



Samudra Manthan
the Churning of
Our Inner Consciousness

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DASHAVATARA

*"Avyasurbhuvana trayeem anibhrutam
kandooranai-adrinaa
Nidraanasya parasya koormavapusho nishvaasa
vaatormaya:
Yadvikshepana samskritodadhi paya: prenkholo
paryankikaa
Nithyaarohana nirvruto viharatey deva: sahaiva
sriya"*

The above is a sloka or hymn on the Kurma Avatara, of Lord Vishnu manifesting Himself as the Divine Tortoise in the Dashavatar (Ten Avatars). Lord Vishnu is one of the Divine Trinity, the others being Brahma and Shiva. Sri Mahavishnu is regarded as the Protector and the Preserver of the universe. In order to maintain Dharma (righteousness) during each yuga (epoch), He descends Himself in different forms (Avatars) and saves the beings of the world.

The meaning of the sloka is, *"May the ocean waves created by the divine breath emanating from the Supreme One resting on the ocean floor, who took the form of the divine Tortoise, protect and preserve all the creatures residing in the three worlds."* The extended meaning of the sloka illustrates the entire episode of the Samudra Manthan. It talks of how Sri Mahavishnu descended Himself as a gigantic Kurma (tortoise), bearing the mountain, Mandara, on His back, so as to help the Devas acquire the divine Amrita or the Nectar of Immortality. The Lord was actually lulled to a short sleep by the rhythmic motion of the mountain, acting as a type of churn dashery! He breathed deeply, even snoring slightly in his sleep. This created tidal waves in the ocean, making it rise and fall, causing a gentle swinging motion, adding to His comfort!

The sloka talks about the Lord taking the Kurma avatara in order to protect the Devas (Gods and demi Gods) and bless them with the Amrita. The whole mission of the Kurma avatara revolves around the familiar Indian mythological story of the Samudra Manthan or the Churning of the Ocean. This is probably one of the most oft repeated stories in Indian mythology, also one of the most popular.

How the universe was created according to the Puranas

The process of the creation of the universe is mentioned in great detail in the Puranas. There are 18 main Puranas and though each one talks about creation and how the world was

created, not all the descriptions necessarily tally with each other. However, these descriptions can be broadly classified into two categories, as follows:

According to the first version, the supreme, all-pervading Brahman created and preserved the entire universe. This Brahman manifested itself into three distinct supreme powers, namely, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma's mission, as Prajapati, was to create the universe, while Vishnu was the Preserver and Protector of the same. The third supreme being, Shiva, was responsible for destruction in the universe, so that new beings could be created yet again from the natural process of destruction.



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LORD VISHNU ON ADISESHA

A huge body of water was created first, out of which arose a gigantic serpent, named Adishesha. Vishnu took His resting position on the bed of snakes. Next came a beautiful, brilliant golden egg, into which Brahma entered and stayed there for a thousand years, while working on creating the universe. The egg then hatched and split into two parts, one becoming the heavens and the other becoming the earth. The upper part gave rise to the creation of the sun. Since the sun emerged first, it is referred to as the Aditya. The lower portion of the egg slowly developed into rivers, mountains and the other landscapes of the earth as we know it today.

According to the second version, Vishnu was lying on the Adishesha, when suddenly a resonant sound of 'Aum', the Pranava Mantra (primordial sound), boomed across the atmosphere, causing Vishnu to awake from his rest. Then, from His navel grew a beautiful, resplendent lotus, on which was seated Lord Brahma. On Vishnu's command, Brahma got to the task of creating the world. He segregated the lotus into three parts, the heavens, the skies and the earth.



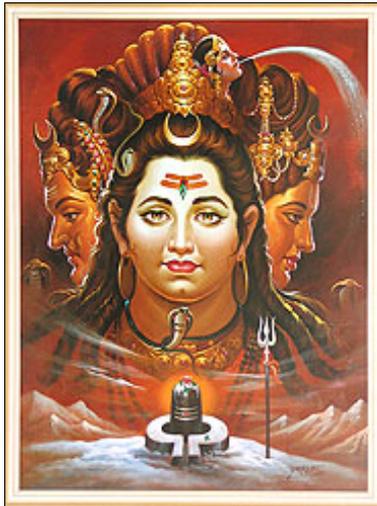
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VISHNU LYING ON ADISESHA BEFORE THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE

Hiranyagarbha Vs. The Big Bang Theory

Deviating a little from the main topic here, it would be interesting to note a clear connection between the mythological concept of the Hiranyagarbha and the Big Bang Theory as we know it today. Both these aspects talk about the creation of the world. Let us now try to draw a parallel between these two theories – one completely religious and the other, completely scientific!

