



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), Nara-sinha (Man-Lion), Parashurama (Rama with an Axe), Rama (the delighter of hearts), Balarama (Rama endowed with Might), Krishna (the Source of attraction and charm), and Buddha (the Enlightened).

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

Buddha Avatara



MORE THAN six centuries before the birth of Christ, there was a spiritual crisis in India: Vedic culture began to dwindle in the encircling gloom of illusion, and, instead of people sacrificing the latent beasts of anger and passion, they began to indulge in sacrificing innocent animals. Rather than pursuing religion in its true spirit, they took recourse to crude forms of austerity, dry intellectual learning, and many hypocritical forms of piety. Violence, cruelty, selfishness, greed, and passion began to dominate the minds of the masses.

In such an atmosphere of decline of virtue, there emerged the glorious light of the spirit in the form of Buddha—a light that was meant to bring order in the world of disorder, to stop the decline of virtue, to dispel the forces of darkness and to promote

the path of righteousness. The Divine Vishnu incarnated as Prince Siddhartha, who later became known as Buddha the Enlightened, in order to manifest the human expression of Self-realization in the form of infinite compassion, universal love, and the principle of non-violence.

Birth and Childhood

King Shuddhodana was a righteous king who ruled over a prosperous and beautiful country of Kapilavastu in the Himalayan regions north of Bihar in India. His queen, Maya Devi, gave birth to the child in a charming garden in the midst of celestial portents and signs, and his body had auspicious marks that foretold his future greatness.

The impact of the delight of having given birth to such a glorious spirit could not be endured by the frail body of Maya Devi; she died seven days after his birth. Buddha, who was then known as Siddhartha, was brought up under the loving care of Maya Devi's sister, Mahaprajapati, his foster mother.

King Shuddhodana consulted the astrologers regarding the destiny of the child, and after having studied the planetary conditions of his birth, the astrologers foretold that the child was going to become one of the greatest of men in the world—either he would be the emperor of emperors, or he would renounce the world and teach the path of *dharma* (righteousness).

When King Shuddhodana asked the astrologers what he should do in order to secure emperorship for his child, they told him that if the child were to be kept away from the sight of four things—a diseased person, an old man, a dead body, and a monk—he would become an emperor; otherwise, he would live a life of renunciation.

Following the advice of the astrologers, all efforts were made to secure Siddhartha from the evidences of pain and misery. King Shuddhodana built seven encircling walls to keep the palace in a completely conditioned atmosphere. All luxuries of life were presented before the growing child, and all the sights of pain and suffering were kept away from him. However, in spite of all this care and caution, his parents could not shield Siddhartha from witnessing the pain in life.

Siddhartha at times entered into deep reflections over the plight of the withering flowers. Even in his royal garden he observed how a moth is captured

by the quick tongue of a frog; and how the frog is, in turn, devoured by a snake; and the snake, in turn, is killed by a mongoose or carried away by a hawk. He noticed how the chain of mutual violence continued to expand in ever-widening circles. He would become depressed and sorrowful at the wide-spread sufferings of all living beings.

The Soaring of Compassion



One day while walking in the royal forest and watching the clouds floating in the blue sky, he saw a flock of wild swans fly over his head. Suddenly one of the swans that had lingered behind fell to the earth, shot by the arrow of a cruel young man.

The beautiful swan fell in front of Siddhartha, struggling for its life. Siddhartha ran to the swan and picked her up in his tender arms. Not knowing what pain was, he plucked out the arrow from the swan and plunged it into his own body. He felt miserable. Then he began to empathize with the bird; compassion surged within his heart.

While this was going on Devata, the young man who had shot the bird, appeared on the scene asserting, “That bird is mine. I shot it and I’m going to cook it. How dare you try to take it away from me!” Buddha responded, “I will not give you this bird no matter what you do.”

The matter reached the royal court. When Siddhartha placed his claim on the bird, he said, “Who is the rightful owner—one who saves or one who takes away an innocent life?” The ministers realized the wisdom of Siddhartha and it was ultimately decided that a person who saves life is better than one who takes it away. The wounded bird was returned to him. Siddhartha nursed the bird back to health with great love and when it was strong enough to fly, he set it free.

With deep gratitude in its eyes, the swan rejoined the flock. This is how Buddha’s godlike compassion was kindled and eventually led to his desire to help others attain freedom from pain through Enlightenment.

AS TIME PASSED, Siddhartha became a handsome youth. He acquired the knowledge of the Vedas as well as all the learning that was meant for a *kshatriya* (military caste) prince. In order to prevent him from becoming a monk, King Shuddhodana kept him in the midst of numerous charming young ladies, and all the pleasures of the senses were available for the prince. In the course of time, his father married him to Yashodhara, a princess of a neighboring kingdom, and eventually, his son, Rahula, was born.

Sometime before the birth of his son, Siddhartha passed beyond the walled enclosure of the palace four times, and each time he witnessed one of the four signs that he was not supposed to see. It is said that the gods themselves appeared before him as a sick and miserable man, as a person disfigured with age, as a corpse with its terrifying stillness, and as a monk beckoning him to renounce the world that is fraught with disease, old age, and death.

