

Amṛita

The Churning of the Ocean

Though the Vedas themselves are revered to this day, the great Vedic gods which they address are no longer worshiped. Around 500 BC, a new kind of literature began to appear, in which storytellers celebrated the deeds of a quite different set of gods and heroes. These texts are vast epics, the Mahābhārata and the Ramayana, and also collections of myths known as *purāṇa* (Sanskrit for “ancient [tales]”). Due to the proliferation of this particular religious format, this stage of Indian literature is known as the Puranic Era. Unlike the priestly Vedas, these works were an expression of the non-Āryan majority. Thus it is quite probable that these “new” deities had a long, yet undocumented, prior history in the indigenous religious traditions.

One of the pivotal events in Hindu mythology is known as *The Churning of the Ocean* (Skt., *samudra-manthanam*). It is referred to time and again throughout Hindu literature and there are three sources which give the entire myth: the Viṣṇu Purana, the Mahābhārata and the Ramāyana. Though all were composed much later than the Vedas, each of these tells its own version of the origin of *soma*, the Vedic sacrament.*

The versions of the myth vary a little in their details but, briefly, the story is as follows:

In the most ancient times, the gods were engaged
in continual warfare with their eternal adversaries:

* In the late Vedic period, as the original soma plant became increasingly scarce, the Brahmanic commentaries on the Vedas began to offer advice on appropriate substitutes. Thus, as various alternative plants became accepted as soma-amṛita, it is likely that the terms *soma* and *amṛita* eventually became more broadly applied, eventually being extended to include any and all psychoactive potions. Thus, it is by no means certain that the *amṛita* of the *samudra-manthanam* is identical with that of the Vedas.

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the *asuras*, the *daityas* and the *danavas*, and on one occasion the gods had been soundly defeated by the *danavas*.^{*} They were extremely dejected and appealed to the wise god Viṣṇu for his advice. He counseled them to unite with their enemies and make peace by collaborating with the *danavas* on a joint project. The ocean, he pointed out, contained several fabulous treasures which would be revealed if it were churned, a feat which the gods, working alone, could never accomplish.

First they scattered various herbs in the ocean and then, taking Mt. Mandara as their churning-stick, they turned it upside-down and balanced it on the back of a giant turtle which was resting on the seabed (actually this was Viṣṇu in one of his many disguises). As a churning-rope, they used the serpent-king Vāsuki,[†] winding him three and a half times around the mountain.[‡] The gods and

^{*} The *danava* ("descendants of Danu") were a race of anti-gods (Skt., *asura*) mentioned in the R̥g Veda who were roughly equivalent to the titans in classical Greek mythology. Some believe that the *danava* were one of various indigenous races (cf. *daitya*, *nāga*) which opposed the Aryan incursion into India. However, there is a clear correspondence with the Irish "descendants of Danu" (Gaelic, *tuatha de danaan*). In Irish myth, this race were the original indigenes of the island with whom successive invasive races fought, just as the Ārya fought with the *asura*. The name Danu is derived from PIE **danu*, "river" (cf. the rivers Danube, Don, Deen, etc.).

[†] To be precise, Vāsuki was a *nāga*-king. *Nāgas* are snake-spirits who inhabit the subterranean land of Pātāla. They are connected with the water element and control the rain. They also have the power to change their shape; their normal form is that of a gigantic snake though their females (Skt., *nāginī*) often assume the guise of beautiful women.

[‡] Compare the "serpent power" of Hindu *tantra*. Known as "the coiled [lady]" (Skt., *kuṇḍalinī*), this potential source of psychic energy, enlightenment and bliss is said to lie dormant, wound three and a half times around the base of the spine.



Figure 21: The devas and danavas cooperate to churn the ocean of milk. Note that Viṣṇu appears three times: second from the left, sitting (with four arms) on the mountain and (as a turtle) beneath the mountain. 19th century print. [pd]

danavas took opposite ends of the great serpent and hauled him back and forth, causing the mountain to spin this way and that on its turtle-pivot. They kept up this to-and-fro motion for over a thousand years and, just as butter emerges from milk, many wonderful treasures floated to the surface of the ocean.

Though there were several other wonders, the greatest of all was *amṛita*. All three versions of the story tell of a noxious by-product, a virulent poison called *kalakhuta* (“mass of blackness”), *hālāhala* or simply *viśa* (“poison”).* In some accounts, this is simply the final product to emerge from the ocean. Others say that Vasuki, unaccustomed to being used

* It is possible that both *kalakhuta* and *hālāhala* derive from the Sanskrit *ulukhala*, “mortar” though the terms also suggest *hala*, “plough” and *kūṭa*, “ploughshare”.