The Rig Veda



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TRINITY - BRAHMA, VISHNU AND SHIVA

Hiranyagarbha of Hindu mythology. Lord Brahma is considered to be this Hiranyagarbha, as He created the world. Brahma, as His name suggests, was brought forth by the Supreme Being, Brahman Himself. Lord Vishnu descended Himself in order to protect and preserve this universe, while Lord Shiva, the god of destruction, took over the task of destroying several aspects of the world through the course of the different yugas (epochs).

The Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva work together on the natural cosmic process of creation, preservation and destruction. Once Shiva carried out destruction, Brahma created yet again, which gave rise to the cyclical process of the cosmos.

The Big Bang Theory

Present-day Science believes that the entire process of evolution in this universe started with the Big Bang. But can one really conceptualize what actually happened before the Big Bang? The answer to this question is a definite NO. No concept of Time or Matter ever existed before the Big Bang – it all came into being much later. Similarly, one simply cannot imagine who actually created the Big Bang. That remains a mystery for ever.

The Rig Veda, in this sense, conveys the same idea as that of the Big Bang Theory. It talks about the world being created out of sheer nothingness – no time, no matter, no space and no creator.

The Puranas

The Puranas also talk about the cyclical process of creation, destruction and re-creation. According to Hindu cosmology, a universe lasts for a time period of roughly 4,320,000 years, which amounts to one day in Brahma's life. Once each kalpa (eon – roughly a thousand 'Brahma years') reaches its end, the world is destroyed by the elements of fire or water. Hindu

According to Hindu calculations, Brahma is supposedly 51 years old at this time and so, it is approximately 155



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LORD BRAHMA

trillion years since He was 'born'. Once His lifespan is over, another 100 Brahma years pass till the whole process of creation commences anew. This cycle of Brahma's 'birth' and 'death' go on forever.

The lifespan of Lord Brahma is again divided into several Maha Yugas (that are one thousand cycles long), during which mankind is born and dies over and over again. Each of these Maha Yugas lasts roughly 4,320,000 years and is again divided into four stages or Yugas, based on the moral values in existence in that particular yuga. As the yugas progress from one stage to the other, morality, virtuosity and principles of righteousness deteriorate more and more, finally ending with the Kali Yuga or the Iron Age. The Kali Yuga will be the worst yuga, where there will be no appreciation for moral values, good conduct and righteousness. Once this yuga reaches its peak, there will be the pralaya and mass-scale destruction of the creation as a whole.

According to the Hindu pantheon, the present Kali Yuga has begun at the midnight of 17th February in the year 3102 B.C.

Hindu cosmology has always been advanced, explaining the complicated concept of relativity with extreme ease. As Dick Teresi, author and coauthor of several books about science and technology, including "The God Particle", puts it, "Indian cosmologists, the first to estimate the age of the earth at more than 4 billion years. They came closest to modern ideas of atomism, quantum physics, and other current theories. India developed very early, enduring atomist theories of matter. Possibly Greek atomistic thought was influenced by India, via the Persian civilization."

The background of the Samudra Manthan

There was a time when all the Devas lived very happily, enjoying their stay in heaven and taking good care of all the creatures walking the earth. They all had immense powers and wielded them with true wisdom. One day, sage Durvasa decided to visit Vaikuntha to pay his obeisance to Vishnu and his Consort, Lakshmi. A Vidyadhara damsel residing there gifted Durvasa with one of Lakshmi's garlands, which the Mother Herself had given her, as she had been pleased with her performance on the Yash (a musical instrument).

While returning from his visit to Vaikuntha, Durvasa happened to pass by Indraloka, where he met with Indra, the king of the Devas. When the sage offered the garland to Indra, he merely plucked it with the ankusha (goad) he used on Airavata (his elephant) and placed it on the creature's head. Airavata, not realizing the value of the garland, threw it down and stamped on it, completely crushing the garland. Incensed by this extreme lack of respect, Durvasa, who was infamous for his nasty temper, cursed Indra that he and the rest of the Devas would lose all their power and glory and be shorn of all their divine powers. The minute Durvasa left Indraloka, the whole kingdom of the Devas fell into darkness and all of them lost their splendor and supernatural powers.

Panic-stricken by the turn of events, Indra rushed to the Prajapati, Brahma, and requested Him to save all the Devas. Brahma asked the Devas to approach the Creator and Preserver, Sri Mahavishnu and address their problem to Him. He further added that it was only Vishnu who could help them out of their present crisis.



