

The Golden Apples of Immortality

I have recently discovered a fascinating connection between ancient Indian and Greek myths, revealing a similar reverence for psychedelic substances in both cultures. Apparently our human heritage is far more profoundly influenced by the insights gained from taking enlightening drugs than we have been led to believe by the official historians. Consider this:

The Greek hero Herakles, who we know better by his Roman name Hercules, performed twelve astounding tasks in a symbolic kind of discipleship to a guru known as King Eusestheus. Their meaning has been largely forgotten and trivialized, but there is a world of meaning in them. For the eleventh of his so-called Labors, Hercules was asked to bring back three Golden Apples from the Garden of the Hesperides, a paradise whose streams flow with ambrosia, the nectar of the gods, said to confer immortality. The Apples are a glowing “food of the gods” with some very un-applelike qualities. Adding to their mystique, they grew on a tree that was a gift of Gaia, the Earth goddess, to Zeus and Hera—the primal man and woman—on their wedding day. To protect the Apples from surreptitious truth-seekers eager to taste their magical elixir, Hera brought in a monstrous serpent, a hundred-headed dragon, and set it on guard.

It’s hard to miss the similarity with an even better-known paradise myth, in which the original man and woman were named Adam and Eve instead of Zeus and Hera. They appear to be two versions of the same tale, coming down to us from the drowned depths of time, back when communion with the “gods” (whatever that may mean) via psychedelics was a normal and essential part of becoming a properly prepared member of the community.

The Garden of the Hesperides duplicates the Eden myth in that in addition to being paradisiacal, both contain covetable Apples guarded by serpents. I contend that these mysterious fruits were most definitely psychedelic substances, and that the ancient storytellers were advocating for their educational use in a spiritual

setting. Where the pervasive Puritanism of the present day recoils in horror at the thought, those of us who have defied its prohibitions have been granted a glimpse of the “abode of the gods” by its divine Apples, and most of us are elated to have had the privilege. The story of Hercules’ eleventh Labor, touching on his entry into a virginal paradise, is intriguing from start to finish. Let’s take a closer look.

On his way to the Garden to retrieve the immortality-bestowing Apples, Hercules did a very interesting thing. Prometheus, a Titan who symbolizes the urge to know and progress, had been cursed by Zeus to be chained to a rock and have his liver eternally gnawed by an eagle. His crime was stealing the divine fire and bringing it down to earth for the benefit of humanity. Hercules went out of his way to free Prometheus, by breaking his chains.

Mundane thinkers assume that Prometheus just brought back ordinary fire for heating and cooking, but it seems clear enough that that would hardly constitute a serious transgression of divine decree, punishable by eternal torment. It was more likely to have been something quite special, perhaps a substance that would confer immortality, a thing the gods were very jealous about keeping to themselves, as many myths indicate.

Immortality is an interesting concept. The common assumption is that it means living forever, but that is once again a materialist viewpoint. Immortality means the opposite of mortality, of death. Spiritual or psychological death occurs when we become docile victims of the social tides, conditioned to accept our lot without question. Rebirth is when we wake up to our inner sense of purpose, and in the process break the chains that bind us to the rock of unquestioned assumptions. Immortality, then, means reawakening the divine intensity, the divine fire, which ignites our enthusiasm to live well and fully, for however brief a span we are physically alive.

Enthusiasm is exactly the right word here, by the way. *En thuse* is a corruption of *en theos*, meaning the god within.

Entheogens or psychedelics reconnect us with our inner divinity, and enthusiasm is the indicator of being alive to its presence. One of the greatest benefits of entheogens is that they reawaken the enthusiasm that tends to be stamped out in the process of growing up and becoming socialized. They are an antidote to the mind-numbing conformity that ejects us from paradise and tacks a “Closed” sign on the gate.

Immortality, then, is not about living forever, it means seeing the unity underlying multiplicity, the divine or cosmic nature of all existence, which confers Blake’s “eternity in an hour.” The joy of living is associated with freely chosen activity, and if you don’t have any, and just live your life out as a slave to the dictates of others or to the patterns laid down in musty tomes, you are squandering your immortal birthright.

