



July 2010 Contemplation Theme

Being Human

– Swami Nirmalananda

Echoing through the ages, the question continues to arise: what is a human being? Considered by the ancient Greeks and by many philosophers and priests since, the question is now being explored in modern media through comparison with vampires, werewolves, and zombies. While movies and TV shows are pursuing a lucrative theme, they are also offering a modern day version of Krishna's discourse in Chapter 16 of the Bhagavadgita, which is subtitled The Divine and Demoniactal. Krishna expounds on your innate divinity and how to fulfill the purpose of your life for fifteen chapters, and then clarifies that the human being is a mix of divine and demoniactal qualities. You have to decide which qualities you will express in your life.

Yoga's sages described that every species has a unique quality. They said that the bee has the most sophisticated sense of smell, with modern day scientists now agreeing. The sages described the deer as specializing in sound and being very responsive to music, but scientist haven't investigated this yet. The elephant has the most sensitive sense of touch, which is why they throw dirt on their backs as a sunscreen. If you have seen a baby elephant being massaged and cradled by its mothers and aunts, you understand how powerful their sense of touch is. In my early years of study with my Guru, Vijayananda, the Ashram elephant, visited the courtyard every day. Baba fed him *chapattis* (wheat tortillas), sugar cane and chocolates, ending the visit with an oil massage. One of the attendants would lean a ladder against his side, climb up and spread essential oils all over his back, taking the time to rub the oils in. It was amazing to watch Vijayananda's eyes; clearly he was in bliss.

What is the unique characteristic of the human being? As a human being, you have an innate capacity to be aware that is shared by no other creature. You are not merely aware, you are aware that you are aware. You know that you know; you see that you see; you think that you think. While your mind is very powerful, you are more than your mind – and you know it. You are awareness itself; your own Self is Consciousness-Itself.

Yet you have an ability to lose it. You can lose track of this great capacity in an eye blink. You get lost in things, in events, in situations, and in other people. When you get lost in anything, it is your Self that you are losing. As a human, you have both divine and demoniactal qualities, so you must choose what you are doing with them.

To understand the choices before you, you must first understand what the divine and the demoniactal are. Yoga's cosmology describes multiple planes of existence, including the three *worlds*: this physical realm, the celestial sphere and the nether world. The celestial realm abounds with *devas* and *devis* (divine beings, male and female), plus *apsaras*, *gandharvas*, angels, cherubim, seraphim and more. Their bodies are made of light and they sip *amrit*, the nectar of immortality.

The nether realm is populated with demons – but they are not evil beings. They are beautiful beings, with powerful bodies and huge sensual appetites. They base their life and being on their instinctual drives. Their primary motivations are power and pleasure, and anything that helps them satisfy these impulses is pursued with a single-minded focus, regardless of how it affects others. Demons are selfish, self-centered, and unrestrained in their appetites, but they are not evil. This is an important distinction.

Yoga's cosmology says that evil does not exist. There is no devil; there is no evil force tempting you; you have no evil hidden within you. Instead, this is a cause-and-effect universe. You choose to shine with the light of your own divinity, or you hide it with the shadows you create in your mind. You must choose where to live – in the light or the shadows. The most powerful tool you have is your power of choice.

Many of yoga's practices address this predicament directly. For example, when you choose to practice *ahimsa*, non-harming, you choose to resist the inner impulse to cause pain to others. The impulse arises in every human; it is one of the demoniactal qualities that Krishna warns about. To understand it more clearly, don't call it "demoniactal," but label it with a simpler name, "instinctual." Your instincts tell you to lash out, to get back, or to get even or to get ahead. You must not follow your instincts.

Instead, look to a higher quality that is already there within you, a divine quality. Find the empathy, love or compassion that makes you able to give another person some breathing space. Or you can look for an intelligent way to handle

yourself in a difficult situation. Most importantly, you can find a way to remain peaceful inside, which makes you able to make better choices and follow through on them.

Animals are ruled by their instincts. As a human, your body has animalistic instincts as part of your basic equipment. These instincts can lead you to eat too much, sleep too much, measure your worth by what you own, and seek love through sexuality. This lifestyle will never be fulfilling because it is impossible to fulfill all of your instinctual cravings. There's a demon inside who always wants more. You have to choose: are you going to experience and express your divine qualities or will your instincts lead the way?

While philosophers ask, "What is the human being?" yogis ask a different question: How do I become fully human? The answer is that you must utilize the human specialty fully: cultivate your awareness. As you explore your ability to be aware, you discover that awareness is more powerful than instinct. It's quite easy to do. Here's how: When instinct wants to take over, *expand your awareness*. Instinct makes you Velcro your awareness to a single thing. All you have to do is expand your awareness.

As an example, let's consider a plate of cupcakes, the newest culinary trend. When you focus on the specific cupcake you want, Velcro takes over your mind. But if you expand your visual focus, like widening a camera lens, you see the whole plate. Now you will want to offer your compliments to the baker.

Continue expanding your awareness. Breathe and expand your gaze wider, and you will see the other people enjoying the yummys, Now your heart opens a little more, not only to the baker but to all those who are enjoying her wares.

Continue breathing and expand to see the room you are all in, with your host (yourself, a neighbor, the bakery or the yoga studio) giving generously of their facility and time. You can keep expanding your awareness to include the city, state, region and whole country you are in. You can include all the family members of the people present, and the generations that preceded and will follow them.

Now your instincts no longer pull you to the cupcake. You may still choose to take one, if you like. Yet your experience is now completely different because you are more aware. The cupcake will even taste better, but that is not the point.

As you become more aware, you become more fully human. As you become more fully human, you become more fully divine. Your own divine essence shines through you because it is you. While the divine is present in everything that exists, the human being has the capacity to experience it most fully. *You* are the human who can experience and express the divine fully. That's what this human life is for.

Here are some of your divine qualities from Krishna's list. There are probably no surprises here. You like yourself better when you live this way.

Steadfastness	absence of anger, hatred and pride
vigor, fortitude	freedom from need, greed and fear
generous nature	peacefulness, gentleness, compassion
straightforward, speaking only truth	

You must intentionally cultivate your divine qualities. Instincts are seductive, but the light of your divinity is even more powerful, if you choose to follow it. The key is choice. In every moment, you have the ability to choose what kind of human you are being.

With great love & blessings,

Swami Nirmalananda

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