

A large crowd of people is gathered in a body of water, likely during the Kumbha Mela festival. The people are wearing colorful clothing, and some are standing in the water. In the foreground, there is a large, woven basket filled with flowers and other items, floating in the water. The background shows a dense crowd of people extending to the horizon under a clear blue sky.

Global Gathering

The Power of Collective Consciousness

The Kumbha Mela offers spiritual seekers an extraordinary opportunity to heal their

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own hearts while restoring harmony to a troubled world. By Pandit Rajmani Tigunait



During my years as a student at the University of Allahabad, I attended the 1977 and 1989 Kumbha Melas and many of the much smaller melas that take place every year in January and February. These melas were like county fairs, filled with fun and excitement, but they also afforded an opportunity to serve my parents during their ritual practice and to study with the sadhus and yogis who attend these melas in great numbers.

As I related in the last issue, when my mother burned her foot during the 1999 mela and insisted on risking death rather than leave the mela grounds, I saw this event through the eyes of the pilgrims for the first time and experienced it through their hearts.

Then and there I decided that when the Kumbha Mela returned to Allahabad in 2001, I, too, would return, this time as a pilgrim. My original plan was to travel with a few friends and family members, but when the residents of the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, Pennsylvania, learned of my intention,

many of them asked to accompany me. Within days, as word spread from the residents to our members and friends, 70 people expressed a wish to take part in this pilgrimage. I found their enthusiasm inspiring, but managing such a large group of Westerners at the Kumbha Mela seemed impossible. There would be millions of people, thousands of loudspeakers blaring at all hours, open trenches for bathrooms, and a pall of dust and smoke hanging in the air much of the time. Americans are sincere and generous, but where would I get their mineral water and organic vegetables?

They enjoy adventure, but at the end of the day, they need a hot shower and a clean, private place to sleep. The hotels in Allahabad would be barely livable by American standards, and anyway, they would be full of politicians and government officers during the Kumbha Mela. I also knew that if our list of attendees had grown to 70 in a matter of days, it would grow into the hundreds in the next two years.

In the end, this problem solved itself. Through a series of fortuitous events, the Himalayan Institute was able to purchase a 30-acre parcel of land on the

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bank of the Ganga just three kilometers downstream from the *sangam*, the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers—not too close to the heart of the mela site, yet not too far away. We built a boundary wall to enclose our new campus, drilled a well, and built a water tower and a two-story guesthouse. As the date for the Kumbha Mela drew near, we erected an elaborate tent city—complete with lecture and dining halls, a kitchen, gift shops, and over 200 spacious tents—preparing to receive 500 of the Institute’s members and guests. A beautiful old mango orchard on a bluff overlooking the Ganga had been fitted with a *yajna shala* (the *kunda* for performing fire rituals) and transformed into a sacred grove for meditation and self-reflection.

While we were completing preparations on our campus, the 25-square-mile floodplain surrounding the sangam was being transformed into a bustling city. By January 10, it mirrored the legendary description of heaven, which, according to Hindus, is fitted with all the amenities. Brightly lit main roads were interlaced with hundreds of side streets. Allahabad’s three permanent bridges had been augmented by dozens of pontoon bridges spanning the two rivers. There were hospitals, police stations, aid stations, watchtowers, strip malls, exhibition halls, lecture halls, media outlets, elaborate compounds for housing high-ranking holy men, and millions of residences for pilgrims—all made of tents. Twenty thousand loudspeakers connected to a central PA system were constantly broadcasting prayers, with occasional interruptions for announcements. All was in readiness.

As it turned out, the 2001 Kumbha Mela attracted the largest crowd in the history of humankind. In a span of four

weeks, 70 million pilgrims took a ritual bath in the river. Millions of people stayed on the Ganga floodplain for the entire month, observing spiritual practices and doing penance, as prescribed in their 1000-year-old traditions. Although the majority were Hindu, the crowd also included substantial numbers of Buddhists, Jains, Christians, and Sikhs.

