

# LIVING MYTH PODCAST

## *Episode 373 – Lies that Poison, Truths that Heal*

Plato, in the Republic, explores Socrates' ideas of the difference between two types of lies. The first type of untruth is typically translated as being the noble lie. And this can be best understood to include stories that are not literal or historical, yet are in fact, foundational because they reveal and establish important truths. A myth for instance, can be called a lie in that it is not a literal, factual documentation of events. But it also can be termed a series of lies that reveal the truth and that can communicate wisdom. Because we know that myths are not claiming to be literally true, we are not harmed by these truthful lies.

For many ancient people, mythic events were both timeless and a part of the immediate present experience. The result was a living relationship between myth and reality, between poetry and truth, as myths were understood to enhance the reality of the present moment. Socrates contrasted this noble lie with what he termed the lie of the soul. This other kind of untruth is what we mean when we speak of injurious, damaging lies. The lie of the soul is an untruth that is taken into a person's being, but not recognized as a lie, and therefore becomes treated as if it was the truth. This is the most dangerous kind of lie, because it will have a destructive effect on a person's soul and very core.

In other words, once such a lie had been taken to the core of a person's life, they can no longer recognize it as being false and untrue. The most dangerous kind of deception is the kind that a person believes is above deception. So, a person who has accepted a lie of the soul will not seek healing or greater understanding, if they cannot become aware that they are sick and infected with a kind of poison. The word poison can mean a deadly substance, it can also mean something that is psychologically and spiritually corrupting.

I've been thinking about and talking about this ancient distinction between the noble lie which secretly enhances life and the lie of the soul, which is detrimental to the life of both individuals and collective society, because of the way that big lies, false beliefs, and rampant disinformation have increasingly penetrated all levels of modern life. The rise of political strongmen in many parts of the world exemplifies and is typically based upon the lies of the soul, and the result inevitably becomes a wider and wider division amongst people. Because just as the lie of the soul separates a person from any kind of inner truth, it also serves to separate a society from the truth that it needs and the truth upon which it may have been founded. For those who have accepted the lie to the point where they no longer understand that the untruth is living in them, it becomes easy and eventually necessary to vote against their own self-interest.

Unfortunately, many modern people have become infected with the lies of the soul, which then become like a collective poison that can corrupt institutions, as well as people in positions of power and authority. In the same way that a poison that enters the body is likely to keep spreading until the right

medicine is found, the poison of untruths that have entered the collective body of society will continue to spread until the right medicine at the right dosage can be found to cure that ill.

Sticking with Socrates distinction between the two kinds of lies, the lie of the soul can be seen to be so deeply dangerous because it mistakes non-reality for reality, while the noble lie can be life-giving because it is understood not to be the truth itself, but to be a glimpse of the truth. There's an old idea that states that at certain critical times, fact and myth come together. And it may be that we are living in that kind of critical time where mythic imagination may be the only way to see past and see through the big lies and untruths that otherwise might simply keep spreading.

One of the greatest myths of all times tells how extreme troubles and the spread of lies of the soul once threw everything out of balance and released a great poison that threatened the entire cosmos. Churning the Milk Ocean is an ancient tale from India about the struggle between the forces of dark and light occurring at a cosmic level. It involves a pantheon of ancient gods and a horde of demons, as all levels of life become caught in a struggle to find and sustain the balance of creation.

What most people in the west call the Milky Way galaxy was known in ancient India as the Sea of Milk, or the Great Milk Ocean. Of course, galaxy itself is a milk word, suggesting a sense of cosmic lactation, in which the earth continues to be nourished by the stars. The age-old sense of a living cosmos in which we are connected to and even nourished by the stars can be reassuring when everything on Earth seems increasingly chaotic, and deeply uncertain. In other words, there's a kind of medicine in those old mythic ideas.

In one sense, this ancient story acts as a warning tale about the dangers that can upset the entire world, and on another level, it offers ways of understanding times like these when the troubles have become both worldwide and existential, when the balance on earth has slipped towards chaos and disorder. And at yet another level, the story of the milk ocean becomes a teaching tale intended to awaken and embolden each of us at the level of our own souls. It used to be better known that the human soul is secretly linked to the Soul of the World, and that a change in the soul can also be a change in the world.

