

# Kumbh in the light of Vedanta: Truth beyond tradition

By **Acharya Prashant** - January 19, 2025



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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," or "My death will come." This I-self 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 STORY FROM PURANAS:**

The legend of Kumbh revolves around the perennial struggle between the Devas (demigods) and Danavas (demons), the resident gods of heaven and the lords of 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 Danavas in the story are terrified of death. To escape death and become immortal, both Devas and Danavas 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, Jayanta (one of the Devas) tries to run away with it. However, he gets caught, leading to a fierce battle between the Devas and the Danavas. 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 Danavas are more interested in indulgence and pleasure than in the truth or immortality.

Understanding this, Lord Vishnu decides to distract the Danavas by giving them what they desire. He takes the form of Mohini, an enchantress ensnaring Danavas in her charm.

While the Danavas are mesmerized by Mohini's charm, the Devas seize the Kumbh and quickly drink the Amrit to begin their journey toward immortality. Among the Danavas, there is one who realizes something is amiss. He figures out that Mohini is merely distracting Danavas 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 their light on him. Once caught, he is chased by both Devas and Danavas, 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.

*If Devas and Danavas 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 mortal. To regain immortality, you must delve deep within yourself.*

**AMRIT, NECTAR OF IMMORTALITY:** 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 (Prakratik) 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 triumvirate 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 Danavas have their own separate guru, and are reluctant to bow to the holy trinity. In fact, on several occasions, the Danavas actively fight Vishnu or Mahadev. This symbolises the ego resisting the truth, though with repeated futility. This mental state is called hell.

**DEVAS AND DANAVAS:** Both Devas and Danavas in the story symbolize the ego, which clings to the illusion of identity. Devas represent a satyamukhi ego (truth-oriented ego) seeking liberation. While Danavas are mayamukhi (illusion-oriented) and fixated on desires and indulgence. Neither is truly free. Ego, at its core, is an attachment to illusion,

and both Devas and Danavas 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 Danavas do not follow. Driven by their fear of death, Devas and Danavas 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 form of truth, aids the Devas, 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 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 transient? 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 Danavas 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 mortal. 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, treasures emerge after poison—like Airavata (the celestial elephant), Kamadhenu (divine cow), Kalpavriksha (wish-fulfilling tree), and jewels—these are symbols of courage and faith, reminding us of strength found within on the path to the immortality, the truth. These symbolize the valuable qualities and potentials discovered within yourself through

persistence. The ultimate purpose is to uncover immortality, symbolized by the Kumbh containing Amrit—the central essence we are born to discover. However, the message is clear: do not stop at these treasures. While they are significant, the ultimate goal is to uncover Amrit (immortality)—the highest truth. True fulfillment lies in continuing the journey beyond these interim rewards to attain the ultimate essence of your being.

**SHIV:** When poison surfaces in a churning process, Mahadev Shiv consumes it, and holds it in his throat to protect existence. Shiv here symbolizes the role of a Guru. Shiv, as the supreme Guru, takes on the poison. When we begin to understand ourselves and our lives, we encounter an inner turmoil. Facing our own inner filth seems a tedious task and an intense urge to drop from the path of self-realization takes over. That is where the role of Guru becomes essential.

The clarity he offers empowers the student to persevere on the path of self-realization, overcoming every challenge along the way. The Guru assures, "I will bear this burden. You continue your process." Once the poison—the worst thing that could emerge—has surfaced and been dealt with, the process continues smoothly, and wonderful things begin to emerge. The poison represents the recoil of the ignorant ego. Ordinary people are floored by such ignorance, but the liberated one can take it in his stride.

So, when we understand the symbols behind the narrative, we look at ourselves, wondering at the nature of the ego, its destiny, and the process of liberation. The ego's nature is to remain 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 Prakratik 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-self 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.

*Acharya Prashant is a Vedanta exegete, philosopher, social reformer, columnist and a national bestselling author. Besides being a prolific author of over 150 books, he is the world's most-followed spiritual leader with 54 million subscribers on YouTube. He is also*

*an alumnus of IIT-D & IIM-A and an Ex-Civil Services Officer. To read more thought-provoking articles by Acharya Prashant, visit [askap.in](http://askap.in))*

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