy heaven. Danavas remain both envious and desirous of heaven, forever frustrated in their attempts to conquer it.

Both the *Devas* and *Danas* in the story are terrified of death. To escape death and become immortal, both *Devas* and *Danas* decide to churn the great ocean because churning the ocean can lead one beyond death. They use *Vasuki*, the lord of serpents, and the great *Mandar* mountain to begin the churning process. Lord *Vishnu* takes the form of a tortoise and positions himself beneath the mountain, ensuring it doesn't slip or fall.

The first thing that emerges in this churning is great fuming *Halahala* (poison).

The story tells us that when the poison emerged, it was taken to Lord *Shiv*, and *Shiv* protected the three worlds by consuming the poison, becoming *Neelkanth*, the blue-throated one. Post that the story describes in great detail the treasures that emerged from the churning among them were things like *Airavata*, the celestial elephant; *Kalpavriksha*, the wish-fulfilling tree; *Kamadhenu*, the divine cow; *Parijat*, the celestial tree; and many other treasures.

Now, as the story unfolds, once the *Amrit* (nectar of immortality) emerges, *Joyanta* (one of the *Devas*) tries to run away with it. However, he gets caught, leading to a fierce battle between the *Devas* and the *Danas*. Seeing the chaos of the battle and the risk that the *Devas* might lose again—as they often did—Lord *Vishnu* intervenes. He knows that the *Danas* are more interested in indulgence and pleasure than in the truth or immortality. Understanding this, Lord *Vishnu* decides to distract the *Danas* by giving them what they desire. He takes the form of *Mohini*, an enchantress ensnaring *Danas* in her charm.

While the *Danas* are mesmerized by *Mohini's* charm, the *Devas* seize the *Kumbh* and quickly drink the *Amrit* to begin their journey toward immortality. Among the *Danas*, there is one who realizes something is amiss. He figures out that *Mohini* is merely distracting *Danas* while the *Devas* are drinking the *Amrit*. Disguising himself as a *Deva*, he sneaks into their group and drinks the *Amrit*, becoming immortal.

However, he is caught—how does that happen? The story says that the sun and the moon expose him by shining the light on him. Once caught, he is chased by both *Devas* and *Danas*, as both desire the *Amrit*. Feeling the immense pressure of being pursued, his hands begin to tremble. As he tries to escape, drops of *Amrit* spill from the pot and fall in four places. *Prayagraj* is one of these four places where these drops of *Amrit* fell, and this is now the site of the *Kumbh* festival, celebrated on the banks of sacred river. Pilgrims visit these places to bathe and purify themselves.

The entire narrative is symbolic, and it's essential to grasp the deeper meaning, the essence behind the story. The essence lies in understanding the profound spiritual and philosophical insights it conveys.

AMRIT, NECTAR OF IMMORTALITY: The *Amrit* (immortality) is at the center of this story. What is immortality? To know that, we need to ask what mortality is. It is discovering that which never dies, for what dies is what changes. Everything in the physically natural

(*Prakritik*) realm is subject to change. We remain attached to, and identified with the body, thoughts and material and mental stuff. All of these things change continuously. Hence the very foundation of our identity remains shaky. *If we identify with that which perishes, we become perishable.* This is mortality. This entire process of identification, change and delusion needs to be witnessed with detachment. That weakens the identification with that which takes birth, changes, and dies. This reduction of attachment to mortal stuff is immortality. One sees the body and the mind changing, acknowledging the change without allowing the change to affect one's core. Then even the greatest changes lose the power to shake one up, and that is the utmost bliss, *sat-chit-ananda*.

HELL AND HEAVEN: Heaven and hell are not geographies. Heaven and hell are obviously for the ego-self. Heaven is a situation in which the self is enjoying the bliss of right orientation. Heaven is the joy that comes from keeping truth and freedom as one's first priority. Heaven is the state in which the self is gladly prepared to bow to the truth. Why is it said that the *Devas* live in heaven? Because they are always prepared to bow to the triumphant of *Brahma-Vishnu-Mahesh* who represent the highest truth.