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When Vishnu heard of the unfortunate

developments, He advised the Devas that they could regain their lost aura only if they drank the Amrita, which could be got only by churning the Ksheerasagara (Ocean of Milk). But the next question was, who would churn the ocean and how would they be able to accomplish this big task?

Again, Lord Vishnu had an idea. He suggested that they lift the Mandara mountain and then place it deep into the ocean. If they wound the divine snake king, Vasuki, around it, it would act as a rope to turn the mountain, thereby churning the mighty ocean. This was acceptable, but the Devas already being very weak, were sure they would not be able to carry out this humongous task.

Vishnu advised them to draw a temporary truce with their worst enemies, the asuras (demons). The asuras always possessed immense strength, so they would help if they were offered some nectar in return. But Vishnu also warned the Devas not to desire any of the other things that would emerge from the ocean as a result of the Samudra Manthan. He asked them to ignore all else, till the nectar appeared on the surface of the ocean. He assured the Devas that once the Amrita appeared, He Himself would protect it and see to it that it was not snatched away by the asuras.

Once the plan was laid out methodically, Indra proceeded towards the asura kingdom with the said treaty. Hearing of his plan, the asuras were pleased too and decided to participate in the proceedings. They also very willingly agreed to lift mount Mandara and place it in the center of the ocean.

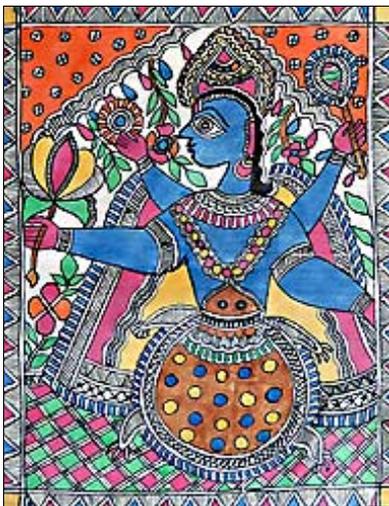
But as they tried to lift the mountain, it became too unbearably heavy for them. Many of the asuras got crushed under its sheer pressure. Vishnu intervened yet again and, mounting Mandaragiri on the back of Garuda (Vishnu's vehicle, the mighty Eagle), He transported it right to the middle of the ocean.



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SAMUDRA MANTHAN

This done, the asuras wound Vasuki around the mountain and selected the head side of the serpent, instead of the tail side, since they thought of themselves to be superior, and were prodded to do by the Devas, in accordance with the plan decided upon with Vishnu. The reason for this was that during the churning, the serpent would spew venom and this would kill the asuras instead of the Devas. Then began the entire process of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, with the Devas on one side and the asuras on the other.



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VISHNU IN THE KURMA AVATARA

How the Kurma Avatara came into being

As the churning got underway, the huge mountain, having no support, dangerously wobbled from side to side and started to sink into the ocean. Seeing this, Vishnu acted immediately and took the form of the giant-sized, divine Tortoise or the Kurma Avatara. Plunging deep into the ocean, He bore the colossal mountain on His back.

Unmindful of His own pain and discomfort, Lord Vishnu patiently bore the mount on his back, stabilizing it, thereby making it much easier for the Devas and asuras to churn the Sagara (ocean). As the process of the churning continued, however, the Lord felt extremely comfortable. Instead of causing Him severe pain and irritation, the constant rhythm of the mountain turning back and forth on His back, actually lulled Him into a highly meditative, sleep-awake stage. He breathed slowly and deeply and this created gentle waves in the ocean that gave rise to a very comforting, rocking motion that further calmed Him!

Things that emerged from the Ocean of Milk during the Samudra Manthan

Halahala

The churning of the ocean first gave rise to the Halahala, Kalakuta or the deadly poison, representing the ocean's impurities. The poison was strong and deadly enough to cause blindness and difficulty in breathing to all who came in contact with it. At the behest of the Devas and asuras, Lord Shiva immediately drank the poison. On seeing this, Shiva's consort, Parvati, was alarmed and clutched his neck in an effort to stop the poison from descending down His throat. The action of the poison turned Shiva's neck permanently blue, which is why He is also referred to as the Neelakantha (the blue-throated One).

There is another interesting interpretation about Shiva consuming the deadly halahala poison. It is said that Lord Vishnu Himself drank the poison, making Shiva a mere vessel to hold the same.