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as the rope in a cosmic tug-of-war, became nauseous and vomited up the *kalakhuta*. This latter explanation presumes that *nāgā*-vomit, like snake venom, is virulently toxic. Other sources state that the poison is a vegetable toxin, the antidote to which is snake venom.⁷⁶

Whatever the origin of the *kalakhuta/hālāhala poison*, Śiva saved the world from its perils by drinking it himself. Due to the extreme virulence of the *toxin*, even Śiva dare not swallow it all the way. Instead, by yogic control and unwavering attention he holds the poison safely in his throat. The constant presence of this poison has caused his throat to change color and this, we are told, explains Śiva's blue throat. But the story continues...

The original agreement had been that the *asuras*, *daityas* and *danavas* would share the *amṛita* with the gods but at the last moment the gods changed their minds. Viṣṇu took the form of a beautiful woman known as “the enchantress” (Skt., *mohinī*) and distracted the *asuras* while the gods took all the *amṛita*.

One of the *asuras*, Rāhu by name, had managed to get in line with the gods as the *amṛita* was being doled out and drank his share before being discovered. As soon as Rāhu was found out, Viṣṇu hurled his magic discus (Skt., *cakra*) and decapitated him. But Rāhu had already drunk *amṛita*, the drink which confers immortality, so both his head and body continue to live. It is Rāhu's head which causes eclipses as he tries to eat the sun and moon.

In astronomical terms, Rāhu represents the “ascending node” of the moon. That is, he is one of two points at which the orbit of the moon crosses the plane of the ecliptic, the other being the moon's “descending node”. Known in Sanskrit as Ketu, this is said to be Rāhu's body. In western astrology, these are known as *caput draconis* and *cauda draconis* (“dragon's head” and “dragon's tail” respectively).

Eclipses happen only when the moon is at one of these two nodes. When a new moon passes through a lunar node it occludes the sun, causing a solar eclipse; a full moon at a node gives a lunar eclipse.

From our vantage point in the 21st century, few of us believe in the churning of the ocean as an historical event nor do we consider Śiva to have a physical body with an actual throat. There must have been a time, however, when the story of how a god acquired a blue throat was a meaningful detail or it would not appear in so many variant versions of the myth.*

The Churning of the Ocean myth presents us with a tale resembling one of Kipling's *Just So Stories*. Such fables which offer fanciful accounts of, for instance, why the sea is salty, how the elephant got its long trunk or the robin its red breast, are known to folklorists as "pourquoi tales" (from French *pourquoi*, "why"). In its tone, the story of *How Śiva Got His Blue Throat* is a "pourquoi tale". It is as if Śiva's blue throat were a natural, though intriguing, phenomenon (like the briny sea, elephant's trunk or robin's breast) which required explanation. After all, the White Yajur Veda tells us that the god Rudra (*i.e.* Śiva) reveals himself to cowherds who recognize him by his blue throat.

In order to understand this myth we have to discard our customary understanding of a "god". Our first clue to Śiva's secret identity lies in this term "blue throat" – in Sanskrit, *nīlakāṅṭha*.

Throat and stem

The Sanskrit word *kāṅṭha* means a narrow place or constriction. It does, certainly, mean "throat" or "neck," but it may also be used figuratively for a narrow part of any object – just as we refer to the "neck" of a bottle. In the context of a plant, the *kāṅṭha* would, therefore, be its stem.

* It must be admitted, however, that the Bhagavan Purana omits this episode. It briefly mentions that a poison was created but says that the *nāgās* took it.



Figure 22: The god Śiva as Ekapada, his one-legged aspect. Stone carving, India [wc].

A similar-sounding term, *kāṇḍa*, means “stem; stalk; branch”⁷⁷ and puns are not exactly unknown in Sanskrit literature. The connection between necks and stems was a familiar one in Indian culture and the poetic trope of comparing a beautiful neck to a lotus-stalk was such a cliché that it became a word, *kaṇṭhanāla* (“neck-stalk”).⁷⁸ Given the tantric tendency to obfuscate and the frequent use of wordplay in Sanskrit literature, the name Nīlakaṇṭha may also be understood as *nīla-kāṇḍa* (“blue stem”). This might be overlooked as a mere linguistic coincidence with no special significance were it not for the context. Śiva acquired the name *Nīlakaṇṭha* while creating *amṛita*, the divine drug. This suggests a specific drug found in some mushroom species. That drug is psilocin.

