

**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.

## Rama Avatara



When the earth was burdened by the increase of unrighteousness and the decline of virtue, Lord Vishnu incarnated in the form of the four sons of King Dasharatha, the ruler of Ayodhya.

Dasharatha had three wives. Queen Kaushalya gave birth to Rama, who was the eldest; Kaikeyi gave birth to Bharata; and Sumitra gave birth to the twins, Lakshmana and Shatrugna. When Rama reached the young age of 16, he received the teachings of Vedanta from Sage Vasistha, thereby enabling him to discover his innate Divine nature.



Then Rama, accompanied by his brother Lakshmana, assisted in the performance of a sacrifice by Sage Vishwamitra, and in so doing had to destroy many terrible demons.



After accomplishing the amazing feat of breaking Shiva's bow in the marriage contest, Rama was wedded to Sita, the daughter of King Janaka.

Noticing his own advancing age, Rama's father, King Dasharatha, wanted to declare Rama as his heir apparent, but Kaikeyi, one of the King's wives, had other plans. She had previously secured two boons from the

king, and now used them to send Rama away to the forest for fourteen years. Her hope was that Bharata, her son through the king, would become the ruler of Ayodhya.

Rama, then, accompanied by his wife Sita and his younger brother Lakshmana, went to live in the forest. Later, Bharata, who was not aware of what his mother had done at the time because of his absence, came to the forest to persuade Rama to return and rule the kingdom.

Rama, however, was firm in keeping the words of his father. So Bharata returned to Ayodhya, installed Rama's sandals on the throne, and began to rule the kingdom as Rama's servant.



While living a life of austerity in the forest, Rama brought about the disfigurement of Shurpanaka, the demoniac sister of the ten-headed demon-king Ravana, by cutting off her nose and ears. Rama also destroyed a large number of their relatives.

Angered by this, Ravana kidnapped Sita, who he longed to have as his wife, and brought her to Lanka, his capital city.

In order to destroy Ravana and rescue Sita, Rama and Lakshmana befriended a vast army of monkeys and bears with the help of Hanuman and the monkey-king Sugriva. Among the monkeys, Hanuman became the closest and dearest servant of Rama.

Rama and his army built a bridge consisting of mountainous rocks across the ocean. When they reached Lanka, Vibhishana, Ravana's *satwic* younger brother, joined Rama and assisted him in his virtuous endeavor.

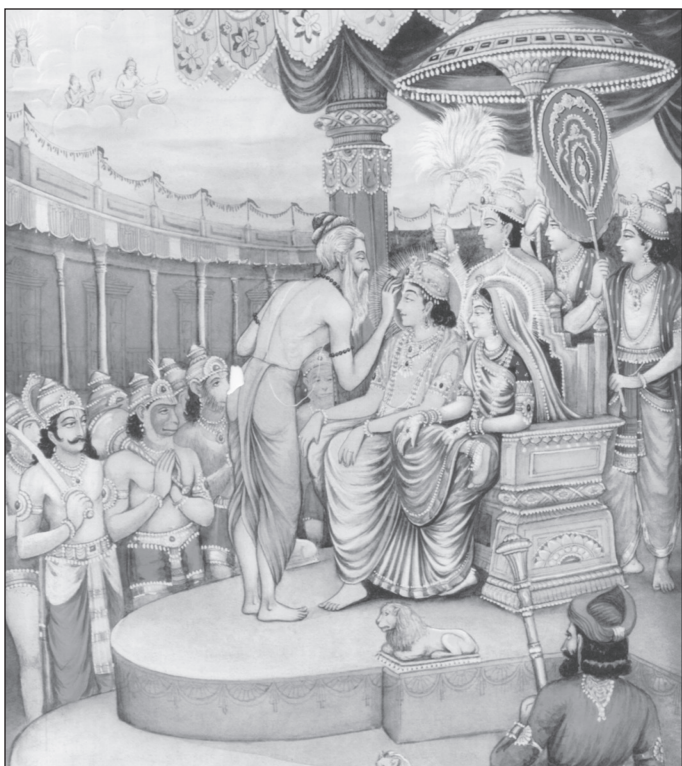




Then after a terrible battle, Rama, with the aid of his brother Lakshmana, his valiant devotee Hanuman, Vibhishana, Sugriva, and the army of monkeys and bears, was able to destroy Ravana and Ravana's other brother, Kumbhakarna.

