

Humility is a Divine virtue that is the positive counterpart of pride or *mada*. It is the expression of an evolving soul—a soul that is winging its way to the Divine Self. Humility implies effacement of ego, and it is attained by an individual in gradual degrees.

When the mind is highly fulfilled, without the pressure of the unconscious *vasanas* (subtle desires), ego is transcended and one begins to experience one's unity with the Divine Self. In that state of perfection, there is an utter absence of ego, a spontaneous blossoming of supreme humility.

In the Puranas there is a story that gives insight into the quality of humility in its highest and most perfect form:

Once Gods were having a discussion about Who among the Deities was the greatest: Brahma—the Creator, Vishnu—the Sustainer, or Shiva—the Destroyer?

“Brahma is the greatest because he is the creator of the universe. He is the teacher of the *Vedic* wisdom. Being the embodiment of righteousness, He is the guide and Guru of all beings.” This was the view upheld by some Divine beings.

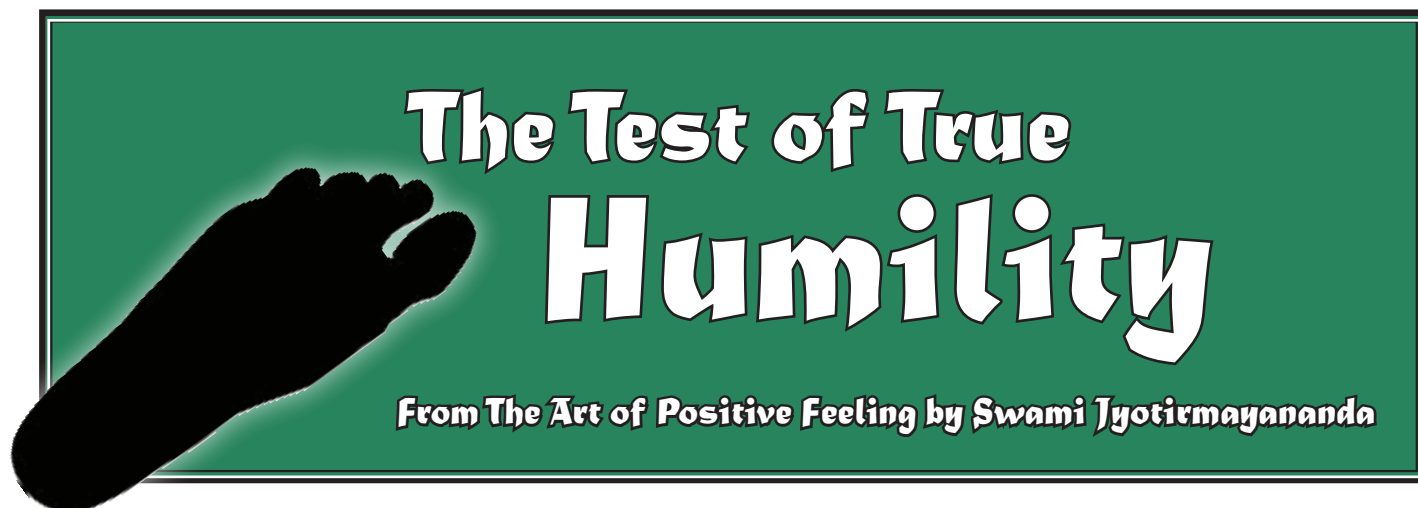
“Lord Shiva is the greatest because by His immense power He brings about the destruction of the world. If Shiva did not destroy the world, the cycle of creation and dissolution could not be maintained.” Thus some argued for establishing the greatness of Shiva.

“Lord Vishnu is the greatest,” asserted the devotees of Lord Vishnu. “He is the sustainer of the world. Creation and destruction are sustained by Him. It is He who incarnated as Rama and Krishna, and it is He who incarnates from time to time to promote harmony and order in the world.”