When the royal palace was jubilant over the birth of his child and all the people were engrossed in festivity, Siddhartha secretly slipped away from the palace with the help of his chariot driver. Departing from his beloved wife, his newly born child, and his world of material prosperity, Siddhartha renounced the kingdom and entered into the dense forest of Bihar.

The Golden Mean

As Siddhartha began to wander through the forests of northern India in search of Enlightenment, he met various spiritual teachers but was not satisfied with their teachings. Therefore, he pursued practicing extreme forms of austerity. In the course of his search, he learned various aspects of Yoga from numerous teachers, and engaged himself in a one-sided aspect of Yoga that led him to the extremes of penance and meditation.

As a result of Siddhartha’s relentless practice of severe austerities, life was feebly lingering in his emaciated body and he was reduced to a skeleton. At that time, it is said, the Gods sent before him in the forest three dancers. As they passed him by, one

sang, “Oh friend, do not string the *vina* too tight. The musical instrument will break and there will be no music.” The next musician sang, “Do not tune the *vina* too loose, or the music will be dull and dreary.” The third sang, “String the *vina* neither too tight nor too loose and the music will be best to enchant the human heart.”



Siddhartha learned a great lesson. He felt this was an advice sent by God: Do not tire out the body through excessive austerities. Then the body will perish and there will be no success. It is best to adopt the path of the golden mean, the moderate path. From then on, Siddhartha adopted and advocated a path of moderation in *sadhana* (spiritual discipline).

Nirvana

Under the bodhi tree Siddhartha passed into the various stages of *samadhi* (super-consciousness). He waged an intense fight against the spirit of temptation, Mara, and attained supreme victory. He began to reflect upon how misery could be rooted out, and he worked on this problem until he attained *Nirvana*. By his intuitive vision he saw the end of misery and the path that leads to such a blessed end. For a moment, he thought to renounce the body and merge into the state of Liberation. But soon, overpowered by a spirit of compassion, decided to disseminate the path revealed to him. He reflected within himself, “I have built a ship for crossing the ocean of the world-process. Shouldn’t I allow that ship to ferry other people? Why should I destroy it?” The moment that idea arose, Siddhartha

refrained from dissolving his body. From that time on he led a very active life, teaching others as his act of compassion.

The Enlightened Teacher

After Enlightenment, Siddhartha became known as Buddha (the Enlightened). Since his family name was Gautama, he is also called Gautama Buddha. And further, since he belonged to the Sakya tribe, he is also called Sakya Muni.

He became the blessed teacher of the path that combined all the important features of life’s movement to its perfection. The life of Buddha gives an insight into a life of *sadhana*. His perfection is the ideal that humanity should advisably continue to seek, wherein all cravings are destroyed, the mind is conquered, and the fetters of limitations are dropped from the infinite expansion of consciousness.

Buddha began to teach the mystic art of attaining *Nirvana*—the end of the cycles of birth and death, and the extinction of all cravings. He spoke of the four Arian truths—pain, the cause of pain, the cessation of pain, and the path that leads to the cessation of pain. He spoke about righteous conduct, compassion, prosperity and adversity. He elaborated upon the chain of causation that keeps a person confined to the cycles of birth and death and taught how ignorance was the root-cause of sufferings. He condemned sacrifices of animals and all expressions of cruelty and violence. The words of Buddha were so powerful, his personality so magnetic, and his conduct so lofty and elevating, that kings, princes, and people from all walks of life began to follow his teachings. His wife, Yashodhara, and his own son, Rahula, also became monks under his guidance.

Buddha continued to promote *dharma* with an unrelenting dynamism. He and his group of monks collected alms by begging and devoted their energy towards the dissemination of his sublime teachings. Then, at the age of 80 (480 B.C.), Buddha departed from this mortal world, but the light of compassion that emanated from his glorious personality continued to sweep over India, China, Japan, and most of Asia. And even today that light is being increasingly recognized, revered, and followed by aspirants all over the globe.

The Folly of Useless Speculation

Lord Buddha discouraged mere intellectual speculations about God, Liberation and the Absolute, and asked his followers to end their pain instead of indulging in various speculations about it.

He gave an example of a person who is injured by an arrow. When a doctor tries to remove the arrow and heal his injury, the injured man begins to ask many questions, such as, “What is the name of the person who shot this arrow? What is the arrow made of? How fast was it travelling?” If the doctor were to stop and answer all these questions, the person would simply die. What is needed is to remove the cause of pain, and later try to find the answers, if such is needed!

Mercy for a Lambe Goat

As Lord Buddha was walking one day along a country road, he saw a shepherd who was driving his flock of sheep and goats to a nearby hill where there was a good grazing ground. One of the goats was lame and limped along slowly, always falling behind the rest of the flock. But the shepherd showed no pity toward the poor beast and whipped it mercilessly to make it keep up with the herd.