Psilocin (4,hydroxy-n,n,dimethyl-tryptamine) is a fragile compound which easily degrades into its deep blue, inactive oxide (see Plate 2). A number of psilocin-rich mushroom species are native to India, the commonest of these being *Psilocybe cubensis*. Others species include *Panaeolus camboginiensis*,⁷⁹ *Panaeolus campanulatus* (syn. *Pan. papilionaceus*), and *Copelandia cyanescens*.⁸⁰

Unless extreme care is taken when picking these mushrooms, some of the delicate stem tissue stem is sure to become bruised. This damage initiates the enzymatic oxidation of psilocin, causing the mushroom to turn dark blue at the site where it was touched. Typically, the mushroom is picked with thumb and fore-finger so that, after 20 minutes or so, a characteristic blue mark appears on the base of the stem. (And also on the tips of your thumb and fore-finger if you pick enough.)

In addition to having a blue throat, Śiva is sometimes said to have one leg. In fact, he came to be identified with the Vedic

term *aja ekapad* (“not-born one-foot”) which we considered earlier. Known as Aja Ekapada, Ajaikapada or simply Ekapada (“one-foot”), this form of Śiva is worshipped mostly in southern India but also in Rajasthan and Nepal.⁸¹ It has been pointed out by Wasson that one-legged entities may often be stand-ins for a “one-legged” mushroom and serve as indicators of psychoactive mushroom traditions.⁸² Add to this the fact that, historically, Śiva was also known as Soma and an interesting picture emerges.

I put it to you, dear reader, that at the most fundamental level, the real reason Śiva has one leg and is called blue-throat lies not in any mythological scenario but in mycology and a biochemical reaction. Simply put, the Hindu god Śiva is an apotheosis of a blue-staining (*i.e.*, psilocin-rich) psychedelic mushroom, probably *Ps. cubensis*. I admit that, on the face of it, this may seem an outrageous assertion, but consider Śiva’s known characteristics:⁸³

- By tradition, Śiva is associated with drugs in various ways: he is called “a medicine for kine and horses, a medicine for men, a [source of] ease for rams and ewes”.*
- As Rudra, he is “the first divine physician”.
- Various psychoactive drugs, including datura (*Datura metel*; Skt., *dhatura*), *gañja* (“marijuana”, *Cannabis indica*) and *bhang*,[†] are considered sacred to Śiva.
- Śiva is said to have consumed huge quantities of cannabis, datura and *Nux vomica* (the major plant source of strychnine, a powerful stimulant) before engaging in battle.⁸⁴
- He is the “Lord of Herbs” (Skt., *auśadhīśvara*).
- Offerings of datura flowers and *bhang* are made to

* This author has observed “rams and ewes” seek out and eat *Ps. semilanceata* on the grassy hillsides of Wales.

† A spiced drink made with *gañja*.

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Śiva.

- Śiva acquired a blue throat by swallowing the poisonous by-product of *soma*, the drug of the gods.
- Śiva is frequently depicted poised on one leg in the *tāṇḍava* dance and even has a one-legged form.
- Śiva's *vahana* ("vehicle") and companion is a bull. Named Nandi ("joyous"), this bull is known for his "wide hump" and "single shining horn."⁸⁵
- Śiva carries the "cup of *soma*" (*i.e.* the crescent moon) on the crown of his head.
- Soma was once a common alternative name for Śiva.
- The nine main lineages of Śaiva tantra each revere a different form of Śiva. One of these forms is known as Amṛiteśvara (Lord of Amṛita).⁸⁶
- The literature and oral teachings of the Śaiva sect was known as *somasiddhanta*, literally "the science of *soma*."
- Some Śiva temples are not only mushroom-shaped but are even called "mushroom-like" (Skt., *chattraka*).

