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Holi: What the Fire Was Really Meant to Burn - Acharya Prashant

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"No matter how vast the darkness, a single lamp does not merely illuminate its corner; it exposes the nature of darkness itself."



Acharya Prashant

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Every year Holi arrives, and every year Holika burns. The wood is stacked, the effigy prepared, the fire lit with ceremony. And then, the next morning, colours fill the air and the celebration continues. All this is well. All this should happen. But alongside it, something else also happens that should not: women are harassed in the name of festivity, animals are slaughtered as offering, and there are reports of foreign tourists at pilgrimage sites being subjected to behaviour that insults the very idea of pilgrimage.

One rarely asks where this distortion comes from. And even more rarely does anyone ask the deeper question: if Holika is burned every year, why is she not finished? If she burned once, why does she return, reliably, year after year, as though the fire had touched only the wood and never reached the principle she represents?

The answer is hidden in the story we think we know but may never have truly read.

Hiranyakashipu. The name itself contains the teaching, and the teaching is not about a mythological king. Hiranya means gold, wealth, the glitter of accumulated assurance. Kashipu means a bed, a cushion, a place of rest. One who wishes to rest upon a bed of gold and comfort is Hiranyakashipu, and that one is not a figure from ancient cosmology; he is a principle that operates inside every human being, constantly demanding security, constantly seeking the

glittering reassurance that its existence is justified and protected. He is ego. Not ego in the casual, conversational sense of the word, but ego as the central organising fiction of the self: the claimant, the sufferer, the one who insists on permanence while knowing, somewhere beneath all its noise, that it is not permanent.

It is also significant that Hiranyakashipu was born in a sage's lineage. So was Ravana. The indication is deliberate and uncomfortable: what was meant to lead toward truth can become the most efficient servant of ego. The very intelligence that could have dissolved the self is pressed into its service. Ego is not lazy. This is the first misunderstanding people carry about it. It can be extraordinarily industrious, patient, and methodical, provided the industry serves its own survival.

Hiranyakashipu performed intense tapasya and went to Brahma for boons. The structure of those boons is worth examining closely, because it reveals the ego's essential strategy. The boons were elaborate: not to be killed by day or by night, not inside the dwelling or outside, not on earth or in the sky, not by weapon or by instrument, not by man or by beast. The details shift across tellings, but the logic is always the same. At every boundary between opposites, I must be protected. In every gap between dualities, I must be safe.

This is precisely where ego resides. Ego is a dualistic phenomenon; it lives in the space between "I" and "not I," between "mine" and "not mine," between self and other. It requires duality the way a flame requires oxygen. Hiranyakashipu was not merely asking for invincibility; he was asking for protection at every seam of duality, because the ego understands, dimly but persistently, that non-duality is the one thing it cannot survive. So it tried to secure every crack through which non-duality might enter.

And yet no amount of protection brought genuine security, because the ego is not truth, and what is not truth cannot be immortal, and somewhere in its depths the ego knows this. So it played another move: it declared itself supreme. "Only I shall be worshipped." This capacity of ego to project itself as God, to take one fragment of the self and erect it as the Absolute, is not a theological curiosity. It is the ego's most refined survival technique. If it cannot find security through external protection alone, it will manufacture it through internal coronation. Hiranyakashipu did not bother with subtlety. The demand was explicit: worship me.

Why such insistence? Because inwardly he did not believe that he was worth worshipping. The one who is genuinely certain of his worth does not need the whole world to confirm it. The desperation for validation is always proportional to the inward doubt. He sought confirmation from others because he could not produce it from within, and he could not produce it from within because he was not, in any ultimate sense, what he claimed to be.

And then, in that kingdom of enforced agreement, something appeared that should not have been possible: Prahlad.

Notice where Prahlad arose from. Not among the rebels or the dispossessed, not from some distant corner of the empire, but from within Hiranyakashipu's own household, from his own blood. The longing for liberation is not born outside bondage; it is born from within it. Where bondage is most complete, where the ego has consolidated itself most thoroughly, there the pressure toward freedom becomes most acute. Hiranyakashipu represented ego at its most sovereign, and therefore, Prahlad appeared there. The child was not an external threat; he was an internal rupture.

No matter how vast the darkness, a single lamp does not merely illuminate its corner; it exposes the nature of darkness itself. Hiranyakashipu should have ignored the boy. What could one child do against an empire? But he could not ignore him, precisely because the boy was not outside. The flame had risen within his own house, within his own lineage, and a flame that close does not ask for attention; it commands it. The ego can tolerate distant criticism; it cannot tolerate the truth appearing this near.