As with most great stories, as well as any genuine disaster, there was more than one version of how the trouble on Earth began and what brought things to a cosmic tipping point at the edge of the abyss. Some say that churning the ocean of existence became necessary because the passage of time had weakened the energy of creation. The gods had lost some of their powers and their creative vitality and this debilitation of the deities, eventually threw the world out of balance. At the same time, the demons of the world became emboldened, believing that it was their time to dominate life on Earth.

As the world began to drain of beauty and wisdom, people became more greedy and more self-involved than usual. At the same time, people's fears and anxieties intensified, and many of them became more susceptible to the big lies that only then led to a greater tyranny and fostered increasing levels of resentment and hatefulness amongst people. As intolerance and poisonous vitriol spread, people turned against each other and against their own self-interest, while human institutions began to slip

towards the brink of disaster. At length, it seemed that the demons would defeat the deities and come to rule the world and likely destroy it in the process.

Once the balance of life was lost, and the gods had faltered, the only way they could regain the creative energy and momentum of creation was to find the divine elixir of life that had somehow slipped into the ocean and disappeared. Because this elixir or panacea was the only antidote to all the poison spreading in the world, it became clear that something had to happen that could bring the elixir back from the depths of the eternal ocean. The disturbance in the world had grown so great that Brahma, the God who was in charge of existence, knew that something had to happen quickly. So he decided to go to Vishnu, the deity who originally dreamed up the world, for some help.

Vishnu, who often slept on the surface of the great ocean, had a sudden vision that revealed that the only way to bring the elixir up from the depths of the unknown was to churn the ocean itself. The method of churning would be a kind of tug of war between the gods and the demons who were also known as the Devas and the Asuras. Paradoxical as it may seem, it turned out that the gods and the demons both wanted the same thing. That is to say, they both desired to have the elixir of immortality, and therefore, they both agreed to the plan of a cosmic tug of war.

So surprising as it may seem, when everything becomes threatened, the two sides so used to opposing each other must temporarily cooperate. The ancient tale draws a distinction between the two possible reasons for desiring the elixir that heals all things, and gives one a sense of immortality. One is the desire to aid creation to continue, and to help bring the world back into balance. And the other reason to seek a sense of immortality is to fill an inner emptiness, a bottomless feeling that can never truly be satisfied. Of course, the difference between the gods and the demons was the difference between those two desires.

It was the gods who approached the Asuras, or the demons, and proposed the plan that they work together. And eventually, a truce was arranged and a deal was made in which the demons agreed to do their part in churning the ocean if they received half of the life fulfilling eternal elixir once it rose to the top. Soon enough, the gods and the demons were churning the ocean of milk. And to the surprise of everyone, the first thing to rise to the surface of the sea was a layer of bitter poison that apparently had laid over the elixir of life and over all the lost gifts that had fallen into the depths of the unseen. It was that toxic poison that had already been seeping into life, and increasing the oppositions and brutality, the distortions and delusions that threatened to destroy the entire world. And now, having been brought to the surface, the poison began to spread more rapidly, and soon animal and plant species began to wither and disappear, and people became more obsessed with greed, and more full of resentment and hatred.

Meanwhile, the Devas and the Asuras, the gods and the demons, both fled because of the poison. And Brahma hastened to find Vishnu, who said what they really needed to do was find Shiva, the god of both creation and destruction. Eventually, they found Shiva in a state of deep meditation, unaware of all the turmoil permeating the world. Once alerted to the great danger, Shiva went directly to the source of the poison and began to drink it up. The ancient stories say that all of creation would have been destroyed had Shiva not swallowed the poison. At the same time, the poison was so powerful that it

endangered Shiva himself, and in fear that the poison might harm the vital organs of her beloved, Parvati, the goddess of love and devotion and Shiva's consort, clasped her hands around his throat to keep him from swallowing all the toxicity of the world.

