

# The Meaning of Myth (I)

PRAVRAJIKA SHUDDHATMAPRANA

**H**uman beings have a deep love, and need, for stories—especially stories of heroes and heroines, or gods and goddesses, many of whom have extraordinary powers. These stories almost invariably represent the forces of good overcoming the forces of evil. Our lives are filled with them. If we are not actually reading them, then we are watching them being enacted on television, DVDs, or in movies. Even many news items about heroic people are stories to us that we reflect on or repeat to others.

Heroes and heroines who risk their lives for others without any thought for themselves are usually held up as paragons of self-sacrifice. Stories of such people are especially wonderful for children, who easily internalize the nobility of these characters. Children love to imagine that they themselves can come to the rescue with super powers—just like Batman or Wonder Woman. But even adults may daydream about being a great hero or heroine just waiting for a chance to prove themselves.

In James Thurber's short story, 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty', we find a bumbling, wimpy, and unaccomplished man, Walter Mitty, spending his time daydreaming that he is a highly accomplished man and a great hero, who, without a second thought, and with the utmost calm, risks his life at the drop of a hat. In his imagination he is 'Walter Mitty the Undefeated,

inscrutable to the end'. Like any good fiction writer, James Thurber uses exaggeration to the utmost to make his point. In these daydreams, Walter Mitty is the saviour of the day—no matter what the situation is. But to his wife in his real life, who knows nothing about his imagined characters, he is a mystery. 'I was thinking,' he tells her. 'Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?' To which she replies, 'I'm going to take your temperature when I get you home.'<sup>1</sup>

All over the world we find stories repeating the same themes of heroism, selfless acts of courage, and self-sacrifice. The heroes, in fact, renounce all care for their own safety to save others and, in the process, manifest a higher ideal of a self. But in many cases, such as in James Thurber's story of Walter Mitty, this higher ideal of a self is basically a more glorious ego. Yet there is another point here: To even contemplate risking one's own life for the sake of others indicates that we identify ourselves with others. We feel connected to others, even though this connection cannot be explained in rational terms. There is a feeling that our self extends beyond our physical body.

Thus we find that most people feel there is more to life than what they experience. And this is why it is hard for human beings to set limits on themselves. We all feel we have more power than what we manifest.

And this is the premise behind the story of Walter Mitty.

Most likely, in the earliest days of civilization, human beings sat around a fire in the evenings and told stories of their ancestors. Life was a mystery to people then. And not simply a mystery—it was often a terror. Telling stories of the heroism and adventures of their ancestors gave them courage and strength, and perhaps helped them to make some sense of life.

But then there were other stories. Some perhaps talked about the strange dreams they had. Perhaps some of them dreamt about deceased relatives and wondered if they were really dead. Dreams and the death of loved ones made a huge impact on early human beings. What were these dreams all about? What happens to us after we die? Was there more to life than the body? Human beings also became aware of a basic, underlying longing, or angst, within themselves to understand who they were and why they were here. Slowly, after perhaps thousands of years, more awareness came of other dimensions to life—that there is more to life than what is ordinarily experienced.

Though the origins of many of the world's sacred texts are shrouded in mystery, yet almost invariably they speak of the essential or original nature of humans as perfect, or even divine. From this we understand that even in ancient times there were exceptional people who could not be content with a superficial view of life. When their search in the external world proved futile, they began to search within—taking a hint from their dreams.

Gradually, after much reflection and discrimination, a few people realized that the mind has deeper and deeper layers to it. And finally—through a state of meditation, or

through some other kind of superconscious experience—some rare people were able to attain a state in which they realized the ultimate reality of life itself. This reality, they found, is right within us—though most of us are not aware of it at all. It is, in fact, our own Self.

Moreover, those very persons who attained that realization returned from that state transformed. They were no longer ordinary people. They spoke with authority and became embodiments of love for all beings. Others understood that such people were exceptional, and some even thought they were divine—a god or goddess sent from another realm.

Black Elk was a Native American Indian who had such a superconscious experience in 1873 when he was just nine years old. But unlike the seers above, his experience came spontaneously. As Joseph Campbell described it:

Well, what happened with this young boy was that he had a prophetic vision of the terrible future of his tribe. It was a vision of what he called 'the hoop' of the nation [the Sioux tribe]. In the vision, Black Elk saw that the hoop of his nation was one of many hoops, which is something that we haven't learned at all well yet. He saw the cooperation of all the hoops, all the nations in grand procession. But more than that, the vision was an experience of himself going through the realms of spiritual imagery that were of his culture and assimilating their import. It comes to one great statement, which for me is a key statement to the understanding of myth and symbols. He says, 'I saw myself on the central mountain of the world, the highest place, and I had a vision because I was seeing in the sacred manner of the world.' And the sacred central mountain was Harney Peak in South

Dakota. And then he says, ‘But the sacred central mountain is everywhere.’<sup>2</sup>

‘That,’ said Joseph Campbell, ‘is a real mythological realization. . . . The central point of the world [which Black Elk says is everywhere] is the point where stillness and movement are together. Movement is time, but stillness is eternity. Realizing how this moment of your life is actually a moment of eternity, and experiencing the eternal aspect of what you’re doing in the temporal experience—this is the mythological experience.’<sup>3</sup>

Invariably, however, when these teachers, like Black Elk, wanted to share their message—or when the followers and disciples of these great seers wanted to convey their teacher’s message to others—they faced a dilemma. How would ordinary people, who cannot understand anything but this gross external world, fathom such a message? As the lives of these great souls were often so unusual, and their spiritual experiences even more so, how could people grasp it all? The solution they found—and we can see this in many of the Hindu scriptures—was to teach people through stories.