The mela began officially on January 12, as the Juna Akhara, the biggest sect of sadhus in India, made a formal procession to the sangam. Hundreds of thousands of sadhus—tens of thousands of *naga* (nude) sadhus among them—had left the seclusion of their caves, monasteries, private dwellings, and ashrams to join this time-honored procession. With the highest-ranking sadhus seated on thrones mounted on the backs of elephants or on motorized chariots, and those lower in the hierarchy on horseback or on foot, the procession began at the ancient monasteries in the heart of the city and wound its way to the mela grounds.

“This procession is not a cultural show nor is it a display of power and glamour,” a high-ranking sadhu told me. “It begins with a long ritual. In the presence of sadhus from all over India, we invoke and propitiate our ancient masters, the presiding deities of our tradition, and the divine forces who guide us and who heal, protect, and nurture all creation. After the rituals are over, we invite these forces to reside at the lotus of our hearts. They are our masters; we are their attendants. This is their procession—we accompany them. They bless this great occasion of the Kumbha Mela, and we witness their blessings.”

In honor of this procession, the streets were festooned with garlands of fresh flowers and streamers of green mango leaves. The crowds lining the route

showered the holy men with flowers and petals. The naga sadhus—smeared from head to toe in ceremonial ash—walked in front and attracted the most attention. Some had sandalwood paste on their forehead, some heads were shaven, and others were adorned with *jata* (long hair). Some walked proudly, with broad chests and massive tummies. Others were a bundle of bones and emitted the graceful energy of austerity. Some carried spears and others tridents or swords. The children regarded the nude sadhus with amusement, the adults with respect and humility, while the people unfamiliar with the practice and values these sadhus embody watched them with confused astonishment. They passed our group as we stood at the main entrance to the mela grounds. In these naga sadhus I saw the spirit of ancient India, which prized inner inquiry, afforded room for diversity, embraced tolerance, and placed inner peace far above the purposeless race of materialism.

The Mythological Origin of the Kumbha Mela

Every culture has its sacred sites. For Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and the followers of the Bon religion, Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarover are sacred. The sanctity of Mecca is at the heart of Islam. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are united in their faith in the sanctity of Jerusalem. The tradition of pilgrimage to these sites is as ancient as the cultures themselves, yet how these places came to be regarded as sacred is shrouded in mystery. Attempts to unveil such mysteries give rise to the world of mythology with its own complex layers of meaning.

This is the case with the Kumbha Mela. As ancient as the Indian culture itself, the origin and the precise source

of the sanctity of the Kumbha Mela are shrouded in mystery. However, one mythological account, recorded in the *Padma Purana*, has a special resonance for our time.

LONG, LONG AGO, when the Himalayas were still in their infancy, the world was ruled by a terrible demon named Shankhasura. His appetite for power and possession knew no limits. He conquered the human race, plundered the earth and the waters until he possessed everything, leaving nothing for others. Poverty and the pain that accompanies poverty engulfed the planet.

Shankhasura built his capital far out of anyone's reach. From the security of this fortress, the demon delighted in watching the dance of destruction, death, and decay that he and his minions had inflicted on all forms of life. At the height of his reign, mountains crumbled, rivers caught fire, and Mother Earth cried out in despair. Hearing her cries, Lord Vishnu, the god of preservation, intervened and engaged the demon in battle. While Vishnu fought Shankhasura, Mother Nature exhibited her fury. Massive floods, fire, famine, and disease swept across the planet, abating only when Vishnu killed the demon, ending his horrific reign.

But even though the demon had been vanquished, the damage done during his reign was evident everywhere. Nature was out of balance. The soil was infertile. Streams had dried up. The groundwater was contaminated. Trees bore no fruit. Clouds carried no water. Animals gave birth to dissimilar species. Flowers were drab and had not regained their aroma. The climate was extreme and unpredictable. Grains contained no nutrients. Even though the demon was dead, fear still haunted the minds of people everywhere, and their hearts were filled with anger and grief.