When Lord Buddha noticed what was going on, his heart was moved by compassion. Approaching the shepherd he asked, “Where are you going with your herd?” The shepherd pointed to the nearby hill. “Would you have any objection if I carry this poor lame goat to the top of the hill on my shoulders?” asked Lord Buddha. “Why of course not,” the man replied. So, Buddha happily carried the goat to the top of the hill and left it there with the rest of the flock. “He is indeed a *fakir* (saint or perfect master) who has subdued his own self, who harms no living thing and overflows with compassion,” stated the shepherd.

A Lesson in Mystic Serenity

Once there lived a farmer who enjoyed a comfortable household life with his wife and children. Having worked hard, he became quite successful in his farming and was proud of his prosperity. Although

it was the rainy season and the atmosphere outside was filled with the turmoil of nature with its torrential rains, deafening thunder, and flashes of lightning, it was cozy by the fire and the family spent many happy hours there.

One evening during a particularly intense storm, the farmer looked through his window and watched the lightning flash across the sky. That sight enthralled him. “How wonderful!” he shouted with joy filling his heart.

As he gazed through his window at the landscape illumined by the flashes of lightning, the farmer noticed the form of a monk seated under a tree. The monk was barely clothed and brutally exposed to the elements. The tree he was sitting under afforded him some protection from the pouring rain, but not much. The farmer, as if to ridicule the monk, began to sing loudly, “Oh rain, come down more and more. Oh clouds, gather together and let your water fall because I have accomplished my task. I have succeeded in my farming; I have filled my home with food and grains for the coming season.”

But the monk was not an ordinary person. He was none other than Buddha, the enlightened One. He heard the farmer’s shouts of joy and he too joined in the chorus, “Oh rain, come down. May more and more clouds gather with more lightning and thunder. I too have accomplished my farming. I have sown in the field of my mind the seeds of good *samskaras* (unconscious impressions) and good karmas. Seeds of meditation and insight have sprouted in the fertile soil of my mind, and thus have I harvested the crop of wisdom. Since I abide in eternity nothing can affect me. So, pour down, oh rain!” According to the story, the farmer suddenly realized how ridiculous he was bragging about perishable wealth, so he came out of his house and prostrated himself at the feet of the Buddha.

The story is symbolic of how the world is forever buzzing with adversity. There are always dark clouds, causing different reactions or expressions in people. But in spite of them, one can experience perfect stability by having profound philosophical insight.

Adversity and prosperity are mere concepts. If you have the proper insight, you realize that most of the time what appears to be adversity is really prosperity in disguise. Likewise, your prosperities are at times adversity in disguise.

If you remember God and turn your heart towards Him with humility during adversity, then what you view as adversity transforms into prosperity. You will discover a Divine message concealed within the adversity. Deeper qualities that lie hidden within your heart soon are revealed. As your faith becomes unwavering, adversity fades. When adversity passes away, you are like the radiant moon that has emerged from the dark clouds. You find yourself far stronger, brighter, and wiser than before.

**An Avatara Must Descend
within One's Own Heart**

Through the study of the underlying meaning of the avatars of the Lord, one can invoke their grace, and prepare for their descent within one's own personality. There are many avatars depicted in every religion of the world. Though the terminologies differ, and the concepts vary, one can clearly see the spiritual movement illustrated in their lives. It is by adhering to this spiritual movement that one is in vital contact with Divinity—not by merely accepting a historical name and form as the Divine Self.

Following are the ten important incarnations of Lord Vishnu that we have highlighted, along with their mystic implications:

1. Matsya – Fish (spiritual insight)
2. Kachhapa – Tortoise (withdrawal of the senses and *samyama* – the combination of concentration, meditation and *samadhi*)

3. Varaha – Hog (purification of the unconscious and revelation of faith)

4. Vamana – Dwarf (development of humility, and consequent expansion of consciousness)

5. Nara-Simha – Man-Lion (manifestation of spiritual power in the vital-mental plane, and development of Divine devotion)

6. Parashurama – Rama with the axe (Destruction of *rajasic* impressions in the unconscious, and development of detachment)

7. Rama – Delighter of the Heart and exemplar of Divine Rectitude (Realization of the Bliss of Self, by destroying ignorance and its retinue)

8. Balarama – Rama with power or spiritual strength (The development of *shubha vasanas* in an enlightened personality, spiritual movement in the unconscious realm)

9. Krishna – Enchanter of all Hearts (Divine perfection within and without – In the realms of the unconscious as well as in the realms of the day-to-day activities)

10. Buddha – The Enlightened (The embodiment of a spiritual process culminating in *Nirvana*, and expressing itself in the most sublime virtues of non-violence and compassion)

Although there have been prophecies of a new avatara to be born on earth at a future date, sincere spiritual seekers should focus more on promoting the descent of that incarnation of the Lord within their own personality—in the form of ever-increasing expansion of consciousness and ultimate Realization of the Self in all!

**"I have sown in the field
of my mind the seeds of good
samskaras and good karmas.
Seeds of meditation and insight have
sprouted in the fertile soil of my mind,
and thus have I harvested the
crop of wisdom. Since I abide
in eternity nothing can affect me.
So, pour down, oh rain!"**

