



Out of the twenty-four avatars of Lord Vishnu that are given importance in Bhagavat Purana, ten are considered most important. These are: Matsya (Fish), Kurma or Kachhapa (Tortoise), Varaha (Hog), Vamana (Dwarf), Narasimha (Man-Lion), Parashu Rama (Rama with an Axe), Rama (the delighter of hearts), Bala Rama (Rama endowed with Might), Krishna (the Source of attraction and charm), and Buddha (the Enlightened).

We will now explore these ten most important incarnations of the Lord Vishnu, along with their mystic implications for the spiritual movement in the life of an aspirant.

Kurma (Tortoise) Āvatara

The Puranas describe, in great detail, *Samudra Manthan*—churning of the ocean by gods and demons. According to the tradition, Lord Vishnu incarnated as the Tortoise to stabilize that important churning process, and thus to allow gods to acquire the Nectar that confers immortality. As you will see from this colorful scriptural story, Lord Vishnu blessed and guided the churning at every stage—not just in His manifestation as Kurma Avatar.

The Churning of the Ocean

Once in ancient times, when the gods found themselves completely humiliated by demons, they went to Vaikuntha, where Lord Vishnu dwells, to seek his assistance. After hearing of their predicament, Lord Vishnu appeared before the gods and said, “The only way you can attain permanent victory over the demons is to drink the nectar that will make you immortal. However, that special nectar can be procured only by churning the ocean. To accomplish that momentous task, you must secure the aid of the demons, who also are eager to drink that nectar of immortality. But have no fear—the only reward the demons will ultimately gain from this project will be their toil.”

To understand the advice that Lord Vishnu then gave the gods about how to churn the ocean, you must visualize how butter is churned. The process requires milk, a churning rod that must be held firmly in place, and a churning rope by which the rod is rapidly turned. Similar apparatus was needed for churning the ocean.

Mandarachala, a huge mystic mountain, was to serve as the churning rod. So the first project for the gods and demons was to join hands and carry the mountain to the ocean. While they were struggling to do so, the mountain fell upon them, crushing and terribly injuring many gods and de-

mons. However, Lord Vishnu quickly revived the gods by his grace through a mere glance, leaving the fallen demons dead or wounded. Seeing the difficulty of relocating that mountain, Lord Vishnu himself then sportily lifted Mandarachala, placed it on the Garuda bird, and carried it to the ocean where the churning was to take place.

Next Vasuki, the mighty serpent with thousands of hoods, was persuaded to serve as a churning rope. To ease his task, Lord Vishnu rendered the great Vasuki insensitive to pain. Then the gods and demons began to line up to take hold of some portion of the serpent’s body. With a clever plan to deceive the demons, Lord Vishnu took hold of the serpent’s head and the gods fell into line behind him.

The demons began moving towards the tail end when their leaders asserted, “Are we inferior to you that we must go towards the inauspicious tail end of that creature? We will be towards the head, and you gods go towards the tail.” Acting as if they were willing to assume an inferior position, the gods readily agreed. Of course, this was all according to the plan of Vishnu, which was actually designed to keep the gods away from the poison-showing, debilitating front end of the snake! Thus positioned, the gods and demons started churning.

Suddenly, however, Mandarachala Mountain began to sink due to its weight. Seeing the discouragement of the gods and demons, Lord Vishnu immediately assumed the form of a marvelous and mighty tortoise (Kurma Āvatara) and plunged into the water to support the mountain upon his back.

Then another problem arose. Mandarachala Mountain began to float up towards the sky. Quickly Lord Vishnu placed his mighty hand on top of it to keep it anchored securely in place.

He also entered into the gods and demons in a mystical way to energize them and enhance their prowess and fortitude in churning. Thus, with the benevolent assistance of Lord Vishnu at every step, the churning commenced with terrible speed.

In this process, smoke flowed out from Vasuki’s eyes and poison gushed out from his fangs. Many

demons were terribly injured by that poison. However, the poison took less toll upon the gods since they were stationed at the serpent's tail end. In addition, Lord Vishnu arranged that clouds rain down upon any gods who were injured—but upon none of the demons—so that the gods were easily healed.

Even though gods and demons continued to churn, nothing came out of the ocean. Realizing that the project required an even greater intensity and speed, Lord Vishnu then took up the churning task along with the others. Gods and demons continued to churn, but it was really Vishnu who was actually doing the effective work—with unimaginable beauty and majesty.

As the churning process intensified, many remarkable things emerged. Among them was the nectar of immortality, which both gods and demons wished to acquire. However, in the story, Lord Vishnu, appearing as the temptress Mohini, tricked the demons by giving them wine while the gods were receiving all the nectar!



