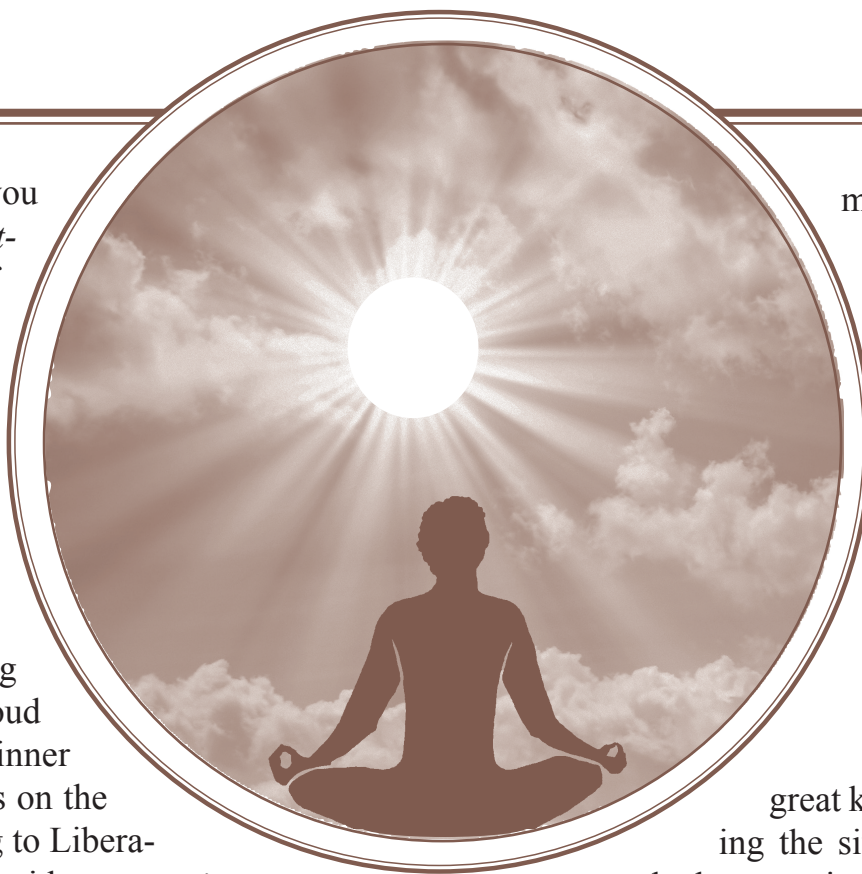


As an aspirant you must have a certain *satwic* pride in yourself in order to succeed in *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) and handle your practical realities effectively. You should be proud of being born in a human embodiment, proud of following the path of Yoga, proud that you have the inner resources to progress on the spiritual path leading to Liberation. These forms of pride are *satwic* and of value in the process of evolution.

However, there are *rajasic* and *tamasic* forms of pride—known as *mada*—which must be quelled day by day with great zeal. Egoism, conceit, vanity, arrogance, insolence, obstinacy, cruelty and selfishness, all these form the family of *mada* and its relatives. The Sanskrit word *mada* is quite similar to the Sanskrit word *madira*, which means intoxicating liquor. People under the influence of intoxicating liquor lose their mental balance and their power of reasoning. So too, pride



makes your mind so intoxicated that you don't know who you are, what is your goal, what is right and what is wrong.

The Ego of King Akbar

King Akbar, a great king in India during the sixteenth century, had a very witty minister named Birbal. Birbal had many enemies among the court officers because he was always favored by the king. One day these officers thought up a plan to degrade Birbal. They started spreading the idea that the King was like God. They knew that Birbal would not agree to that, and if Birbal did not agree to it, the king would punish him. Certainly every king wants to be praised, and could not bear anyone who would not praise him. So the officers started bowing to the King

The Art of Positive Feeling Part Four



Overcoming Pride



by Swami Jyotirmayananda

saying, “King, to us you are God himself. But Birbal doesn’t hold that view.” King Akbar, who was very pleased with this praise, looked at Birbal and said, “How is it that you do not agree with what the officers are saying? Don’t you have any reverence for me?” Birbal replied, “Why should I agree with these people? I consider you greater than God.”

“How so?” King Akbar asked, intrigued by this response. Birbal replied, “If someone commits an error, God cannot drive him out of His kingdom, because His kingdom includes the entire universe. However, if someone commits an error in your kingdom, you have the power to drive him out. Therefore, you are above God.”