Lord Vishnu summoned the sages and asked them to help Mother Nature restore herself to balance and to help

human beings summon the patience and vision to build a new and healthy world. As guided by Vishnu, the sages converged in the area surrounding the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers and began a 12-year group meditation known as *ashwamedha*. High-minded individuals—women and men, old and young, poor and rich, merchants and philosophers—joined the sages in their group meditation, which was centered around 12 altars. The scriptures describe how the sages captured their mind and turned it into a bright horse—a horse which finds its own direction, leads its rider to the right destination, and returns safely to its original home. This horse roamed the land, and the high-minded individuals followed it. Later texts call this ashwamedha *dharmachakra pravartana* (rotating the wheel of dharma).

By the time the ashwamedha practice drew to a close, the ecosystem had come back into balance: the air was pristine, the rivers ran deep and pure, the rains came on time, the soil was fertile, the trees were laden with fruit, crops were healthy, and the harvest plentiful. The health of humans had also returned—they were strong in body and clear in mind. Fear no longer haunted their minds, and anger and grief had been banished from their hearts.

As the sages made their final offering, the sacred fire at all 12 altars illumined the entire *ksbhetra* (the area now known as the Kumbha Mela site), and Lord Vishnu, the presiding force of the group meditation, spontaneously emerged from this light. The sages spoke in gratitude: “It is your guiding grace that restored the balance in creation. The power that illuminates this place has brought harmony out of chaos. We pray that this divine power stays here forever and that until the end of time humanity receives the guiding nurturance of this light, here at this place.”

Lord Vishnu granted their wish. “From now on this spot will be known as *Tirtha Raja* (the lord of all shrines). Every twelve years, during the month of



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Magha, which begins in January in the Gregorian calendar, when the sun is in the house of Capricorn, the benevolent forces of creation will convene here. And just as sunrise dispels the darkness, the forces residing at Tirtha Raja will dispel the confusion of mind. I, too, will reside here at all of these altars.”

This story takes us back to a time when Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, or any of the other forms of “ism” familiar to us today did not exist. But the human mind existed and so did the lust for power, prestige, name, fame, and the unrestrained desire to possess and consume. This story takes us to a place in time when the human race was ruled by fear and greed and our very core was shaken by unrest, both within and without. It takes us to a world where a handful possessed everything, and the rest, nothing. It tells of a society engulfed by strife in all its forms at a time when the collective conscious-

ness of the human race was desperately seeking positive change. Do we need an extra pair of eyes to see how deep we are in the era described by this story?

Our campus is located next to one of the altars where Lord Vishnu appeared and offered the assurance that he will reside here forever, and that the power inherent in this sacred place will dispel the confusion of mind. The sacredness of this place and the area around it is palpable. Here, in the sanctity and security of our well-ordered campus, during the 2001 Kumbha Mela, we spent our time studying, meditating, and enjoying the company of our friends and fellow seekers. From time to time we visited the sangam, where millions came to bathe. We marveled at their faith in the Ganga, at their faith in the Kumbha Mela, and at their belief in the law of karma and the redemption granted by pilgrimage.

In the pre-dawn hours, we could feel the spirit of the planet moving as the throng emerged from their tents and surged toward the bathing ghats to take

a dip in the Ganga. One morning I was crossing a pontoon bridge at sunrise when the dense fog lifted to reveal a sea of humanity standing in the river, facing the rising sun and offering the water of the Ganga to the celestial beings. In that instant, I saw the spirit of the collective consciousness filling the space between the earth and the sun, and I saw myself in all and everyone in me.

In the days that followed, we visited the compounds of sadhus belonging to different traditions, listened to their discourses, attended their ritual ceremonies, and received their blessings. One afternoon I received the privilege of sharing the stage with His Holiness the Dalai Lama while our guests sat at his feet and listened to his enlightening discourse. He summarized his remarks with these words: “The debate whether God exists or does not exist is perennial. Leave this debate to us. Your job is to discover how to live peacefully and happily.”