The ocean is the mind that must be churned. Demons and gods are symbolic of the two aspects of human personality: the lower self and the higher self. The lower self or forces of darkness are comprised of anger, hatred, greed, vanity, and all that is demonic. The higher self or forces of light are comprised of magnanimity, cheerfulness, peace, love of God, sincerity, humility, and all that is Divine. The forces of darkness are energies that arise on the basis of *rajas* (restlessness, distraction of mind) and *tamas* (dullness, negativity, perversion of mind). The forces of light are energies that arise on the basis of *sattwa* (purity and harmony).

In the churning process of each individual's life, the forces of the higher self and the forces of the lower self are constantly at war. When churning is done in the wrong way, the demons get the advantage and you encounter a process of degradation. There is increasing illusion and infatuation. When the churning process is positive, you become an

aspirant on the spiritual path, a truly religious person.

As a spiritual aspirant practicing *sadhana* (spiritual discipline), meditation and reflection, you are constantly trying to bring about the victory of gods over demons. There are times when you are defeated, times when you attain victory. There are times when your mind conquers the negative thoughts, times when you are conquered by them. However, with the blessing of Divine Grace, you keep the churning moving on in the right direction. You gradually learn the secrets of how to obtain the nectar of intuitional knowledge that will lead you to Enlightenment.

Mandarachala Mountain symbolically refers to what is called *nishtha* in Sanskrit. You develop an unshakable resolve: "I am going to attain Enlightenment." This happens in the lives of very few people. However, once you have truly developed it, Divine Vishnu helps you at every step—even if you are not aware of it—to sustain the mighty weight of that project.

When you first develop that resolve to attain Enlightenment, you are sustained by both aspects of your personality—the lower self and the higher self. The ego continues to maintain a hold on your reason. However, from the very commencement of the great project of intensifying your spiritual evolution, many negative forces within you are quickly destroyed. Mandarachala Mountain falls down right upon your head, destroying many demons within—yet the gods within you continue to be nurtured by Divine Grace.

Vasuki, the mystical serpent with thousands of hoods that became the churning rope, is symbolic of the *chitta* (mind or mental process) with its myriad *vruttis* (thought waves). The success of the churning process, the success of your meditative movement, depends on enlisting Vasuki's help. The thought waves must be rendered positive, they must be organized and allowed to flow uninterrupted to the Divine Self.

Lord Vishnu's clever plan to trick the demons into positioning themselves near the poisonous

head end of the serpent has an important mystical message. When you become a spiritual aspirant, the gods within you choose the cool spray of water at the tail end of the snake and demons rush to position themselves at the head. With each movement forward, the lower self within you is gradually stifled and life becomes truly meaningful. As spiritual *sadhana* moves on in a healthy way, the demoniac qualities within you continue to diminish and the Divine qualities continue to increase. Demons continue receiving injury, and gods continue receiving Divine Grace.

The gigantic tortoise, Lord Vishnu's incarnation as Kurma Avatara, is the symbol of *pratyahara*—withdrawal of the senses, which supports the triple practice of concentration, meditation and *samadhi* (super-consciousness)—which together are termed *samyama* in Raja Yoga. If *pratyahara* has not been perfected, you cannot practice intense meditation in a successful way. Lord Vishnu's incarnation within your heart as Kurma Avatara helps you to sustain the terrific churning involved in spiritual transformation as if it were just a delightful little scratching upon your back!

If you have control of the senses, but have no faith in God's Grace, the meditative process will make you fly high. You may begin to develop an aberrated mind that enjoys great expansion, but that expansion will not transform your personality. This was symbolized by Mandarachala Mountain's floating up toward the sky when the churning began.

However, when you have the Divine tortoise below and the Divine Hand above, churning proceeds in a healthy manner. Faith in God keeps your meditation stable so that your mind does not fly out at tangents.

In the process of spiritual advancement, the demons (negative) within you should be mortal (die), and the gods (goodness) within you should become immortal and flourish. Thus, in the story, the Gods received all the nectar and became immortal, while the demons, tricked by Lord Vishnu in disguise, did not receive any nectar—but rather,

only intoxicating wine. So too, when the immortalizing nectar of spiritual vision is attained by an aspirant, the demoniac forces of the personality are unable to enjoy it. They remain drunk in egoistic illusion and are progressively weakened.

Thus, as the story of the churning of the ocean makes clear, it is Lord Vishnu—the Divine Self—who is the very essence of the entire drama of spiritual evolution. He is helping you at every step. It is he who assumes the form of the tortoise to support your spiritual resolve. It is his hand that ensures the stability of your personality and allows your mind to flow with meditative dynamism. It is his energy that operates through the demons and gods so that they have the strength to proceed at all.

As *sadhana* progresses, an aspirant's practice of concentration and meditation blossoms into the experience of *samadhi*. It is the dissolving of egoistic individuality during *samadhi* that is symbolized by Lord Vishnu's directly taking hold of the churning. When the ego is drowned in the intensity of that experience and you are no longer aware of yourself as an individual, God or Lord Vishnu has taken over the whole project of churning your personality.