The subtle implication of this story is that when you have ego, you place yourself above God. The things around you are controlled by God’s plan. But ego becomes overly assertive and makes you feel as if you are moving the world.

The Pride of Kakabhushundi

In the Tulasi Ramayana, there is an interesting story told by Kakabhushundi to Garuda of how he had become a crow and why he had chosen to remain in that embodiment through all cycles of creation:

In one of his previous incarnations, Kakabhushundi was a young, arrogant devotee of Shiva. Even though his Guru again and again instructed him not to hate Vishnu and the worshipers of Vishnu, Kakabhushundi continued to do so. He even began to hate the Guru himself for asking him to be broadminded and became insulting to the Guru in various ways.

One day, Kakabhushundi was seated in the temple offering prayers to Shiva when the Guru entered the temple. Out of arrogance, Kakabhushundi

stayed seated and did not rise to welcome him. Suddenly the voice of Shiva rang out in the temple and cursed Kakabhushundi, saying, “Ungrateful disciple, since you have stayed seated like a snake, may you become a snake and continue to incarnate through thousands of embodiments as lower forms of life.”

Hearing this curse from Shiva, Kakabhushundi trembled, and the Guru was moved by profound compassion for him. The Guru then prayed to Shiva to withdraw the curse He had imposed. Appeased by the heartfelt prayer, Shiva reduced the curse by ordaining that those lower embodiments would pass very quickly. Further, He told the disciple, “After exhausting your thousand embodiments, you will be born in Ayodhya, the sacred city of Rama. And there, by My grace and by the force of *satsanga*, devotion to Rama will arise in your heart. But remember, never again should you displease a spiritual preceptor. Consider all Saints and Sages as *Brahman* himself.”

According to the words of Shiva, the disciple was eventually born into a *brahmin* family in Ayodhya and from his very childhood was immersed in worshipping Rama. After his parents died he entered into forest life and approached a Sage for spiritual initiation. The Sage began to expound the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedanta, the path of Jnana Yoga, but the *brahmin* youth was not happy with this teaching. His mind was so intensely devoted to the worship of the personal form of Rama and to the path of Bhakti Yoga that he insisted again and again that he should be given initiation into that path.

Angered by the disciple’s stubborn insistence, the Sage cursed him, saying, “May you become a crow.” The boy accepted that curse lovingly, as if it were a welcome blessing, and

immediately began to fly while adoring the Sage. Seeing this, the Sage regretted having cursed the boy and revealed to him a secret: that he taught Jnana Yoga to most people, but kept Bhakti Yoga for a very select type of highly qualified aspirant. Since the disciple proved to be that type of aspirant, the Guru then began to initiate him into the path of devotion, teaching him the art of meditating on Rama as a child through the aspect of devotion known as *vatsalya bhava* (loving God as parents would love their child). The Guru further blessed the disciple with the ability to easily understand the hidden secrets of the scriptures and to develop ever-increasing love for Rama. In addition, he would have the power to assume any physical form of his choice.

As a result of those blessings and initiation, the disciple became Sage Kakabhushundi, a great devotee of Rama, and attained oneness with the Absolute. Because of a rare boon received from Rama, he had the power to maintain his body as long as he wished, and so he continues to live on through ages and ages in order to teach others the path of devotion and knowledge. Although he could have assumed any form he wished—including the human form—he retains the beloved crow embodiment in which he attained oneness with Rama. In this form, he continues to hold *satsanga* as numerous birds come and listen to his teachings. Further, whenever Rama incarnates in any age, Kakabhushundi goes to Ayodhya and watches the baby Rama playing and delighting his parents. Then he returns to his Himalayan ashram again and resumes his teachings.

This story about how Kakabhushundi had to overcome his arrogance and pride in order to attain Enlightenment can be taken literally, as a portrayal of how every soul evolves through many embodiments until spiritual perfection is attained. Or it can be taken as a mystic portrayal of spiritual transformation in

general. Even as one evolves spiritually in one lifetime, many changes occur. A person who slithers crookedly like a snake in his youth may experience a dramatic personality change as he grows wiser. He may become simple and innocent like a dove, dynamic like a hawk, elevated and detached like a swan. A swan sports in a lake but it doesn't belong to the lake. The moment the swan desires to fly, it shakes off all the water particles from its feathers and soars. Similarly, in the state of Realization, one develops the ability to shake off the world at any time and to soar beyond the world to the realm of transcendence.