What exactly is this divine fire? A substance that confers the intelligence of the gods must be more than simple flames of oxidation on a stick. Fire symbolizes the principle of illumination. The effect of even a single spark of the divine fire was to stimulate creative thinking and activity in mortals, along with spiritual vision. It’s hard to imagine any gods getting upset about humans obtaining ordinary fire, which at current estimate has been around for a couple of million years (give or take a few decades), but expanded consciousness is another matter entirely. That seems quite recent, as far as we can make out, and may well have been the spark that propelled humanity’s evolutionary leap to conscious decision making. Staring into a campfire is a good meditation, but a dose of divine fire will really take you places!

The connection I found with Indian mythology is that just like Prometheus, the divine eagle Garuda brought the nectar of the gods, soma, from heaven to earth. In the Indian context, our true birthright is the *amrita*, the immortal nectar of pure existence. *Mrita* is death, *a-mrita* is the opposite of death. Interestingly, amrita is associated with the soma plant, which is a “food of the gods,” that allows you to truly see. *Ambrosia*, the nectar that waters and nourishes the Garden of the Hesperides, is a closely

related word that means exactly the same thing as *amrita*. It is quite possible that *amanita* of the *amanita muscaria* mushroom is also a related word, though that's purely speculative—the kind of musing that munching a magic mushroom motivates.

Both myths feature an eagle and depict the transmission of something special from the gods to humans. In the Western version it engenders terrible consequences, but in the Indian version it is an event to celebrate. Their gods of old loved soma dearly, and drank it whenever they could, but they didn't want to share it with humans any more than their Western counterparts did. Yet after Garuda delivered the goods, no one was punished. In the West, no good deed goes unpunished. You may recall that the god (or gods—*elohim* is a *plural* word) of the Bible was extremely jealous of the fruit of the sacred tree in the Garden of Eden, and warned Adam and Eve away in no uncertain terms.

There is a common thread, shared with many traditions, that the gods are jealous of humans obtaining enlightenment or knowledge that raises them up to their level. Wisdom is a serious, nontrivial affair. Like the red pill in the movie *The Matrix*, wisdom irreversibly changes the trajectory of life. That's what God meant in Genesis, too, when he counseled Adam that he would surely die if he ate the divine fruit. He didn't mean *literally* die; according to the same story, Adam lived to be 930 years old. But Adam and Eve died to their *innocence*, their naïveté. As the serpent expressed it, “in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” When our eyes are opened, it never quite works to shut them again. The genie has been let out of the bottle. We may well try to forget, but at least an inkling remains of what we learned. And for the brave heroes among us who have partaken in something like the Golden Apples of immortality, living with eyes wide open becomes their natural state, which they would never surrender no matter what pressures they faced, divine or otherwise. This is something the psychedelic community holds in common trust today, and we are very fortunate to be alive at the end of the long dark age in which eye opening

substances were nearly eradicated from human awareness, in an attempt to glue our eyelids permanently closed.

Eden had its forbidden fruit that dispels childish ignorance, and there is an undercurrent of divine elixir in the symbolism of the Golden Apples too. Just as the divine fire is more than plain fire, the Apples are more than ordinary fruits. Eating of them confers immortality. It wakes the eater up from a state of childish innocence to a state of adulthood where we can be quite certain, with Hamlet, that “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” It is a great blessing, yet one that may cause discomfort and anxiety, to know that what we are normally aware of pales to insignificance compared to the vast cosmos in which we live. This is not just a desiccated idea, the myths are referring to a living reality of direct experience. And that is exactly what psychedelics are capable of transmitting to us.

Because of the challenges, a trip to paradise is not for everyone. Hercules had to overcome the many-headed serpent to retrieve the Apples. There are a thousand reasons for us to avoid a visit to immortality, but if the determination is there, it can be done. Hercules “took” the Apples, but then he passed them on, which is the righteous thing to do. In India, soma was an integral part of mainstream spiritual discipline for centuries if not millennia, but as in the West, it also faded from view eventually. We should always be seeking and finding new ways to open our eyes, and then share our insights and the kindness they inspire with our fellow beings. The wise seers of the ancient world have sent us that message in many guises through their myths, in hopes that we will keep alive the tradition of learning to see. The psychedelic community is the inheritor of a great and noble tradition, and it is right for it to stand tall against all the opposition mounted by those who seek to crush the human spirit and punish those who revel in the divine fire. The Apples are so tempting! They dangle from their branch so tantalizingly close to our fingertips. Is it any wonder that we should want to pluck one and eat it?

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