

The Second Labor – To Destroy the Lernaean Hydra

Heracles' second labor is the first task he took on after arming himself with an invincible philosophy. There are some variations in the story, but the gist is this. Heracles was asked to destroy the Hydra, a water dragon or serpent, living in the Swamp of Lerna. It had many heads, at least nine, and was so venomous that its very breath was poisonous. Heracles lured it out of its lair with flaming arrows. It caught his foot in one of its coils and the battle was on.

Heracles would smash a head with his club, but a new one grew right back. In some versions two grew back. Luckily Heracles was accompanied by his friend and charioteer Iolaus, a role similar to Krishna's in the Bhagavad Gita by the way. With his help the Hydra was conquered. First Heracles would bash a head to smithereens, then Iolaus would cauterize the neck with either a torch or a red-hot iron. That took care of all but the last head, which turned out to be immortal. Heracles cut it off and buried it in the earth, rolling a huge stone over it to keep it in place. Then he dipped his arrows in the poisonous blood of the serpent, and headed off for his next Labor.

What this demonstrates is that spiritual problems often are very persistent, not to mention potentially lethal. And they come at you in clusters. As soon as you deal with one, two more spring up in its place, because you aren't getting to the root of the problem, but only dealing with its most superficial aspect, its face or head. We won't thoroughly overcome our problems until they are dealt with at the source, and this is by no means an easy task. It takes an intense fire of intelligence to discern the root of a problem and confront it there. Most of the time we have to have help; we can't do it alone.

The fact that one of the Hydra's heads is immortal tells us that we will always face challenges. A happy life includes knowing how to effectively deal with problems, because they never go away permanently.

Even ordinary activities have a proliferating nature resembling the Hydra's regenerative powers. When we decide to do something simple, more and more sacrifices are necessitated by it. For instance, if a person wants to have sex, they can't just walk up to someone and do it, they have to preen and make themselves look respectable. They have to earn money for a date. They may even have to get married, which means they have to get a job first, which means they have to study in school first, and so on. One uncomplicated desire breeds a thousand necessities before it can be satisfied.

Or you want to start a business. It begins with a simple impulse, but then there are endless details to be addressed. It becomes a never-ending nightmare of attending to minutia, where the simple act of buying and selling is overwhelmed in regulations and compromises, in scheming and deceit. And once we engage with this "monster" of resistance to our goals—what my father used to call the obstinacy of the inanimate—in whatever form we have decided to meet it, we may well become caught up in its coils to the point where there is no escape. Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati called this "the ever-horizontalizing mesh of a structured institution."

We can see this myth played out all around us in the transactional world. But the ancient rishis didn't write myths to caution us about courting or business practices. As Dr. Mees reminds us, the purpose of myths "is more profound. The aim of religion is to make man happier and to help him find peace and bliss, within himself and in his relation to the world without. It does not make anyone happier to know how the material world is created (assuming that such knowledge is possible at all) and how the physical processes take place and can be controlled." (The Key to Genesis, p. 9) We must look deeper yet to reveal what the Herculean myth is getting at.

Invincible philosophy in hand, the first order of business for a budding spiritual aspirant is to confront the negative aspects of the psyche lying buried in the subconscious. In Vedanta these are referred to as *samskaras* and *vasanas*; *samskaras* being the seeds of past actions and misunderstandings, and *vasanas* our genetic

makeup, which sprouts and proliferates both as hindrances and as opportunities. A novice typically treats these as “evil” and desperately tries to suppress them and keep them out of sight of other people, who they fear might then judge them as being unworthy or at least inferior. Fearing exposure, the ego strives mightily for suppression of these “monsters from the id,” but suppression causes them to come back Hydra-like, with redoubled force. Like a steam boiler without a relief valve, pressure builds up to a maddening degree. At first the system is poisoned, but eventually the whole tank may rupture, causing a psychic explosion. It is thus critical to find a way other than repression to curb chaotic inner urges.

This actually happened already to Heracles, who killed his whole family in a fit of madness. His Labors are his means to expiate the disaster he brought about. Many of us ordinary mortals are also initiated into spirituality as a means to expiate our guilt for bad behavior. If we think of “killing” as symbolizing the alienation or emotional devastation of our close friends with our untamed tendencies, then many of us have exploded in a similar manner to Heracles, somewhere along the line.

Much of what passes for spirituality in the popular mind is the dominance of inner libidinal pressures by a hyperactive ego dedicated to their forceful eradication. By contrast, the healthy spirituality that Heracles is seeking will be a harmonious expression of the same inner forces, which are not inherently good or evil, but only subterranean. Antisocial, or even impolite, you might say. And powerful. The Bible refers to this aspect in Luke 19:37-40, where Jesus’ disciples are excited and carrying on, and the guardians of social propriety insist that he shut them up, make them behave. He replies, “I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.” He knew his intensely focused followers needed to let off libidinal steam, and while a bit rude perhaps, it was okay.

