


Kumbh: Churning of mind to escape cyclic hopes and despairs

This churning of the mind is essentially self-observation through an honest and dispassionate seeing of one's life, thoughts, fears, desires, actions

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Kumbh

So, the demigods and the demons, vigorous and adventurous as they were, thought of adding to their bounties. And got together, uncharacteristically, for a joint exploration mission. Together they churned the great sea using the great mountain as the churner and the great python as the rope.

One of the first things to show up was the great fuming poison. Shiva protected the three worlds by consuming the poison. And then emerged the nectar of immortality. The mission had succeeded. The ambrosia had been churned out from the depths of the great ocean, and was now available to be gulped down some ambitious throats. Both parties looked lustfully at their biggest exploit: the pot — *Kumbh* — of nectar that would put an end to death, and make them invincible. But death is so overwhelming a threat that the prospect of deathlessness can make anyone do strange things. One individual, probably a *devta*, probably a *danav*, particularly inspired to make it big in life, simply ran away with the pot. Obviously, others gave him a hot pursuit. On the run, he had to pause at four places on planet Earth to catch his breath. Trembling as his hands were, thinking of his infuriated and powerful brethren, a bit of the nectar fell at these four places. The Kumbh is celebrated at the four places as a mark of immortality reaching mankind. Since millennia, devotees have been taking bath in Ganga, Shipra, Godavari — the Kumbh rivers — hoping to gain freedom from the clutch of death. The Kumbh is acknowledged as not only the biggest pilgrimage event on the planet, but also the biggest congregation of mankind for any purpose.

The story, the myth, is elaborate, multi-layered, and replete with symbolism. However, in the middle of the rich clutter that the Kumbh saga is, there is one word that firmly dictates the narrative: Immortality. The whole celebration revolves around man's fear of death and his desire to taste the nectar of deathlessness.

What is death? Why does man fear death so much? In spite of all their powers and glory, why do even gods run after ambrosia of immortality? Death is the thought of loss. Death is the fear of not existing any

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year after another of immortality. Death is the thought of loss. Death is the fear of not existing any longer. Man is in a strange situation. On one hand, everything he identifies with is perishable. His body, his thoughts, his feelings, his world, his relationships, his identities are all ephemeral. The world means change, and time is always threatening to ruthlessly change and destroy everything he bases his life on. On the other hand, this same destructible man, a puppet of time, has an inexorable love for deathlessness, changelessness, timelessness.

What does one make of this dissonance? If one looks at his life truly, what does one see? A series of movements. Acts, hopes, desires that are failing to find a climax, and are therefore continuing ad infinitum. Man’s eyes are endlessly searching for something. He is trying to find that through action, knowledge, possessions, relationships, pleasures, experiences, feelings, through everything at his disposal. That’s what the human condition is. To live on, man keeps bearing this condition, even glorifying it.

What does man really want? What did the gods and demons want despite owning the grandeurs of life? Let’s rather see what all ways man tries to satiate his want. We have already done a lot. Have our ways succeeded? If not, then an altogether new kind of exploration is needed in an altogether new dimension. What is that dimension? The Kumbh legend gives us a clue. The mythical ocean is the mind, the *Bhavsagar*. Its churning is needed. That’s simple to say, but what one initially gets upon churning is accumulated poison: Old tendencies, suppressed desires, the haunting residues of the past that one has been carrying forward in evolution. Poison is stuff that is basically worthless and harmful, but is still preserved within due to ignorance and attachment. This churning of the mind is essentially self-observation through an honest and dispassionate seeing of one’s life, thoughts, fears, desires, actions. But most people do not proceed with self-observation for long. As soon as they counter the poison, they back off. To go beyond the poison, dedication and love towards truth – Shiva – is needed. One has to trust Shiva to surrender one’s poison to Him. This is faith. And then, upon such cleansing, what is left is deathlessness. Deathlessness thus demands both: A burning determination to get rid of the indignations of cyclic hopes and despairs, and a great love for an unknowable, indescribable freedom. And deathlessness is timelessness. Immortality is to live deep, not necessarily long.

Another Kumbh beckons us. Can we go beyond the ritualistic dip, and honestly observe life as it is, within and around us?

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