



**O**ut 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), Nara-sinha (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 continue to 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.

## Nara-sinha (Man-Lion) Avatara

Long, long ago, there lived a demoniac king, Hiranyakashipu. With his ferocious appearance—gigantic body, strange face, and hair that stood on his head like spears—he terrified the world of his time. This mighty demon had declared that no one should love God; rather, everyone should adore only him. It so happened, however, that Prahlada, the son of Hiranyakashipu, developed intense love for God from his very childhood.

What was the reason for this unusual development? Prior to the child's birth, the gods had fought with Hiranyakashipu, captured his wife, and put her into a heavenly prison. There Hiranyakashipu's wife met Sage Narada. While imprisoned, the child in her womb received the influence of Narada's good association. Later, after Hiranyakashipu triumphed over the gods and his wife was released, this son was born. Because he had received that good association, the child exhibited love for God from a very early age. Hiranyakashipu did not concern himself too much about it at that time. He thought to himself, "After all, Prahlada is only a child, and children do so many strange things."

When the boy was six years old, he was sent away to school. Naturally, his teachers were also demons, and they were expected to teach all children to love matter, to love objects and wealth, to be cruel, and to practice falsehood. In brief, the philosophy of a demoniac school was "Be evil and wicked." And so, Hiranyakashipu expected that under the teachers' guidance his son would become a perfect demon.

Prahlada went to school and began learning all the demoniac arts and sciences. But all these

had very little influence on the boy. Whenever the teachers were away, Prahlada would repeat mantras and tell the other students how sweet it is to remember God and meditate on Him. Inspired by his words, all the students would quickly surround him and together they would repeat mantras and sing songs in praise of God (*kirtan*).

Whenever the teachers saw Prahlada "spoiling" the minds of all the students in this way, they gave him a good thrashing. However, everything they did merely intensified the devotion in Prahlad's heart.

Finally, the teachers brought Prahlada before his father and said, "This boy is incorrigible. He has developed an incurable disease of loving God."

Hiranyakashipu then asked his son, "Who is the God that you adore? Don't you know that I am God?"

But the child replied, "No, father, God is Almighty. He abides in the heart of all, and life



is wasted if one does not love Him and repeat His name.”

Hiranyakashipu was very angry and tried to punish Prahlada in various ways for his devotional behaviour, but the boy could not be deterred by punishment. After some time, Hiranyakashipu decided that it was better to get rid of the child than to let him exist as a thorn in the family of demons.

So the king ordered his men to destroy Prahlada. Following his command, they had him punctured by spears, trampled by elephants, bitten by snakes, thrown from cliffs, crushed under rocks and tortured by snow, wind, fire and water—but Prahlada continued to emerge out of all these attempts at execution unaffected, unscathed, and firmly rooted in his devotion.

Finally, frustrated and filled with rage, Hiranyakashipu grabbed Prahlada while they were in the royal hall and said, “O Son, who has been protecting you?”

The boy answered, “Lord Vishnu, the Lord of the Universe.”

“Where is He?” demanded Hiranyakashipu. “I don’t see Him here.”

The boy answered, “He is everywhere.”

Then Hiranyakashipu, seeing Prahlada looking at a golden pillar, said, “Is Lord Vishnu in that pillar?”

Prahlada answered, “Yes, He is there also.”

Furious, Hiranyakashipu cried out, “You foolish boy! I am going to cut off your head, and let Lord Hari, your refuge, come and save you if he can!”

Thus saying, Hiranyakashipu took a great mace and struck against that pillar with immense anger. The structure cracked with a loud, rumbling sound, and out of it to the amazement of all, arose a strange creature, half lion and half man. That awesome majestic form possessed a lion’s head adorned with golden hair blowing in the wind, piercing eyes shooting sparks of molten gold, and

a tongue that flickered like a devastating sword from the gaping mouth. There were hundreds of lion-like arms on that strange being, and at the end of each paw were fierce claws.

Hiranyakashipu thought within himself, “This must be a creation of Vishnu’s *Maya*,” and using his mace he brazenly attacked Lord Nara-sinha. At first, Nara-sinha played with Hiranyakashipu like a cat with a mouse, allowing the arrogant demon to slip out of His paws. Finally, however, Nara-sinha held him on His thigh and clawed that demon to death.

Nara-sinha then arose on His mighty legs, roared and attacked the entire army of Hiranyakashipu with His ferocious claws, causing the demons to scatter or be destroyed. The sky, the mountains, the oceans—indeed the whole world—trembled as Lord Vishnu in the form of Nara-sinha Avatara carried out this Divine destruction.

After Hiranyakashipu was killed, Prahlada approached Lord Vishnu in the form of Nara-sinha with folded hands and words steeped in reverence and love. In response, Lord Vishnu manifested His gentler form to the child and bestowed upon Prahlada the boon of ruling his dead father’s kingdom with righteousness, setting an example for future generations about the glory of pure devotion.



The story of Lord Vishnu’s manifestation as Nara-sinha Avatara has a deep message for all. Even in difficult situations, you must have great faith that God is right there near you, because He is the all-permeating Reality. Never think that you are separated from God. He may not seem to come when you ask Him to come, but have tremendous faith that He is always there guiding your path.

Further, the soul in every individual is potentially Prahlada. Hiranyakashipu symbolizes ignorance (*avidya*). All the demons in his army represent impurities of the mind, such as anger, hate and greed. These demons can never destroy the soul of a devotee, no matter how hard they try. Rather, they themselves will be destroyed when the Divine Self manifests within one's personality in the form of Nara-sinha Avatara.

When you have love of God within your heart, that love invokes the Divine Presence and Nara-sinha expresses through your personality as

an amazing power with sharp nails—intuitional knowledge. That powerful force destroys the world of egoistic values (I-ness and mine-ness) and tears apart the illusion of names and forms. This special manifestation of Divine power is an expression of Grace that operates in the most dazzling manner to destroy ignorance. When ignorance is destroyed, *Brahman* or the Absolute Self is revealed as the Reality behind everything in this universe. When ignorance no longer conditions your mind, you forever enjoy that amazing vision possessed by Prahlada that God is everywhere.

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