There were several ratnas or gems as well that arose from the Samudra Manthan. These ratnas were shared by the Devas and the Asuras. The gems were as follows:

- **Chandra (The Moon God)**
The next to emerge from the milky ocean was Chandra, or the moon.
- **Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth)**
Sri Mahalakshmi, consort of Vishnu and the Goddess of Fortune, emerged next from the Ksheerasagara, resplendent in all Her glory, smiling benevolently and showering Her blessings to all the Devas present.



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LAKSHMI GARLANDS VISHNU DURING THE SAMUDRA MANTHAN

- **Sura (Wine Goddess)**
Sura, the Goddess of Wine, emerged from the ocean, bringing along with her the highly inebriating liquid.
- **Apsaras (Celestial Nymphs)**
Sura was followed by several attractive and seductive apsaras and divine nymphs, such as Menaka and Rambha.
- **Ucchaishravas (Powerful white steed)**
Ucchaishravas, the magnificent flying horse with seven heads, a snow white body and jet black tail, was immediately taken by Bali, the king of Asuras. But finally, Indra took possession of it.
- **Kaustubha (Precious gem)**
The Kaustubha is the most precious jewel ever known, adorning the chest of Sri Mahavishnu.
- **Kalpavriksha (The wish-granting tree)**
The Kalpavriksha, as the name suggests, could grant the wishes of everyone desirous of possessing a thing. This too was taken back by Indra to paradise.
- **Kamadhenu (The wish-fulfilling cow)**
The Kamadhenu, believed to be the mother of all cows, also had the power to grant any wish to the true seeker.
- **Airavata (The divine white elephant)**
Airavata was the beautiful five-headed, divine, white Elephant of Lord Indra.
- **Parijata (The divine tree)**
The Parijata, a divine tree, was next brought forth from the frothing ocean surface.
- **Dhanvantari (The celestial Doctor)**
Dhanvantari, the divine doctor, an aspect of Vishnu, stepped out of the ocean. Those

desirous of good health approach Dhanvantari, who is considered the ultimate authority on Ayurvedic Medicine.



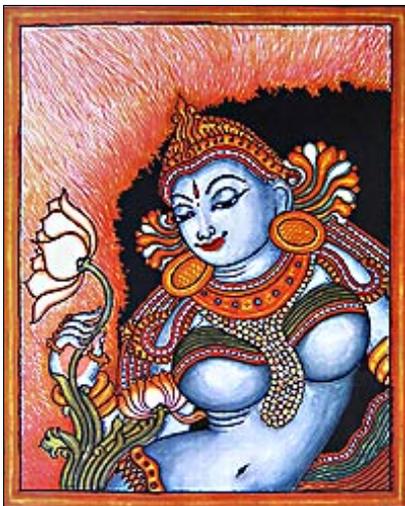
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DHANVANTARI

- **Amrita (The Nectar of Immortality)**

Dhanvantari had the golden pot of Amrita in His hands, seeing which both the Devas and asuras were excited and spurred on to fight to the finish and win.

The manifestation of Vishnu as Mohini



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VISHNU AS MOHINI

In accordance with His promise of protecting the Amrita from entering the hands of the asuras, Lord Vishnu took the form of Mohini, a beautiful damsel, and enticed the asuras to let her distribute the nectar among them all, on the condition that they would never question any of her actions. Totally taken in by her beauty, the asuras readily agreed to her conditions.

Mohini asked the Devas to be seated in a row and started distributing the Amrita to them first. Rahu, one of the Daityas (demons), divined the true identity of Mohini as being Vishnu himself and understood that this entire episode was a ploy to cheat the Asuras of the Amrita. Fearing that he would never get a share of the Amrita otherwise, Rahu disguised himself as one of the gods and sat down with them.

Mohini had already served the Amrita to Rahu when the Sun God and the Moon God revealed his identity to her. Furious, Vishnu lifted his Sudarshana Chakra (discus) and cut off Rahu's head. Legend has it that Rahu's head still roams around the heavens and that his undying enmity with Surya (Sun God) and Chandra (Moon God) is what causes several adversities to befall a Hindu during the period of his trine with either of the stars.