Considered individually, these divine attributes may seem inexplicable, even bizarre, but once they all are seen to allude to the same referent they are readily understood. It is *Psilocybe cubensis* which is simultaneously the powerful **drug** and the perfect **doctor**. *Psilocybe* is the divine fungus-vehicle with a "wide hump" and a "single shining horn. In the absence of any good reason for the singular horn, I assume that this is a coded reference to the (wide, humped) cap and the (single, shining) stem of the *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom.*

Though details vary, in every version of the myth Śiva acquires his blue throat as a consequence of the production of *soma-amṛita* the sacred inebriant. In this context, the

* Note the similarity to Gaṇeśa's single tusk.

identification of a god with a psychedelic mushroom should not be out of the question. Indeed, the parallels between Śiva and this blue-staining mushroom which grows on cow dung may not only explain Śiva's blue throat but may go a very long way to elucidating many other characteristics of this god, who either has a single leg or who “dances” **on one leg**, and has a **throat** (stem) that turns **blue** when picked.

The popularity of the Śiva cults may be inferred by their influence on Buddhism. In its later phases, Buddhism not only borrowed many deities from Hinduism, but it imported Śiva several times over, each time with a different name.

Some Buddhist versions of Śiva:	
Bhairava	Terrifier
Iśa or Iśāna	Lord
Mahākala	Great Black One / Great Time
Maheśvara	Great Ruler
Nandi[ke]śvara	Ruler of Nandi[ka]
Nīladaṇḍa	Blue Staff
Nīlakāṇṭha	Blue Throat
Nīlāmbhara	Blue-Robed
Vajrabhairava	Vajra-(i.e. ‘Buddhist’) Terrifier

Some of these (e.g. Mahākala, Vajrabhairava) developed distinct cults but by far the most popular of all the Buddhist versions of Śiva was Avalokiteśvara.

Avalokiteśvara

Indian Buddhists referred to local deities by the term *lokeśvara*, literally “place lord”. The Sanskrit word *loka* (“place”) shares a common origin with Latin *locus* and English *location*. One particular *lokeśvara*, presumably Śiva, became regarded by Buddhists as the *bodhisattva* Nīlakāṇṭha-Lokeśvara. Hindu texts often refer to Śiva, in his

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mild form, as *lokanatha* “lord of the world” or simply as *iśvara*, “lord.” Familiarity with these two terms may have caused Buddhists to misinterpret the name of the *bodhisattva* Avalokita-śvara (*i.e.* “contemplation of sound”) as Avalokiteśvara (“lord [who] looks down [upon] the world”). Eventually, Avalokiteśvara became so popular that every *lokeśvara* (even *Nīlakāṅṭha*) came to be regarded as one of his many aspects.⁸⁷



Figure 23: *Nīlakāṅṭha* (“blue throat”) *Avalokiteśvara*, a Buddhist version of Śiva, holds aloft a skull-cup of amṛita. Nepali drawing. [lc]

Avalokiteśvara is perhaps the best known of all Mahayāna *bodhisattvas* and his cult is to be found throughout the Northern Buddhist lands. He is even revered in Theravada Buddhist countries, being called *Natha* in Śri Lanka and *Lokeśvara* in Thailand and Cambodia.⁸⁸ In Tibet he is known as *Chenrezi* and is the patron deity of the Land of Snows.* On migrating to China he became the androgynous deity *Kuan [Hsi] Yin* and was primarily thought of as female when imported into Korea, Vietnam and Japan. All of these

* *Chenrezi* (Tib., ལྷན་རེས་གཟིགས).

variant forms, whether Chenrezi, Kuan Yin or Kannon, carry a flask of *amṛita*.

These very Buddhist deities betray their Hindu origin in several iconographic details. For instance, the Tibetan Chenrezi is described as having a blue throat. According to the Buddhist commentary, this resulted from his swallowing poison, just like Śiva. In the Buddhist version though, he swallows the standard Buddhist trio of psychological “poisons”: attachment, aversion and apathy. Are we to understand, then, that abstract nouns may cause one’s throat to turn blue? Personally, I find this a little hard to swallow.

Encountered *in vacuo*, devoid of mythical context, this “explanation” of Avalokiteśvara’s blue throat would be more baffling than the blue throat itself. The true reason is much simpler: Avalokiteśvara is Śiva, blue throat and all. As if to underline the importance of this anatomical anomaly, several versions of Avalokiteśvara are explicitly named Blue-throat (e.g., Skt., *nīlakāṇṭha-lokeśvara*; Chinese, *Ch’ing-hsiang Tzu-tsai Kuan-shih-yin*; Jap., *Shōkyō Kannon*).⁸⁹

Of course, to make any sense of this one must be familiar with the Hindu legend of how Śiva got his blue throat and also to recognize Avalokiteśvara as a form of Rudra/Śiva in Buddhist guise. Apart from his blue throat, Avalokiteśvara has several other attributes which betray his Hindu antecedents.

