

Inner Call Podcast #143 Why Shiva has a blue throat September 27 2021

Toward the One, says our Invocation, and after describing our goal, the Only Being, it affirms that we journey there in the company of all the illuminated souls, who collectively embody the Spirit of Guidance. Guidance speaks to us in countless ways – sometimes in the smile of a friend, sometimes in a hint of warning, sometimes in the murmur and tumult of nature, and sometimes in the sacred stories that have been passed down to us from long ago.

One such tale is from the Hindu tradition, about the Devas and the Asuras undertaking the cosmic project of churning the ocean of milk. It is one of the best-known episodes in all of Hindu mythology. The Devas and the Asuras, the clans of gods and demi-gods, had been battling for control of the universe. In order to come to some harmonious solution, it was proposed that they collaborate in a task that was too large for either side to accomplish alone – the churning of the ocean of milk to produce amrita, the divine nectar that confers immortality. (Parents, by the way, might recognize this technique, of putting an end to a family squabble by giving the children something to work on together.) An enormous mountain was chosen as the churning rod, and the great king of the serpents was offered as a rope to make the mountain whirl in the ocean. Soon the hordes of Asuras on one side and Devas on the other were pulling the snake back and forth, spinning the mountain and making the vast sea of milk foam.

In addition to the amrita, the churning produced an extraordinary collection of other treasures, including many apsaras or divine nymphs, a seven headed horse and other creatures of wonder, and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune, but there also arose a poisonous scum, so toxic it endangered the whole world. Of course, no one wished to touch the poison – only Shiva had the courage to scoop it up and drink it. Shiva's consort, Parvati, though, saw that the poison pained him, and before he could swallow it, she seized his throat so that it could not go further into his body. Therefore, according to the legend, Shiva's throat turned blue from the effect of the poison. This made him immune to such impurities, and the world was saved from the terrible threat.

One way to view this ancient story is as a profound teaching about how to handle conflict. It shows us, for example, that when opposing forces such as the Devas and the Asuras manage to work together, they can bring forth divine nymphs, a wish-granting cow, precious jewels, goddesses and the elixir of immortality, treasures that would otherwise be unattainable. This is not only about groups with different identities, but also about the active and receptive polarities of energy, as well as different aspects of our own being. When we are whole, when we can accept and claim all that we are, any task can be accomplished.

The story also gives us a warning that while effort, or churning brings out the cream, it also reveals impurities, and when these are concentrated, they pose a danger.

Shiva's drinking of the poison is a repetition of the lesson of working with different energies, and illustrates the teaching of Jesus, 'resist not evil.' Taking the poison into himself is a way of saying, 'I contain all,' and all is beyond the effect of any limitation. In Vadan Boulas, Hazrat Inayat Khan puts it this way: 'Neither fight evil nor embrace it, simply rise above it'.

But the hand of Parvati on her consort's throat is important here, for it symbolizes the work of love. It was love that kept the poison from reaching Shiva's heart. We can learn from this that it is not weapons and armour that can protect us from evil; only love, unlimited love, can be our salvation.