The crow has been given a special symbolic significance in Indian scriptures. It is not considered the ugly, lowly creature that many cultures consider it to be. Rather, the crow is considered unique because it is described as possessing only one eye that rolls back and forth between two sockets. Whether this is biologically true or not doesn't matter. What does matter is that this conception makes the crow a symbol of double consciousness—a Sage's ability to switch his vision between the transcendental and the relative at a moment's notice. At one moment a Sage is immersed in the highest reality that transcends all, and at another moment, he comes back to the world, aware of every practical reality.



The emphasis placed in Kakabhushundi's story on not insulting a Guru or spiritual preceptor reminds an aspirant of the importance of not developing any negative attitudes that hinder his spiritual advancement. In this context, insulting a spiritual preceptor implies turning away from the path that leads to Liberation, which is the greatest injury that one can do to himself, and leads to the greatest loss that one can experience.

The Rise and Fall of the Ego

In Devi Bhagavata there is another story that graphically illustrates the degrading nature of pride. It is the story of the rise and fall of the great King Nahusha:

Once there was a great and powerful king in ancient India named Nahusha. During his reign he performed various sacrifices and righteous acts. Because of his meritorious deeds, his ability to enjoy heavenly delights was heightened.

According to the story, Indra, the king of gods, had to go into seclusion for some time and suspend his normal duties. Immediately there arose the question of who would rule the heavenly world in Indra's absence. The gods and Sages therefore convened to choose a successor. In reviewing the possible candidates, they found that King Nahusha of the mortal world had attained great spiritual qualities and undoubtedly deserved to be the ruler of Heaven; so they proposed that Nahusha succeed Indra as ruler.

Immediately a messenger was dispatched to report their decision to King Nahusha. He was told that he was promoted to the heavenly world and that he would become the new Indra—ruler of the gods. Nahusha was highly pleased to hear this news and he entered the heavenly world and began his rulership.

But such exaltation, instead of making him humbler, made him swollen-headed. Formerly he had been a righteous person, but actually his righteousness had not been very profound; ego still dominated his mind to a great extent. Because of this he gradually developed intense pride in his position in the heavenly world. The gods and Sages were not pleased with the changes in Nahusha, but since they had chosen him for his position, they allowed him to have his way.

Soon, however, Nahusha's pride grew even more and he began to covet Indra's wife, Indrani Shachi. His mind was constantly obsessed with the thought, "Why shouldn't Shachi become my wife? Just think of the glory and prestige she would bring me."

Presently news was sent to Shachi that she should come and accept Nahusha as her husband. When Shachi was brought before him, Nahusha said to her, "You shall accept me as your husband, and both of us will enjoy the heavenly glory. Think no more of your husband who is dead and gone. Even if he is alive he may as well be dead, because he is no longer ruling the heavenly realm."

Shachi tried to persuade Nahusha not to insist on her becoming his wife, but he was adamant and wouldn't hear of it. The more she pleaded the angrier he got. Seeing Nahusha's anger, even the gods and Sages were afraid. They did not know what to do about his terrible ego, or how to divest him of the power they had invested in him.

Seeing that Nahusha would not compromise, Shachi asked him for some time to think about his proposal. Nahusha acquiesced. In the meantime Shachi went to Brihaspati, the Guru of gods, for shelter and advice. Brihaspati counselled her that the only one who could help her in this situation was Goddess Saraswati; so he initiated her into the worship of the Goddess.

Shachi offered adorations to Goddess Saraswati, and the Goddess gave her insight about what to do. With her intellect touched by the grace of Goddess Saraswati, Shachi knew how to handle the situation.



She sent a message to Nahusha saying that she would accept him as her husband, but that he should come to her in a palanquin carried by Sages. She expressed her view that every god had a special vehicle. Lord Vishnu rode on Garuda, Shiva on a bull, etc. Since he was a person from the mortal world who rose to such great power, he must have a unique vehicle. Therefore, he should be brought to her on a palanquin carried by Sages. Surely, no one had ever thought of such a form of transportation!

Nahusha, with his pride and tremendous ego, didn't realize that he was being tricked; rather, he felt that he was being honored. "Surely all the gods and Sages adore me," his message stated. "Whatever I say they will do. So I shall come to you on a palanquin borne by Sages." And Shachi replied, "Very well, my lord, I shall await you."

Soon after this Nahusha chose a group of Sages and asked them to bear the palanquin.