Mees refers to the need to vent in his chapter on the creative power of consciousness: the Serpent Power, or what we know as kundalini:

Herakles began to destroy the heads with his club, but where he destroyed one, two new heads immediately grew in its place. It is clear that “destruction” of the Serpent Power is not possible and that the attempt very much intensifies it. The attempt at “destruction” is that which causes “repression” and “suppression.” (ii.77)

Actually, processing these inner urges is one of the most complex and pressing tasks set before the aspirant. The Greek myth counsels us that fire, symbolizing conscious intelligence, is the key. Intense concentration—intense *caring*—is needed to make the fire hot enough. Heracles first coaxes the demon out of its cave with flaming arrows, which are well-directed and penetrating thoughts aimed precisely at the problem. The heads are later seared with a hand-held torch, a perennial symbol of the light of wisdom shining forth in the darkness. Think of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. Luckily, Heracles is already armed with an excellent philosophy filled with light, thanks to his successful first Labor. Plus, he has a helper. This is one task he cannot possibly accomplish alone. Our low-grade personal fire is not likely to be hot enough for the task, but a wise teacher can help us bring the necessary intensity to bear. Iolaus’ cauterization symbolizes the final touch of wisdom that destroys the possibility of the poisonous proclivities reawakening.

Indian rishis speak of roasting the seeds of karma (vasanas) so that they can never sprout. The cauterization of the Hydra heads is the same process. They must be cremated in the fire of wisdom. Until you really grasp how harmful, how useless the seeds of karma are, part of the mind wants to trot them out and take a look at them just “one more time.” It keeps a few in reserve, in case it wants to play ball with them. Once you truly understand how past

conditioning binds you—like being held fast in the coils of the Hydra—the realization can develop enough heat to finally scorch the samskaras and vasanas once and for all.

Tapas, the effort involved with spiritual striving, literally means generating heat, or transforming with heat. Often this is taken to mean the heat of repressed emotions, stemming from the conflict between personal desires and scriptural injunctions. The myth and the rishis suggest otherwise: *tapas* is the white heat of uncompromising awareness, of being fully cognizant of what normally lurks in the shadows. Bringing light automatically dispels darkness. All we have to do is keep ourselves from shrinking back or running away. There is real courage involved in entering the Hydra's lair.

The Bhagavad Gita refers to the equivalent of the Hydra myth in this way: “Here (in yoga) the well-founded reasoning is unitive, but many branched and endless are the reasonings of them in whom reason is ill-founded.” (II, 41) This means that the original unity of reality can be interpreted as either pro or con, good or evil. Once that happens, each side tends to be considered in isolation, and they will be found to have ever more pros and cons. Each of these increasingly peripheral arguments has its strong and weak points, and so on, ad infinitum. At each stage the original unity becomes more remote, until it is obliterated entirely.

The club Heracles uses to smash each head might represent the crude examination of ordinary, or ill-founded, reason. It is obviously inadequate for the task at hand. It works only for a second. Luckily this crude handling is followed up by the application of the fire of intelligence by Iolaus, who may well be acting as his guru, like Krishna was for Arjuna. The fire is applied with a red-hot iron, indicating intense determination, as in a will of iron. When the coils of karma want to sweep you off your feet, you have to put all you've got into standing firm, even at times to holding on to your very sanity, which may be severely shaken. Nitya Chaitanya Yati speaks eloquently of this stage of spiritual unfoldment:

When you come to this level, all single items of experience are like fuel for the fire of your understanding. That is why the Bhagavad Gita says the fire of wisdom burns away all ignorance. And what is this ignorance we speak of? In Vedanta, ignorance is considered to be that which creates a desire.

Desires create the visualization of ways to satisfy them. The visualization of means to satisfactory ends initiates action; the idea of action builds momentum in you to act; and ultimately the action brings about an apparently new situation. As the new situation ebbs it is replaced by a sense of loss, which in turn initiates another desire. From the new desire arises the need to have another action. Thus one action leads to another, endlessly. This is called bondage.

[To be released from bondage] you have to make a distinction between taking a relativistic path through life, with many compromises and half-baked notions about things—in other words, a pretentious life—and a thoroughgoing search made with great intensity, into which you put your whole mind and spirit, and where you will accept nothing less than complete understanding in every situation. This allows you to own your life entirely and live it with absolute clarity. Until it becomes totally clear to you, you refuse to take it. That changes your stature from a relativist to an absolutist.