One of his best-known aspects is Eleven-headed (Skt., *ekadaśa-mukha*) Avalokiteśvara, the patron deity of Tibet. The number eleven has no especial meaning within Buddhism but in the Vedas it was, for reasons now obscure, closely associated with Rudra. There were said to be “eleven Rudras” among the thirty-three gods on the Hindu Olympus, Mt. Meru. But what was meant by “the eleven Rudras” is



Figure 24:
Avalokiteśvara's
symbolic form – a vase
of amṛita. Japanese
drawing. [le]



*Figure 25: Eleven-headed, eight-armed Avalokiteśvara.
From a Tibetan woodblock print. [mc]*

unclear.

Vedic myth tells us that the god Prajapati (later called Brahma) came across his daughter in the form of a doe. Struck by her beauty, he turned into a male deer in order to ravish her. The other gods, aghast at the prospect of incest, created an archer (Skt., *śarva*) to slay Prajapati before he could fulfill his desire. This archer was, of course, Rudra (a.k.a. Śiva) who slew the Prajapati-buck and took his skin as a shawl. Rudra was also said to be the world's first physician and carried a flask of medicine. The most significant attributes of Rudra, therefore, are his bow and



Figure 26: Avalokiteśvara not only shares Rudra's blue throat but also carries several of his attributes: the antelope-hide shawl, bow and arrow, and the flask of medicine. Enhanced detail of previous figure.

arrow, his flask of medicine and his deer-skin shawl. All of these, as well as the blue throat, are present in the iconography of Avalokiteśvara.

Avalokiteśvara has been a very popular deity in Mahāyāna and, over the centuries, he has been imagined in many different ways. The simplest of these has a two-armed, one-faced Avalokiteśvara making the blessing gesture (Skt., *varada-mudra*) with his right hand and holding a lotus in his left. The lotus, incidentally, is sometimes said to be red, sometimes blue, reminiscent of the red and blue Rudras mentioned in the White Yajur Veda.

The out-stretched right hand of Padmapāṇi (“lotus-in-hand”) Avalokiteśvara makes the symbolic gesture of “giving” (Skt., *dana-mudrā*). Only when we consult the actual *sādhanas* of Padmapāṇi do we discover that this is no empty gesture; he is actually giving something. Although



Figure 27: Avalokiteśvara's right hand drips amṛita. Tibetan print. [lc]

no indication of this ever appears in the iconography, these liturgies clearly state that the hand “drips *amṛita*.”⁹⁰

Lokesh Chandra describes eighty-nine major versions of Avalokiteśvara and a few dozen other variants who go by slightly different names. Twenty-two of this eighty-nine are versions of “Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara” (Skt., *sahasrabhuja-avalokiteśvara*). One has only to glance at an image of any thousand-armed deity to notice the resemblance to the underside of a mushroom cap.

It would, of course, be absurd to build a hypothesis based on this resemblance alone but we have already seen that the blue-throated god Śiva is a deified form of the *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom. In light of which, the comments of Dr. Chandra are very relevant:

Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara is a metamorphosis of Maheśvara [*i.e.* Śiva]. His hymn is **Nīlakāṇṭhaka**... [The name] Sahasrabāhu (“thousand-armed”) occurs in *Rig Veda* 8.45.265 and is a name of Śiva in the *Mahābhārata*.

Dict. Buddhist Iconography, vol. 10 ⁹¹



Figure 28: Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara. A nāga at his feet holds a flask of elixir in his two main hands, with a book, vajra, skull-cup of amrita and a lotus in his other hands. Nepali drawing, 18th century. [lc]

There are, of course, entirely Buddhist explanations for Avalokiteśvara's eleven heads but it is surely no coincidence that the number eleven was sacred to Rudra. As for the thousand arms, the number one thousand also occurs in the mythology of Rudra, with his thousand eyes and thousand bows and arrows. Indra, the *soma*-lord, king of the Vedic gods also had one thousand eyes and the *vajra*, his thunderbolt-weapon, was said to have a thousand prongs:

When the artful Tvaṣṭri had turned [upon his lathe]
the well-made, golden thunderbolt with its
thousand spikes, Indra took it to do heroic deeds.

Rig Veda, 1.85.9 ⁹²