Correspondingly, there is hell: the state of the ego-self



in which it is not prepared to bow to the truth. So the *Danas* have their own separate *guru*, and are reluctant to bow to the holy trinity. In fact, on several occasions, the *Danas* actively fight *Vishnu* or *Mahadev*. This is ego-oriented and fixated on desires and indulgence. Neither is truly free. Ego, at its core, is an attachment to illusion, and both *Devas* and *Danas* embody this delusion, though with contrasting perspectives: one seeks *yoga* (union) with truth, the other *bhoga* (indulgence) in



desires. However, the *Devas'* redeeming trait is their willingness to turn to the Ultimate, at least when defeated, seeking divine refuge—a path *Danas* do not follow. Driven by their fear of death, *Devas* and *Danas* unite to churn the ocean, temporarily setting aside enmity. This profound insight into the ego shows how the fear of death can turn adversaries into allies, though their hostility will eventually resurface.

LORD VISHNU: In the story, Lord *Vishnu*, in the

strength and courage from truth itself. Lord *Vishnu*, in his tortoise form, bears the mountain on his back, symbolizing that without the support of the highest truth, without faith and surrender to it, self-reflection and self-realization are impossible. In Vedantic terms, it means one must have love for truth. How can one achieve immortality while holding on to things that are perishable? What we are holding onto is itself mortal. How, then, can one transcend by relying on something tran-

sceding the ego, the mind, it seems small. Searching through the entire world is easy, but "searching" the mind is difficult. Moreover, even if you explore the whole world, you won't attain immortality. Immortality can only be achieved by churning this inner ocean-mind. **CHURNING:** If *Devas* and *Danas* symbolize the ego, churning represents a symbol of self-reflection. Vedanta says that immortality is the very essence of your being, but you have drifted far from your center, and that is why you have become mor-

entangled—feeling a constant fear and hollowness within, and trying to associate with, and consume, as many objects in the world as possible. We are born, and we spend our lives in a blind pursuit, groping, consuming, indulging, procreating, and dying while still not at ease—never ever realizing that it is possible to live without fear. No object of consumption satisfies us, so we consume more and more, and this is what has led to the threat of the sixth mass extinction coming from the climate crisis.

Our destiny, the purpose of the most precious human life, is to transcend death and go beyond it in the lifetime itself. This means detaching oneself from all things that are perishable and transient. Let them perform their functions while you remain the witness. Do not resist the workings of the body, mind, or intellect. Allow them to function but understand that you are not these things—you are merely their witness.

The *Bhagavad Gita* explains this beautifully. It teaches that everything in nature—senses, intellect, body—functions according to its *Prakritik* nature. You are the witness. The senses perform their duties, the intellect operates, and the body fulfills its purpose. Nature moves in its rhythm. You neither drive their actions nor obstruct them; you simply observe. The body, with its intellect and senses, knows its own role to play in nature. The body is never a problem in itself, however the ego-identified with the body is a great problem to itself. All spirituality is about alleviating the suffering of the ego. The fundamental suffering of the ego is the fear of death.

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form of truth, aids the *Dexas*, symbolizing those aligned with truth. Vedanta refers to this truth as the *Atman*—not the individual soul or spirit, but the unified, non-dual (*Advaita*) reality that is universal and same for all. According to Vedanta, when the ego turns toward truth by negating its false identities and beliefs, it automatically gains immense

tal. To regain immortality, you must delve deep within yourself. Whoever dives deeply into their inner self attains immortality. But to go within, one must undergo deep self-reflection. **HALAHALA (POISON):** The first outcome of the churning process is the *Halahala*. In self-reflection, undertaken to discover the truth, the initial result is violent resistance and discomfort—symbolized by *Halahala*. When we begin introspection and seek to understand ourselves and our lives, we encounter an inner turmoil. This resistance, the unpleasant feelings that arise when facing our inner selves, represents the poison that surfaces first. *Halahala* teaches that the path to self-discovery begins with confronting this inner toxicity. **TREASURES IN THE CHURNING PROCESS:** In the churning process,

First, one must let go of all supports, for these very supports bind one to death. When one renounces all other supports, the ultimate support becomes available, leading to immortality. **OCEAN:** The ocean symbolizes the mind, the entire realm of the ego. It may seem small, but in reality, it is vast. The world appears so enormous, yet in comparison to

the mind, it seems small. Searching through the entire world is easy, but "searching" the mind is difficult. Moreover, even if you explore the whole world, you won't attain immortality. Immortality can only be achieved by churning this inner ocean-mind. **CHURNING:** If *Devas* and *Danas* symbolize the ego, churning represents a symbol of self-reflection. Vedanta says that immortality is the very essence of your being, but you have drifted far from your center, and that is why you have become mor-