Stories were told of the lives and activities of these teachers—people who lived extraordinary lives. Taking a cue from ordinary tales, these great souls were often depicted as superheroes, yet they went beyond the ordinary mould of heroes. They were God-like. Here legends and facts often got combined, but enough of a picture of their lives came through so that people could understand that some very great souls had lived on this earth.

Again, other stories presented the teachings of these great souls—sometimes as direct teachings and other times as

parables or allegories. Still other stories tried to convey the visions and spiritual experiences of these great souls. Some of these latter stories were quite mysterious and on the surface did not seem to have any meaning at all. Yet, in fact, these stories work on another level of the mind, a deeper level. As they are trying to describe the indescribable—a spiritual experience—they employ symbolism to do this.

Regarding these stories of ‘yoga experience’ in India, Heinrich Zimmer says: ‘[Such stories] are effective primarily on a subconscious level, touching intuition, feeling, and imagination. Their details impress themselves on the memory, soak down, and shape the deeper stratifications of the psyche. When brooded upon, their significant episodes are capable of revealing various shades of meaning, according to the experiences and life-needs of the individual.’<sup>4</sup>

In the Christian and Jewish traditions, the biblical book known as the Song of Solomon can be considered such a story. And in the Hindu tradition, the story of Markandeya’s vision of Vishnu as a baby lying on a banyan leaf, as well as the story of Vishnu as Trivikrama covering the earth, the heavens, and the nether regions with his three steps—these are also examples of a myth describing a spiritual experience. They are both mysterious stories that seem unintelligible on the surface, yet they both have a profound inner meaning.

Regarding the first type of story—stories of great souls and their teachings—who can say now how much history there is in them—or if there is any history at all? But over the centuries, one thing became clear: Some stories—especially those that have been retold and ritually re-enacted over and

over again—have a power to awaken a higher consciousness in people who contemplate them. They have a power to transform people and help them realize their own divine nature.

We should not be surprised at this, as even stories of ordinary heroes and heroines, who are willing to sacrifice their lives for others, have power, because people want so much to identify with them. Yet sacred myths have even more power because these stories touch something deeper within us. They reveal a higher dimension to life.

### **Sacred myths and ordinary stories**

Sacred myths may often resemble ordinary stories, but they are not. Rather, sacred myths inspire human beings to transform their lives—sometimes to the point of prompting people to renounce everything to seek the Ultimate Reality behind our existence. Stories of ordinary heroes and superheroes—no matter how righteous they may be—cannot take us this far. Where does that power of sacred myths come from? Sceptics may say it comes from people’s blind faith. But don’t children have intense faith in Santa Claus or Superman? Yet that same kind of power is not there. The power of sacred myths comes originally from the lives and spiritual experiences of the great souls who lived these myths. Then, as the stories are retold and become ritualized, they gather more power.

Let us look at some recent stories that we know have a historical basis, and that refer to spiritual experiences. From these we can see that their power is manifest from the very moment the sacred act or vision takes place. For instance, when Sri Ramakrishna did intense spiritual practices of various religions, the power of his sadhanas

reverberated in the subtle atmosphere. Then, when Swami Vivekananda spoke those words of religious harmony at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, a paradigm shift was set in motion. As that power was already in the subtle atmosphere, people somehow, without consciously being aware of it, recognized the message that was spoken and they responded by welcoming it. And it all came from the power of Ramakrishna’s spiritual experiences.

Yet, to keep that divine power alive through the following generations, events like this must be celebrated, or re-enacted. We could say that the present-day inter-religious conferences, and the Parliament of Religions that are held every few years—these are the celebrations. And these celebrations themselves become the ritual.

In another incident, Ramakrishna touched many of his disciples on 1 January 1886 at the Cossipore garden house, and he awakened divine consciousness in them, the consciousness of their divine nature. And even now thousands of people come to the Cossipore garden house every year on 1 January to re-enact that episode. Moreover, if others cannot come, they read or recite the story of this incident, or sing songs about it. This is how the power of the original divine act is carried on. Not that everyone who celebrates this incident has his or her consciousness awakened. But as people’s minds are turned in that direction, some benefit accrues.

So this is why rituals have evolved to celebrate or re-enact sacred events and keep them alive. Black Elk, in fact, created a ritual for his tribe to re-enact the story of his own realization and vision so that a path could be opened for others to follow him. Whether, in the following generations,

everyone in his tribe understood what the ritual was about was not so important. What was important was that his vision should be kept alive, and also that the path be kept open for those who could grasp it. In this way, Black Elk's story could remain alive and 'awakened'—that is, it could retain the power to enlighten those who could grasp it.

