



**I**N HIS TEACHINGS to Sage Narada in the second skandha of Srimad Bhagavat Purana, Brahma, the Creator, introduces the profound concept of the avatara — God’s descent or manifestation upon the earth. Touching upon the highest Vedanta in his devotional teachings, Brahma eloquently conveys to Narada that God or Brahman (the Divine Self or Supreme Being), represented in this scripture as Lord Vishnu or Narayana, is the majestic Truth that underlies and is the very essence of this creation. Whatever exists in creation is nothing but the Self. The entire universe is nothing but the manifestation of God — the “body” of God.

To promote a mind that perceives the universe in this majestic way is the ideal before a devotee. Such a mind is no longer cramped by ego consciousness or burdened by egoistic desires (*vasanas*). Perfectly in tune with the Cosmic Mind and sublimely pure, it views every object in the world as a window to eternity.

The devotee who possesses such a mind no longer looks for God somewhere in the future, or somewhere out in the distant sky. Rather, he experiences God here and now as the permeating, all-encompassing Reality. He sees every internal movement of the mind as well as everything externally perceived by the senses as an expression of Divine glory.

He swims in the ocean of unending delight, constantly enveloped and encompassed by the One Who is the embodiment of infinite love and sweetness. To help lead the mind to such a joyous and luminous state, Sages have introduced the method of meditation upon the *avatars* or manifestations of God upon the earth.

## God Descends to Allow Souls to Ascend

On the path of *sadhana* (spiritual discipline), there is a gradual ascent leading to the unfolding of subtler planes of the Divine Self. The ascent is from the plane of physical objects to the plane of senses, from the plane of senses to the plane of mind, from the plane of mind to the plane of intellect, from the plane of intellect to the Cosmic Mind (the purified *chitta*), and from the plane of the purified *chitta* to the Absolute Self.

Accompanying this ascent on the spiritual path, there is a descent of Divine energy to meet the aspirant on his upward movement and

to endow him with the success of his mission. No matter how gross the plane of existence, it is interpenetrated by the Self. It is the light of that Self that sustains and supports all developments in human personality, even in its grossest level.

Therefore, as one ascends the ladder of evolution, spiritual energy descends from the higher plane. As a result, the process of ascent that was attended to with effort, pain, and insecurity now turns into a delightful, spontaneous movement aided by the descending power of the Self. This vision of the descent, emergence, and unfolding of spiritual energy is mystically depicted in highly figurative language in the stories of Divine incarnations (*avatars*).

## The Divine Urge for Balance

It is Divine law to always maintain balance—on the physical, psychological and spiritual planes. On the physical level, for example, the moment there is high pressure in Miami and low pressure in New York, the wind will immediately rush from Miami to New York. When there is a change in the pressure of water in the ocean, El Nino (special ocean currents) will arise. Thus, changes are always taking place. The main purpose is to restore balance, and nature is constantly restoring balance.

On the psychological and spiritual plane, the same law applies. If the majority of human beings begin to follow the path of *adharma* or unrighteousness, completely ignoring all ethical values, equilibrium must be restored. Thus, God manifests, either as a spiritual leader like Rama, Krishna or Buddha, or as a mighty happening, such as a war or an earthquake, or a cultural or political upheaval, bringing about a tremendous change.

Lord Krishna declares in the Gita:

“Whenever there is a decline of *dharma* (righteous order) and a rise of *adharma* (un-righteousness), I manifest Myself, controlling My *Yoga Maya* (the power of Cosmic Illusion).

“For the protection of the *sadhus* (Divine personalities, Sages and Saints) and for the destruction of the *duskritas* (the doers of evil or the forces of darkness), and for the establishment of *dharma* (righteousness) I incarnate from time to time.” Gita: 4-7 & 8

The purpose of *avatars* is to restore order in society. An *avatara* does not rid the earth of all demons or demoniac forces. Souls always exist at different levels. What the *avatara* does, however, is “straighten the ladder.” The ladder that should have been leading one upward has become slanted, or has fallen down, and the *avatara* lifts it back up again. He restores order so that society again feels the impact of the ethical values of life.

Internally God manifests within the mind of an aspirant in the form of special Divine insights and realizations. Externally, God manifests in the world in the form of a Divine personality to bring about harmony in a particular segment of humanity or location in the universe. One must realize that the earth planet is not the only world. There are numerous world systems in which Divinity manifests.

Further, the same incarnations can occur again and again in time, as history repeats in the world-process. Thus, for example, the story of Lord Rama is presented by different Saints in various ways. These differences reflect that in various manifestations of the Divine Being as Lord Rama there were various differences in their deeds.

## Historicity vs. Mystical Symbolism

Great personalities with Divine insight and spiritual power do manifest from time to time in the world. They become mirrors reflecting the Divine Glory. Their activities become symbols of the spiritual process in every individual. Their achievement becomes an inspiration in fighting the battle of life. The fervor of glimpsing the Divine Majesty becomes so great, that as time passes, the historicity of their life blends with mysticism; and it is difficult to distinguish whether a particular story connected with a Divine incarnation is to be taken literally, or merely considered to be a highly allegorical and mystical portrayal given by Sages of the Absolute Self.

This conflict between historicity and symbolism has little meaning for spiritual aspirants. To them the world begins to reveal itself as a symbolic elaboration of the abstract Truths of life. Their minds are drawn to the history of the soul—its unfolding from the meshes of ignorance to the freedom of the Supreme Self.

In this way, meditation upon the mystical forms of the major *avatars* and their colorful stories has become the support for a profound devotional movement and has led sincere aspirants to the heights of Divine love and wisdom.

**T**HE HINDU SCRIPTURES state that there are innumerable incarnations of Narayana or Lord Vishnu (the Divine Self) that occur again and again, as history repeats in the world process. The 24 *avatars* of Lord Vishnu highlighted in Bhagavat Purana include: Varaha, Hari, Sage Kapila, Sage Dattatreya, Sanatkumaras, Nara-Narayana, Dhruva, Prithu, Rishav Dev, Hayagriva, Matsya, Kachhapa,

Nrisinha, Vamana, Hamsa, Manu, Dhanwantari, Parashurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha, and Kalki.

Although *avatars* such as these have been highlighted in the Vedic culture from a historical or mystical point of view, *avatars* are in no way restricted to twenty-four or to any other number. These twenty-four are simply highlights of countless expressions of God, like waves in the ocean of the Self.

Understood more profoundly, the entire world is an expression of God. Every element around you is a manifestation of God. Every human being is essentially the Divine Self. Therefore, as you advance and begin to radiate the presence of God through your personality, you become an *avatara*. All Sages and Saints are *avatars*. *Avatars* in this general sense are

referred to as *ansha avatars*—little rays of God. But then there are *purna avatars*—complete or full *avatars*—like Rama and Krishna and others highlighted in the scriptures.

Out of the twenty-four *avatars* given importance in Bhagavat Purana, ten are considered most important. These are: Matsya (Fish), 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).

**W**e will now begin 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.