The contemplative... is not just a person who sits in lotus pose in a room with his eyes closed, meditating, but one whose whole life is engulfed in the white heat of a meaningful search. The search can take any form, but it is its thoroughness, the intensity of the pursuit, and the minute details to which one's best attention is given in all earnestness, that [are what is required]. You don't slack up even for a second. (*That Alone*, verse 82)

Heracles exemplifies this intensity in his battle with the Hydra. If he loses focus for even an instant he will be destroyed! Sharp fangs and poisonous breath are assaulting him from every angle. But he

stays with it, full of absolute attunement. One by one the hostile heads are crushed and then cauterized with indomitable resolution.

The last of the heads turned out to be immortal, unkillable. This refers to the eternal nature of vasanas. Everything we do, good, bad or indifferent, plants seeds of future travails. Therefore the last vestigial urges of selfishness cannot be totally eradicated, but they can be pinned down under a rock of firm determination so that they cannot arise again. I also see this as possibly communicating the sympathetic humor of some bygone guru, letting us know that we will never be fully free of vasanas until we are liberated by the grave. Only when we are safely tucked in the ground with a stone over our head will the Hydra leave us in perfect peace....

Lastly Heracles does a surprising thing: he dips his arrows in the poisonous blood of the monster. This demonstrates that we must take what we've learned from every encounter. We don't just walk away and that's it. The very thing that caused the repulsion and the striving can become a positive factor to bring to bear on the next challenge. As Nataraja Guru would tell us, there is no principle of the excluded middle in this philosophy. Ancient wisdom is dialectic. Good never triumphs over evil, nor evil over good. Through wisdom they are brought together in harmony. The modern cliché is we learn from our mistakes. If there is no connection between our good side and the evil we encounter, the conflict would essentially be meaningless.

Oddly enough, precisely because Heracles relies on his helper Iolaus's expertise and not purely his own, this Labor "didn't count" toward expiating the guilt that propelled him into his spiritual struggles. Eurystheus, the Mycenaean king who set the Labors, did not consider this a victory by Heracles. This may be only an afterthought, a later addition to the myth so a couple more Labors could be added, or it may be significant. Regardless, triumphing over the vasanas is a tremendous accomplishment, and few if any of us will ever achieve it alone. By rights Eurystheus should represent a wise teacher, so probably, like Milarepa's guru

Marpa, he is using a technicality, a trick to keep Heracles busy with his spiritual unfoldment. Realization requires far more than just two Labors! And it's reasonable to admit that whatever we do on someone else's coattails is preliminary to us exercising our full recognition on our own.

However you read it, Heracles' second Labor speaks to us from the primordial past in vivid pictorial language, imparting a timeless spiritual lesson for us to learn from.

The Northwest Native American myth of the Sisiutl resembles the Hydra in some intriguing respects. A two-headed sea serpent, it also has poisonous blood. The poison could be either offensive or defensive, lethal or shielding. Here are a couple of citations from the internet:

The sea monster, Sisiutl, roamed the land and sea of the Kwakiutl and Nootka peoples. It had two heads, and could transform itself into different sizes and shapes. It was believed that anyone viewing a Sisiutl would be turned to stone, but if a warrior could obtain Sisiutl blood and rub it on his skin, it would render his skin impenetrable to enemy weapons.

(<https://pjsnorthwestcoastindians.wordpress.com/2014/04/02/makah-tribe-the-cape-people/>)

And:

A mythical two-headed sea serpent that guarded the entrance to the homes of the supernaturals, Sisiutl was believed to kill and eat anyone who saw it; washing in its blood turned a person to stone. Transformed into a self-propelled canoe that must be fed seals, this is a creature unique to Kwagiutl mythology. (<https://www.tumblr.com/search/sisiutl>)

Blood is considered ultimately intimate in many cultures, and there is a sense of the essence of the monster being conferred on its

conqueror when its rubbed on the skin, as a special knowledge, in both cases. Pure toxicity would kill the wearer, but wisdom conferred about evil would be simply protective.

Finally, there is a fine book of Native American stories retold by Anne Cameron, called *Daughters of Copper Woman*, (Vancouver, B.C: Press Gang Publishers, 1981), in which the Sisiutl appears. The entire story is very powerful, and worth seeking out. I've selected two brief highlights that resonate with the interpretations of Heracles above, to serve as a final blessing for us on our journey of self-discovery:

When you see Sisiutl you must stand and face him. Face the horror. Face the fear. If you break faith with what you Know, if you try to flee, Sisiutl will blow with both mouths at once and you will begin to spin. Not rooted in the earth as are the trees and rocks, not eternal as are the tides and currents, your corkscrew spinning will cause you to leave the earth, to wander forever, a lost soul, and your voice will be heard in the screaming winds of first autumn, sobbing, pleading, begging for release....

When you see Sisiutl the terrifying, though you be frightened; stand firm. There is no shame in being frightened, only a fool would not be afraid of Sisiutl the horror.