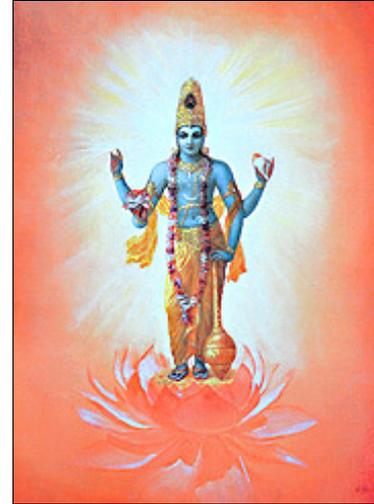
By the time Mohini was done with her task, there was not even a drop of nectar left in the pitcher. Once Her mission was completed, Mohini again reappeared as Vishnu, got onto His

Vaahana, Garuda and flew back to His abode. The asuras felt completely cheated and humiliated and so, tried to attack the Devas. But the latter had regained their lost strength and hence the already jaded asuras were no match for them. Cutting their losses, they fled back to their abode in the Patala loka (netherland).

Why Sri Mahavishnu's role is so vital during Samudra Manthan

Sri Mahavishnu was the pivotal force behind the Samudra Manthan. The Lord had taken care of every little aspect while orchestrating the entire episode. It is only His Supreme Presence that helped the Devas regain their lost glory and power.

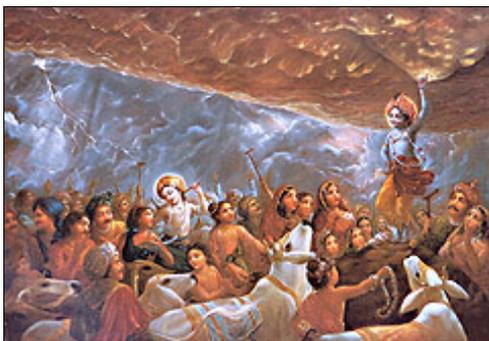
- Vishnu first advised the Devas to acquire the divine Amrita.
- He also told them how to rope in the asuras and get their help during the Samudra Manthan process.
- Knowing how dangerous it would be to stay close to Vasuki's head, He let the demons suffer the bad consequences of the serpent spewing poison at them during the churning of the ocean. This led to the death of many asuras.
- Vishnu endured the tremendous weight of the Mandaragiri on His back during the Manthan.
- He took the aspect of Dhanvantari, wielding the pitcher of the divine Amrita.
- Finally, Vishnu took the form of the beautiful Mohini and charmed the asuras into meek submission, in order to ensure that only the Devas could get their share of the nectar.



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VISHNU THE ALL POWERFUL

Without Sri Mahavishnu's help, nothing like this could have been possible and the Devas, suffering from the ill effects of Durvasa's curse, would have been stripped of their divinity and powers for ever.



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KRISHNA LIFTS GIRI GOVARDHAN

It is interesting to note, here, that Vishnu's act of wielding the Mandara mountain on His back bears close resemblance to Krishna's leela (miracle) of lifting the Govardhana mountain with the little finger of His left hand, in order to protect the residents of Vrindavan. Lord Krishna was one of the Ten Avatars of Lord Mahavishnu.

How Samudra Manthan is relevant today

All tales from Indian mythology sound fantastic and fascinating. Many people, who merely listen to the stories with a casual attitude, question the logic behind these tales. Many even believe that these stories are a mere fabrication of someone's highly hyper-active imagination! But the truth is startlingly different.

Indian mythology has always tried to teach man some profound principles in life, through its many tales and anecdotes. These interesting tales actually have many hidden meanings and connotations, which, if delved into deeply enough, could reveal some of the highest philosophical truths to mankind.

Applied properly to real life, the Samudra Manthan can be seen as being an extremely effective guide on how to live our day-to-day life. Let us now analyze the Samudra Manthan in detail.

The Samudra

The Samudra or the Ocean of Milk actually represents the human Consciousness or the Jeevatma. The Churning of the Ocean embodies the journey of life undertaken by this Jeevatma during its tenure on earth. It represents all the moments of pleasure and pain, physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual struggles that it is put through in life.



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THE OCEAN OF LIFE

The Mandaragiri

The mind is an ocean, where our thoughts and emotions play on it like the waves of the ocean. The Mandara mountain represents the virtues of steadiness and concentration. Like the mountain, our concentration too will wobble if it not anchored onto something concrete.



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**LORD VISHNU IN THE
KURMA AVATARA - THE
TORTOISE**

The Tortoise

The Mandaragiri was held steady by the Lord, who took the form of a Tortoise. Here, the tortoise symbolizes the spiritual withdrawal of a person into his own Consciousness. Just as a tortoise withdraws into its shell, so can a man attain liberation only by withdrawing into the Atman residing inside him.