Sita was reunited with Rama, and the gods praised Rama for ridding the earth of the burden of those terrible demons. Vibhishana was then made ruler of the kingdom of Lanka.

By this time the fourteen years had passed. Rama then returned in an aerial car to Ayodhya with Sita and Lakshmana. There Rama was coronated king, and he ruled for an extremely long time, during which his people enjoyed immense peace, bliss and prosperity.



When circumstances required that Sita leave Ayodhya, she went into exile to the ashram of Sage Valmiki, where she gave birth to Lava and Kusha. Eventually, she entrusted her sons to the care of the Sage and entered into an opening in the earth while meditating upon Rama.

After many thousands of years, Rama decided to terminate his physical existence and ascended to the heavenly world, where he eternally abides as the Self in all.



Having assumed lesser levels of Divine descent, the Supreme Self manifested as Lord Rama, a perfect human being, the delighter of hearts. Rama and Krishna are described as *purna avataras*, or full *avataras*. Further, Rama is described as *Maryada Purushottama*, which implies that Rama is setting an example to be followed by humanity. Although all *avataras* outstep human limits to a certain extent, in Rama's case this was much more controlled. Rama does not readily assert his Divinity, but always shows himself to be like everyone else. Yet the expressions of immense powers are there in his personality.

Since Lord Rama is one of the most adored of Divine manifestations, the symbolism in his life covers the entire range of mystic movement in an aspirant. On the highest level of mystic understanding, Rama is *Brahman*, the Absolute Self. On the relative plane, Rama is Lord Vishnu, the Absolute with form and qualities. He appears as an incarnation or *avatara* of God and is an object of devout meditation for the devotee. In addition, Rama represents the *jiva* or individual soul that has entered the forest of the world-process and struggles to overcome *Maya* (Cosmic Illusion) and attain Liberation.

This soul is born to King Dasharatha—an individual who is very virtuous. The soul is bound

by the body and limited personality as well as to the queen mothers, who represent the three *gunas* (modes of Nature) in their positive expression—*sattwa* (purity and harmony), *rajas* (activity and externalization) and *tamas* (dullness, inertia, extreme negativity). Nourished by the mothers and loved by the father, the soul evolves and struggles to discover its essential identity.

The soul (Rama) evolves in a personality that is a blend of four aspects—wisdom (*jnana*), will (*dhyana*), action (*karma*), and devotional feeling (*bhakti*). These are represented, respectively, by Rama, Lakshmana, Shatrughna, and Bharata.

**B**reaking Shiva's bow is a turning point in human life. The bow of Shiva represents a subtle illusion in the mind that keeps one glued to the sense of individuality and leads one through endless cycles of birth and death (the path of *pravritti*). If one were to break that illusion, he would begin to tread the path of *nivritti*, the path that leads to Liberation. The moment one makes a resolve to become free of the bondage of individuality and attain Liberation, Rama (the emergent soul) within him breaks Shiva's bow and weds Sita, the purified intellect.

Rama had to enter into forest life for fourteen years before he could return to Ayodhya and be enthroned as king. This was necessary if he was to fulfill the objective of his embodiment—the destruction of demons. In one's spiritual movement there is a similar unfoldment. Although Rama abides at every moment in your heart, you cannot enthrone him or become one with his glorious presence until the demons that abide in the forests and cities of the unconscious are destroyed by a deep-rooted transformation within your personality.

The encounter with Shurpanaka (the sister of the demon king, Ravana) has interesting mystical implications. In confronting all the developments in life, an aspirant has two choices—*shreya*, that which is good or pure, represented by Sita; or *preya*, that which is alluring or pleasing, but im-

pure, represented by Shurpanaka. The cutting off of the nose and ears of the demoness is symbolic of the development of *vairagya* (dispassion) and *viveka* (discrimination between the Self and the not-Self.)