Sometimes we wandered into the mela without a specific goal in mind



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and allowed ourselves to see whatever happened to be there. Such wanderings led us to witness aspects of the Kumbha Mela that were not at all uplifting: Sadhus sitting around their fires smoking marijuana and arguing about politics; priests shouting their self-composed mantras and manipulating pilgrims into making love offerings they could not afford; religious organizations and leaders politicizing their agendas; and non-governmental organizations exploiting the sentiments of the pilgrims to collect donations. Thousands of beggars—lepers, the blind, the crippled, and orphans in tattered clothes—sat along the roads with their begging bowls, but hardly anyone seemed to notice. When we took boats downstream from the sangam to our campus we saw decomposing human corpses floating in the river, crows pecking at their eyes. These corpses, along with untreated sewage from the city, masses of pink and blue plastic bags, and an endless stream of marigold garlands offered by pilgrims had clearly made the Ganga sick. I looked at the sea of humanity crowding her shores and wondered how many in the crowd understood that spiritual aspirations and social responsibilities are not divorced from each other. How many know that personal enlightenment and the enlightenment of society go hand in hand? Clearly something vital is missing from our understanding of life, from our understanding of ourselves and others, and from our understanding of the natural world.

Another story narrated in the scriptures provides a glimpse of these missing elements. This story explains the message of the Kumbha Mela and tells us how to bring a qualitative change in our lives and in the world around us.

ONCE UPON A TIME, the gods and demons waged a war that lasted 10,000 years. Both sides exhausted all their resources, both material and spiritual, only to realize that the power and supremacy earned by subduing and harming others leads nowhere. Searching for peace and lasting happiness, the two warring parties went to the creator. The creator told them that *amrita* (immortal elixir) is the source of true peace and happiness. Like butter in milk, the amrita is hidden in the ocean of life (*ksbira sagara*). He also told the gods and demons that they had to put aside their differences, become friends with one another, unite their strengths, and churn the ocean together if they wished to collect this amrita. They readily agreed.

The churning began, but as soon as the amrita emerged the two sides started quarreling. “It’s all for me!” they shouted. “It’s mine, and mine alone!” At this, Dhanvantari, the eternal healer, appeared and captured the amrita in his vessel. As he tried to escape, the disputants snatched at the vessel and some of the amrita spilled out. The earth, water, fire, air, and space surrounding the area where the amrita fell swallowed it instantly.

Later, pleased by the austerities, selfless service, and devotion of the sages, Lord Vishnu granted a boon: Every 12 years, the earth, water, fire, air, and space that contained this amrita would make it available to humankind. Thus began the celebration of the Kumbha Mela at 12-year intervals.

Clearly the war between the bright and the dark forces is well under way in our world today. Cries for justice and disputes over what constitutes justice echo across the airwaves. Might has become right. The face of the earth is blan-

keted with terror. Nations are obsessed with their homeland security. The gap between rich and poor has become an ever-widening chasm. Do we have the stamina to fight for 10,000 years before we look for amrita, the real source of peace and happiness? Can we leave behind our addiction to labeling others, highlighting our differences, forcing others to comply with our values, and claiming everything for ourselves, while at the same time expecting everyone to work together to create a peaceful world? We have creative ideas, but they are contaminated by selfishness. We have brilliant politicians, but most are afflicted with a hunger for power. We have intelligent executives with untiring energy for business, but most are afflicted by greed. We have religious leaders with troves of knowledge, but most are caught in sectarianism. We have well-meaning and passionate activists, but many lack broad vision and consideration for others.

The Kumbha Mela is a time to have a dialogue with the creator, our own conscience. It is a time to churn the ocean of life and capture its very essence. It is a time to rise above the conflicts within and without, to tap into the healing power contained in the vessel of our body, mind, and consciousness. It is a time to renew our commitment to discovering who we are and what we can become; how we can prosper together, heal the damage that has already occurred, and restore peace to this troubled world. This is what we tried to imbibe at the Kumbha Mela in 2001. And this is what will take us back in January 2013. ■

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