The poison then became stuck in the throat of Shiva, turning his throat blue black and causing him to be known ever after as the blue necked God. Once the great venom that had been plaguing the world had been dealt with, the gods and demons went back to churning the ocean of life, each desiring to win the greatest share of the sacred elixir. In the course of the next phase of the cosmic tug of war, all kinds of wondrous things that had been lost over time began to rise from the depths of the great ocean. The number of things that had been lost, but now we're rising to the surface is too long to recount. But some things are too important to leave out. The cow known as the mother of plenty and abundance came back and people began to realize the beauty and the wonder of the earth. And they began to feel gratitude for the gift of life again. The Goddess Lakshmi, the consort and spiritual partner of Vishnu, who had disappeared from the earth came back, bringing people an awareness of beauty and truth and of grace, which are the real elements of wealth in this world. Wisdom returned and with it came the sense that real knowledge comes not from any one way of seeing the complex issues of life, but from having a knowledge of both the light and the dark. And eventually, Amrit, the elixir that symbolizes inner peace and creative prosperity, and a sense of the presence of the divine in life also came back. And with the return of the elixir, the sense of inner truth began to come back to the minds and the hearts of people.

Amongst all of the wondrous things that had been lost, there was the essential connection to the divine that had been lost and forgotten. And it can be said that it was that loss of connection to the divine that was making everyone sick, and causing the world itself to become diminished. This elaborate and indelible tale of which I have only told parts depicts how true knowledge and wisdom comes from deep universal roots that must at times be touched, and be brought up from the depths of the unconscious to the surface of conscious life. The story also shows that there are times when the missing elixir and the essence of the feminine can only be found through a great churning of the world.

Currently, we are living through our own increasingly harrowing version of the loss of essential truths and the rise of untruths and the lies that diminish life and threaten the Soul of the World. Anyone anywhere on Earth can feel the tension of opposites and the polarization of things, as we all are caught in a cosmic tug of war that keeps dividing people and threatens to pull everything apart. One of the functions of myths is to show that this has happened before and further reveal that the point of polarization and division amongst things is not simply to tear everything apart and have it all fall into disaster. But rather, the increased tension of the opposites at times becomes necessary to regenerate the energy of life and bring back into consciousness all the things of beauty and meaning and healing that have been lost.

As Socrates implied, the spread of untruths can become like a poison that blinds people, but also adds to the darkness and chaos that can threaten to consume the Earth. The name given to the poison in the story of the milk ocean translates into English as dark mass or time puzzle, as if to say that the churning of the world produces both dark energies and also a puzzle that must be solved. The venom

that seeped into all layers of life was the primordial opposite of the Divine elixir that had disappeared from awareness and consciousness.

Part of the teaching of the story involves the recognition that like night and day, or end and beginning, there is an interplay between the poison that can destroy, and the elixir that sustains life on Earth. At critical times in our personal lives, in our collective lives, and in the life of the Earth, how we each handle the poison and the elixir affects the balance of life and the Soul of the World. And on one level, we are each but a speck in the eternal ocean, and on another level, because we each have a soul, we also have a way of affecting the Soul of the World. In that sense, we each may carry some of the poison that troubles our own lives. But as the story shows, at a deeper level, we each have access to an inner antidote that can cancel the poison and release an elixir.

The shared threat to humanity and to the earth at this time, may require that we each find meaningful practices and ways to be creative in order to help convert the poisons into the elixir. It might be that the Shiva inside each person must be willing to drink a little bit of the poison or acknowledge that they carry a little bit of the poison and become more conscious of that in order to then become more aware of how we each are capable of contributing to our own healing but also contributing to the rebalancing of the world.

As this and many other ancient stories show we are all connected, we are interconnected, we are all affected by the flood of changes, all caught in the churning of the world. Ultimately, what stands against the storms of extremism, the spread of untruths, and the threat of nihilism is the awakened individual. Unless we find the inner truths of our own lives, and the underlying sense of unity that is secretly present in each soul, we inadvertently add to the growing darkness, divisions and confusion that already threaten the world.

The uniqueness of each individual life is the treasure hard to find. It's the secret of the elixir in the individual. It is the eternal thread that secretly winds through all living things. The awakening, the healing and the blossoming of our own souls becomes the way we can best contribute to the healing and the renewal that is secretly trying to happen even, and especially, when the world around us and the ocean of existence is churning again.