**I**n order to find and recover the kidnapped Sita, Rama befriends the monkeys and bears. This represents that phase of spiritual movement where an aspirant learns to practice *pratyahara*—withdrawal of the senses and control of the mind. The *pranic* energy operating at the plane of the senses and mind can be compared to monkeys and bears. Without Rama, without a Divine mission, those energies simply wander without purpose through the forests of the world process. But when Rama befriends them, all those energies are united in a powerful mystical mission that greatly aids one's spiritual evolution.

Hanuman represents the immense spiritual force that is known as *atma bal* or soul force. He represents *sadhana shakti*—the power generated by intense spiritual discipline and also *brahmacharya shakti*—the power of purity that results from the restraint of passion and the lessening of one's identification with the body-idea. If you enter into the unconscious during meditation, Hanuman goes with you and brings about a tremendous change. Like Hanuman's fiery destruction of most of Lanka before the arrival of Rama, the soul force within you wipes out myriad negative impressions. It enables you to cross the ocean of illusion and enter into the place where the basis of ignorance abides.

**R**avana, with the ten *indriyas* (five senses and five organs of action) as his heads, represents *rajas*-predominating ignorance (ignorance that is active, restless and distracted); his brother, Kumbhakarna, represents *tamas*-predominating ignorance (ignorance that is dull, melancholy and extremely negative); and Vibhishana represents *sattwa*-predominating ignorance (ignorance that is purer and more healthy). In the course of spiri-

tual movement, the soul must befriend *sattwa* and enlist its assistance in fighting against *rajas* and *tamas*. Though *sattwa* belongs to the world of the demons of duality, yet one is led to Self-realization through its help.

The confrontation of Rama with Ravana is the last confrontation in the spiritual movement. All demonic forces that harass the individual and humanity emanate from that ignorance. Therefore, when you fight against ignorance it is your last fight—and there is no fight like it! Further, Rama's annihilation of Ravana symbolizes the ascent of Kundalini as it destroys the knot of karma, the knot of desire, and ultimately the knot of ignorance on its way to the crown of the head, where Enlightenment reaches its summit.

Thus the soul discovers its essential nature as it is reunited with Sita—the intuitive intellect that had been kidnapped by ignorance. Then, like Rama and Sita reigning blissfully together for thousands of years, *Rama rajya* reigns within the personality of an enlightened Sage. This represents the state of *Jivan Mukti*, or Liberation in life. However, when the *prarabdha karma* (fructifying karma) of a Sage terminates, and he is ready to enter into *Videha Mukti* (bodiless Liberation), even intuitional intellect is no longer needed. Thus Sita departs, and Rama remains alone as the nondual *Brahman* or *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute).

(\*Please see *Mysticism of the Ramayana* by Swami Jyotirmayananda for an in depth study of the story of Rama.)



## FROM SWAMIJI'S KITCHEN

### Divine Poha (Flattened Rice)

- 1 cup thick poha, soaked for 10 minutes prior to cooking
- 1 chopped onion
- 1 diced potato
- ½ packet frozen mixed vegetables
- Juice of ½ lemon
- 2 tablespoons ghee (clarified butter)
- Chopped cilantro leaves (dhania/coriander)
- 1 pinch mustard seeds
- 1 pinch cumin seeds (jeera)
- 1 pinch asofoetida (hing)
- ½ tsp turmeric powder (haldi)
- ½ tsp dhania (coriander) powder
- ½ tsp garam masala
- 1 tablespoon chaat masala

1. In a pan, heat ghee, add asofoetida (hing), mustard seeds, and cumin seeds, and wait until they sputter.

2. Add onion. Cook until it is light brown in color. Then add potato and mixed vegetables. Then add turmeric powder, dhania powder, and garam masala. Cook for 5 minutes on low heat.

3. Add soaked poha. Cook for 10 more minutes.

4. Add the lemon juice.

5. Add chaat masala and chopped cilantro leaves.

6. Enjoy! Serves 4