In order to undertake a spiritual journey, man has to surrender himself to the Supreme Being, depend on Him for steadiness and only then, embark on his voyage. The support of the Tortoise – that Supreme Consciousness – has to back him all the way if he has to succeed in this higher venture.

Vasuki, the serpent king

Both the Devas and the Asuras desired immortality. Vasuki embodies the desire in us to attain liberation by steadying our minds, concentrating and contemplating on the higher Self. The story also shows that if this 'desire' factor is not under our control, it can take over our lives and destroy us altogether.

The rope also signifies the need for cooperation. Our spiritual journey has to take into account a good balance of both spiritual and worldly life in order to attain salvation. There are many ascetics who have achieved enlightenment by performing severe penance on the Himalayas. Our worldly life, however, dictates that we continue to live a spiritual life while being involved in this Samsara (material world) itself.

Who actually are the Devas and the Daityas?

The Devas actually represent the 'good' (Sat) within us, while the Daityas represent the 'bad' or the 'sin' (Asat) within us. Interestingly enough, the tale of Samudra Manthan, as related by the Srimad Bhagavatam, consider both the bad and the good as being sides of the same coin, coming from the same One Creator!

During Samudra Manthan, Vishnu advised the Devas to work along with the Daityas to churn the ocean. Similarly, we have to learn to balance both the positives and negatives of our personalities, harmonizing both these energies, in order to attain a higher state of spirituality in our lives. Only when we effectively combine both these energies can we hope to attain salvation and true bliss in this lifetime.

Halahala – the deadly poison

The Halahala or the Kalakuta poison represents the pain and suffering we have to undergo during our life's spiritual journey. As we delve deeper into spiritual sadhana (practice) and try to achieve the state of ekaagrachitta (intense concentration), we experience tremendous inner turmoil, which must be dealt with, before we can proceed ahead in our spiritual endeavor.

The story of Lord Shiva consuming the Halahala poison educates us on how we should deal with this inner turmoil with courage, discipline, austerity, detachment and total commitment to leading a life of asceticism. Shiva also teaches us how to hold the poison of our inner selves only at a surface level, without letting the same get into our system or our mind, thereby affecting our entire life.

When the poison arose from the Samudra, the Devas immediately sought succor from Lord Shiva, who obliged by swallowing the entire venom. This teaches us that if we encounter any difficulty in life, we should immediately request help from the all-pervading One and surrender to the Supreme Entity. Help would most definitely arrive at once and free us from all our troubles and travails!



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**NEELKANTHA - SHIVA DRINKING
THE HALAHALA POISON**

The several ratnas that arose from the ocean

Vishnu had advised the Devas to ignore the various precious gems, jewels and other aspects that arose from the Ocean during the Samudra Manthan. While the Asuras tried to snatch away as much as they could, the Devas remained focused on acquiring the Amrita. This focus is what led to the fulfillment of their goal as well.

Likewise, man's spiritual journey gives him several seemingly impressive psychic powers or Siddhis, from time to time. Many of these Siddhis keep developing and get honed as his endeavor moves further and further. But the true seeker should ignore all these, remain unaffected by these transient temptations and continue forward with his onward journey into spirituality.

Delving on these temporary siddhis may actually slow him down in his progress and may even cause harm to him in future. In case he uses these psychic powers, it should be for the welfare of others and not something to satisfy his own ego or materialistic desires.

Dhanvantari

Dhanvantari embodies general health and longevity. The emergence of Dhanvantari during Samudra Manthan indicates that one can attain spiritual success only when both one's body and mind are in perfectly sound health. Absence of deficiency of either can impede man's journey towards discovering his own higher self.

The enchanting one – Mohini

Mohini symbolizes the delusion of the mind, arising out of pride and ego. The Asuras had great pride on their immense strength and achievement. They were so blinded by their egos that they completely lost sight of their actual goal – acquiring immortality. Similarly, a feeling of pride and complacency oft times gets in the way of a man's higher endeavor. If he were to fall prey to these petty feelings, he would immediately proceed towards nothing but total self-destruction.

Rahu's wily act



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RAHU

Rahu, an Asura, managed to partake of the Amrita and became immortal, in spite of Vishnu beheading him. This shows that no matter how much man tries to control the bad in the world, the strife between good and evil will continue for all time. The true seeker, should hence understand this nature of the Cosmos itself and proceed forward, unaffected, in his journey of seeking the Aatman.

Conclusion

The story of Samudra Manthan teaches us how to maintain harmony between our material and spiritual lives, by placing complete and unshakable faith in our Creator and accepting both the good and the bad in our lives (both from within and without) on an even keel.

This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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