Unsatisfied, however, with these answers, Sage Bhrigu took upon himself the task of finding out who is the greatest among the three deities. He reflected within himself, “I will consider Him the greatest who is endowed with the greatest degree of forbearance, who has the greatest control over his temper.” With this idea in mind, he first proceeded to Brahma Loka, the heavenly region where Lord Brahma dwells.

Having entered Brahma Loka, he approached Brahma without offering adorations. Brahma could not tolerate this misconduct of the Sage. Anger manifested on His face as the corners of His eyes grew red, and He began to look for His *kamandalu* (the vessel containing sacred water) with the intention of pronouncing a curse on Bhrigu. Goddess Saraswati, the divine consort of Lord Brahma, restrained Him, saying, “O Lord, do not be angry with Bhrigu. He has always been courteous before. There must be some reason for his unusual behavior.” Thus saying, Goddess Saraswati dissuaded Brahma from cursing the Sage.

Scarcely believing that he had escaped, Sage Bhrigu hastened his steps to the dwelling place of Lord Shiva. Approaching the great Deity, he did



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not salute, and in addition, he began to insult the Deity saying, “O Shiva, You ride on a Bull, wear snakes for Your garlands, and keep Your body besmeared with ashes. You are the very personification of madness!”

At this, Lord Shiva grew immensely angry and reached for His trident, ready to hurl it to destroy Bhrigu. But Goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva’s Divine consort, stopped Him, pleading, “O Lord, Bhrigu is a great Sage and devotee of ours. Please have patience with him.” Reluctantly Lord Shiva withdrew His trident saying, “This *brahmin* must be taught a lesson. However, I am not beheading him this time for your sake. But if he ever shows rudeness again, his head will fall!”

Fleeing from Lord Shiva, Bhrigu proceeded to Vaikuntha where Lord Vishnu dwells. Lord Vishnu—the indweller of every heart—knew what the Sage was intending to do, and even before Bhrigu arrived, He pretended to be deep in sleep. When Bhrigu arrived at Vaikuntha, he rushed towards the Divine abode. The gate-keepers tried to stop the Sage from entering, but noticing his angry face, they kept quiet. Bhrigu rushed into the inner apartments of Lord Vishnu, and seeing Him stretched in sleep, the Sage kicked the chest of Lord Vishnu with great vehemence, saying, “You who are the sustainer of the world, how dare You sleep, ignoring the well-being of the world!”

Lord Vishnu got up and clasped the feet of the Sage, saying, “O Sage, your tender lotus foot has been injured by my rock-like chest. What a great sin I have committed! Please forgive me, O great Sage!”

Sage Bhrigu was amazed at the humility of Lord Vishnu. He said, “O Lord, it is I who must be forgiven by You who are supremely compassionate. How can I ever be free of the sinful act of having kicked Your sacred chest with my foot? The world will always speak ill of me for having done so.”

Lord Vishnu said, “O Sage, on the contrary, the world will sing your praises. You have pleased Me by placing your foot on My chest. Just as a mother is pleased even when her infant kicks her, I am ever pleased with My devotees even when they are angry with Me. As a token of My satisfaction, I have installed your footprint on My chest. Not only this, but every great incarnation of Mine will bear your footprint on His chest.”

Sage Bhrigu was immersed in bliss. He had discovered the greatest among the Deities!

From a mystic point of view, this story is not meant to ascertain the superiority of one Deity over another, because, in fact, these three Deities are One appearing as three. What it intends to do is to show the secret of real greatness. The greatness of a person does not lie in his power and prosperity, but it lies in the magnanimity of his heart—the magnanimity with which he is ever ready to love instead of hate, to forgive instead of bear a grudge, to be humble instead of proud and conceited.

The perfect and total humility of Lord Vishnu is Divine, beyond the human plane. As long as one is in the human plane, his interactions are based on ego to one degree or another. But the ideal of egolessness personified in this story must be adored, and one must strive to realize that ideal gradually with patience.