They told him they would be happy to do it and smiled knowingly among themselves, for they knew what was waiting for Nahusha. Among them was the great Agastya, the most exalted of Sages. There were others of great standing also. At the appointed time, the Sages picked up the heavenly palanquin and hoisted it upon their shoulders for the journey to Shachi. Nahusha sat upon it, bursting with pride as he eagerly awaited the moment when he would claim Shachi as his wife.

From the outset, however; Nahusha was annoyed with the Sages because they weren't able to synchronize their movements and they moved much more slowly than he had expected. He sullenly thought to himself, "Lord Vishnu's vehicle moves a lot faster than mine. Come to think of it, everyone's vehicle moves faster. I made a big mistake agreeing to this." In his impatience he scolded the Sages, shouting, "*Sarpa, sarpa*—quick, quick! Move faster!" His choice of words was most significant in this context, because the Sanskrit word *sarpa* has a double meaning: it can mean "snake" as well as "quick."

Nahusha's shouts to move faster caused the Sages to quicken their pace to the extent that they could. But their outpouring of effort and energy still didn't suit Nahusha. Screaming, "*Sarpa, sarpa!*" at the top of his lungs, the King lost his temper and kicked Agastya in the back as hard as he could. Agastya immediately cursed him: "May you become a *sarpa*—a snake!" So he turned into a snake that instant and fell from Heaven down to the mortal world. There he remained for many centuries as a snake until he met King Yudhishtira at the time of the Mahabharata War.

Though a snake, he was still able to talk like a human being and thus was able to hold many interesting conversations with King Yudhishtira. Because of the contact he had with the great king, who was the embodiment of righteousness, his spirit was liberated. But in spite of this, he still

had to go through a long process of suffering and degradation before this happened.

This story symbolically portrays the rise and fall of ego, as represented by Nahusha. When a person performs *sakamya* karmas, or actions prompted by the desire for heavenly enjoyment, the fruit he reaps from doing such actions leads him to heavenly enjoyment. But enjoying that fruit of righteousness is not equivalent to attaining Liberation. King Natasha was a great monarch who performed many good deeds, but as we saw, simply performing good deeds with no philosophical insight does not eliminate ego. And if ego is present, there will always be a basis for degradation.

If you have philosophical insight you do not seek a reward in heaven; you seek the dissolution of ego itself. You perform actions for *chitta shudhi*, or purity of the heart, not for enjoyment on the astral plane.

Another point illustrated by the parable is that if the unconscious has not been purified—if real aspiration has not developed—then possessions, power, and glory all create a twisted intellect. If a person lacking purity of intellect attains great power he becomes swollen-headed. If you cannot handle power you will fall, and that is what happened to Nahusha.

Shachi is the principle of pure intellect, which cannot be owned by ego. Any effort to dominate the intellect by an egoistic process is a movement that will lead one to degradation.

Yoking the Sages to a palanquin also has mystical significance. When you have not brought order in your personality, it is like a runaway chariot. The chariot of your personality has to be driven by the higher principles of your soul, such as understanding, reasoning and reflection (symbolized by the Sages), not by your ego. But instead, the lesser in you tries to dominate the higher.

The right destination for the ego is that state wherein it is effaced. When ego allows itself to be effaced, there lies its exaltation, its grandeur. But when ego allows itself to be intensified, degradation results. This seems paradoxical, but therein lies the subtle mystery of mysticism: you enjoy existence more when your ego dissolves.

Thus, when Nahusha tried to dominate the Sages, he initiated his own downfall. Instead of possessing Shachi, his soul fell into a state of degradation and bondage.

Further, the story shows that by adoring Goddess Saraswati you allow your ego to be dominated by pure intellect. By making you reflective, Goddess allows you to have proper reasoning and insight. If you exalt your ego, however, and live for egoistic values—power, fame, glory, and wealth—then the same Goddess who can enlighten the intellect deludes it. This is the same process that caused Nahusha to fall. The Goddess in you is ever ready either to delude your intellect or to enlighten it.

When you turn towards egoistic feelings such as selfishness, greed, and vanity, the Saraswati within you smiles in a sinister way, causing your intellect to become gradually twisted. Though you may think that you are doing good to yourself, you are actually creating a basis for future sorrow. On the other hand, when you follow the path of righteousness and allow good qualities to develop, the Saraswati within you smiles in a heavenly way and your intellect begins to recover its brilliance. You begin to understand the subtle secrets of life and discover the simplest way to transcend all your troubles and turmoil. This is the process by which intellect becomes intuitive. Figuratively speaking, your soul rushes toward the heavenly world. On the other hand, when ego dominates, the soul rushes headlong down into the world-process.