Then came Holika, and here the story offers one of its subtlest teachings. Holika possessed a cloak that protected her from fire. Her plan was direct: she would carry Prahlad into the flames. She would be safe; he would burn. And she was confident, because she had a protection that seemed reliable. She had always been safe before.

But the fire in this story is not ordinary fire. It is the fire of viveka, of discernment, of the capacity to distinguish what is real from what merely appears real, what is essential from what is merely accumulated. This fire does not burn indiscriminately. It has knowledge. It burns what is false and leaves what is true, and Holika, whatever her cloak, was false in her purpose; Prahlad, whatever his vulnerability, was true in his understanding. The cloak burned with her. Prahlad walked out.

Without this reading, what do we do? We stack wood, we shout into the night, we call it Holi. The story is pointing at a very specific fire, and without recognizing it, we perform a ritual that has been hollowed of its meaning, keeping the form perfectly intact while losing everything the form was designed to protect.

What Holika represents deserves attention. She is not merely a villainous aunt. She is the environment that surrounds and sustains you as you currently are: the social circle that ensures you never grow too uncomfortable, the relationships that reward your existing patterns, the collective agreement that the ego's arrangements are natural and permanent. Such environments do not usually threaten you directly; they simply make sure that no Prahlad within you survives long enough to become dangerous. The protection Holika offers is real, and it is exactly as real as her cloak: sufficient against ordinary pressure, helpless before discernment.

After Holika's death, Hiranyakashipu confronted Prahlad directly, and from a pillar emerged Narasimha. Every condition of duality was resolved: twilight, so neither day nor night; the threshold, so neither indoors nor out; claws, so neither weapon nor instrument; the lap, so neither earth nor sky. Not one of the boundaries Hiranyakashipu had so carefully secured held. Non-duality did not negotiate its way through his protections; it simply appeared where those protections were not, which is to say, everywhere. And it appeared not from some distant, prepared battlefield, but from an ordinary pillar that Hiranyakashipu himself had built and in whose inertness he had trusted. From what he considered dead stone arose what he had spent his entire life ensuring could never reach him. That is how truth operates. It arrives where you are not looking.

The ego may fortify itself within duality, arranging its boundaries with the care of someone who believes the arrangement will hold. Non-duality does not attack the fortification. It renders the logic of fortification absurd.

Now the question that opens this inquiry: if Holika burned and Hiranyakashipu died, why does the festival return? Why does the burning repeat, year after year, as though the problem had not been resolved?

Because Hiranyakashipu is not a person and was never a person. He is a principle, and principles do not die. Every child is born into identification with the body, and from that identification, everything Hiranyakashipu represents follows naturally: the demand for security, the need for validation, the arrangement of duality as shelter, the intolerance of any light that rises too close. Even within a single lifetime, the ego does not die once and stay dead. It returns, in subtler forms, with better justifications, wearing the language of growth and self-improvement while maintaining precisely the same centre. Like Raktabeej in the Durga Saptshati, from every drop of it that falls, another rises.

So the burning must recur. Not because the story is incomplete, but because the one who needs the story keeps beginning again. Liberation is not an event one attends; it is a direction one faces. As long as the body persists, the tendency to identify with it reasserts itself, and the fire of discernment must be re-lit, not once in a lifetime but as often as the ego reconstitutes itself, which is to say, very often indeed.

The distortions of Holi are not accidents of irresponsible celebration. They are what happens when the inner meaning drains out of a festival and the outer form continues on its own momentum. When the fire of viveka is replaced by a bonfire of wood, the energy that was meant to turn inward finds no direction and spills outward, and what spills outward in an unexamined crowd is rarely beautiful.

Do not search for Prahlad somewhere else. He is the part of you that has, at some moment, seen through the claims of Hiranyakashipu within; that has noticed, however briefly, that the security arrangements are not working, that the assurances are hollow, that the throne is built on nothing. That honest seeing is Prahlad. And you are Hiranyakashipu too, which is not an insult but a description: the one who works very hard to remain exactly as he is, who builds his kingdom and guards his borders and cannot tolerate the lamp that rises in his own house.

The question Holi puts to you is not whether you will celebrate it. It puts a harder question: when the fire of discernment appears, as it will, from some pillar you did not think to guard, will you recognize it? Or will you do what Hiranyakashipu did, and call it a threat?

Acharya Prashant is a teacher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life.

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