Again, the night before Christ's death, he asked his disciples to continually re-enact the scene of their last supper together—'in remembrance of me,' as he said. Other incidents in his life are also celebrated, but he especially wanted this one particular incident to be remembered—and not just remembered, but re-enacted. That incident was to give people a reminder of his saving grace, and by its continued re-enactment, the power of that grace would remain alive.

Moreover, by celebrating such incidents and by reflecting on the lives of such great souls—like Christ, Buddha, Ramakrishna, etc.—we begin to internalize their lives. Just as children internalize the lives of Luke Skywalker or Rey, so also by meditating on and celebrating the lives of these great souls, their lives and actions become paradigms for us.

When we identify ourselves with a myth<sup>5</sup> by internalizing it, what we want is for that myth to guide and inform our whole life and being—to be one with our life. To be truly effective, our chosen myth must touch the innermost part of us. It must resonate with the divine within us. Then only can we access through it our inmost Self and attain spiritual strength and bliss from it.

#### **True purpose of a sacred ritual**

In recent years there has been a movement among some Christians called

'What Would Jesus Do?' The idea is to discipline your life in such a way that you respond to serious events in your life by first reflecting on and then trying to emulate what Jesus would do in a similar situation. This is no small thing. It is, in fact, the way to get a sacred myth to work for you. Moreover, this is the true purpose of a sacred ritual.

This is exactly what St. Francis of Assisi did. After his first two followers joined him, Francis decided that the three of them should get the Lord's command as to how they should live their life. With this in mind, they went to a church in Assisi and began to fervently pray, 'Lord God, Father of glory, we ask you in your mercy to reveal to us what we have to do.'<sup>6</sup>

After praying like this for a long time, they went to the priest of that church and asked him to open the Bible anywhere and read whatever words of Jesus from the Gospels he saw. The priest did this three times, and what he found was: 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' (Matthew 19:21) The next reading was: 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' (Matthew 16:24) And finally: 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics.' (Luke 9:3)

Thus was founded the Franciscan monastic system. For the rest of their lives, Francis and his followers followed literally these words of Christ. In fact, St. Francis embodied Christ's teachings so much that he became almost a second Jesus.

About two hundred years after Francis's passing away, Thomas à Kempis, a monk of a different Catholic Order, wrote a treatise

called *The Imitation of Christ*, which continued and elaborated on the ideas of St. Francis—that is, to return to the teachings of Christ as he taught and lived them. Though *The Imitation of Christ* was originally meant for Catholic monks of his day, it still continues to inspire both monastics and lay people all over the world. Swami Vivekananda was very fond of this book. He not only translated part of it into Bengali, but also kept a copy of it with him during his itinerant days.

But Christ's life is a difficult ideal to follow. In order to make sure that this ideal would be followed in its true spirit, St. Francis insisted that the monks of his Order take the three vows of Roman Catholic monasticism—that is, the vows of absolute poverty, absolute chastity, and absolute obedience (ie, humility). He knew that all the checks and balances that are needed to bring the ideal of following Christ to fruition would be taken care of by the faithful observance of these three vows.

In Francis's mind, he was simply doing as Christ commanded: 'Follow me'. But to follow someone means that you constantly think of that person. In fact, you meditate on

that person so much that you become very much like that person. It is said, 'As one thinks, so one becomes.'

St. Francis did exactly this. He loved Christ so much that he emulated him till he became Christlike. Such was his humility, however, that he could not bear to hear anyone comparing him to Jesus. Yet, towards the end of his life he meditated so deeply on Christ and his sufferings, and became so identified with Christ, that the marks of the stigmata—that is, the wounds that Christ received on his hands, feet, and side when he was on the cross—appeared on Francis. Just as Ramakrishna felt the blows when one fisherman was beating another, and the marks of those blows were found on his body, so also the pain and the wounds of the stigmata came on Francis's body.

We must remember, however, that this is an inner journey. The path is within. Though outwardly Francis vowed to live—and did live—just as Christ did, his real transformation was in his inner life. An external life of poverty does not necessarily imitate Christ. It is Christ's spirit that must be imitated. ■

(To be concluded)

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,' by James Thurber; in *An Introduction to Literature: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, ed. by Sylvan Barnet, et. al. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985), pp. 239-244.
  - 2 *The Power of Myth*, by Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 89.
  - 3 Ibid.
  - 4 *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, by Heinrich Zimmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 40.
  - 5 I am using the term 'myth' in the broad sense of any story of a person, event, or deed—whether historical or revealed in a sacred manner—that gives an explanation of and/or meaning to life for a group of people.
  - 6 *Francis of Assisi*, by Gianmaria Polidoro (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 2016), p. 40.
- \* Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana is a nun of the Vedanta Society of Hollywood, currently posted at the Vivekananda Retreat, Ridgely Manor, in New York. She is the author of *Indian Saints and Mystics* published by the Institute.