

**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), 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.

## Krishna Avatara



### Lord Krishna's Parents

Lord Vishnu incarnated as Lord Krishna in Dwapar Yuga, during a much later era than the one in which Lord Rama had incarnated. At the time of his birth, Mathura, a city in North India, was ruled by Kamsa, a demoniac king. Kamsa had overthrown and cruelly imprisoned his father, Ugrasena, the true king of Mathura, and he, along with his assistants and ministers, had established a rule of heartless and materialistic values of life.

In an atmosphere of great pomp and splendor, Kamsa's cousin, Devaki, was wedded to Vasudeva, a nobleman in the kingdom. At the conclusion of the wedding ceremony, out of apparent fondness for his cousin and Vasudeva, Kamsa offered to drive their chariot in the gala procession. No sooner had the procession begun, a celestial voice spoke to Kamsa saying, "O Kamsa, the eighth child of Devaki will be your killer." Kamsa became horrified by this sudden prophecy. He unsheathed his sword and decided to kill Devaki on the spot, but Vasudeva dissuaded him from doing so. He promised Kamsa that the eighth child would be offered to him the moment he was born—and thus he need not be afraid of the prophecy.

However, in fear for his own safety, Kamsa imprisoned Devaki and Vasudeva, and mercilessly killed each of their first six children as they were born. Devaki's seventh child, Balarama, was the incarnation

of Sheshanaga—an aspect of Lord Vishnu. (According to the Puranic concept, Sheshanaga is the Cosmic serpent that holds the entire universe on its countless hoods—a figurative portrayal of the Cosmic Mind)

To prevent Balarama's death at the hands of Kamsa, Lord Vishnu commanded Maya Shakti (his Power of Cosmic Illusion) to secretly remove the child from Devaki's womb and place him in the womb of Rohini. Rohini was Vasudeva's second wife, living in the village of Gokula with Nanda, a close friend of Vasudeva, and Nanda's wife, Yashoda. He further instructed the Devi to be born herself in the womb of Yashoda.

Following these instructions, Devi descended to earth and carried out the transfer of Balarama from Devaki to Rohini. When this was accomplished, the people in Mathura all concluded that Devaki had lost this child due to a miscarriage.

### The Birth of Krishna

When the time approached for the birth of the eighth child—Krishna, Kamsa sleeplessly awaited the advent of his enemy. It was the rainy season of Indian monsoons. The sky was overcast with dark clouds and the night was pitch black. Lord Krishna chose to be born at midnight when his parents were fettered to iron chains. Immediately after his birth, he assumed the shining, effulgent form of Vishnu, with four arms, holding a conch, mace, discus and lotus. He said to his parents, "Please, take me away from this place to the home of Nanda across the Yamuna River and make an exchange of babies, because right at this moment a female child has been born through Yashoda, in Nanda's house. Bring the female baby here, to this place. Do not be concerned with the cruel destiny that may await that child; nothing will happen to her. She is my Yoga-Maya (my Divine Power)." Thus saying, the Lord assumed the form of a newborn child.

Father Vasudeva prepared himself to conduct the Divine behest. He witnessed the special miracle operating as his fetters broke loose. The gate keepers were found in deep sleep, and all security measures were suspended for the time being. Vasudeva then took the baby in a basket and crossed the flooded waters of the Yamuna River—another Divine miracle.

After baby Krishna was secretly placed next to the sleeping Yashoda in Gokula, Vasudeva retraced his steps and returned to the prison in Mathura with

the female child. At once the gates closed, the fetters were resumed, the baby commenced crying, and the news of the birth of the eighth child was brought to the attention of Kamsa. The demoniac King rushed to the prison house and snatched the baby girl from the arms of Devaki. Despite the mother's pleadings, he tried to kill the infant, but she flew up into the heavens in the form of a many-armed Goddess and declared: "Oh fool, your killer is born elsewhere." Thus saying, the Devi disappeared.

### Lord Krishna's Childhood

Lord Krishna continued to thrive in the home of Nanda and Yashoda, who looked after him as their own dear child. Although Kamsa attempted on many occasions to kill the boy, all efforts failed.

Nanda was a lord of cowherds (*gopas*) and milkmaidens (*gopis*), simple folk who possessed great spiritual attainment, which enabled them to witness the childhood days of the Lord. Thus, the two Divine boys—Krishna and his elder brother, Balarama—enjoyed close, playful friendships with the other children



of the village. The young boys seemed very naughty—always stealing butter from the houses of the *gopas* and *gopis*—but merely to delight the hearts of their adoring neighbors.

### Divine Leela in Vrindavana

Seeing that life at Gokula was fraught with constant interruptions from the demons, Nanda decided to leave Gokula and move to Vrindavana—a beautiful haven of nature at the banks of the Yamuna River. Thus, Nanda, with his wife Yashoda, and all the cowherds and milkmaidens under him, left the village and went to live in Vrindavana.



Krishna and Balarama were young men by then and their presence was deeply inspiring for all those around them. Whenever Krishna was near, the *gopis* of Vrindavana felt a Divine attraction surging in their hearts, a love that transcended all forms of ordinary worldly love. This love—and especially that of Radha for her beloved Krishna—is depicted in glowing terms in Srimad Bhagavata Purana.

### Divine Victory in Mathura

After seeing so many demonstrations of Krishna's miraculous powers in Vrindavana, Kamsa invited Krishna and Balarama to appear at his court in Mathura to participate in heroic demonstrations taking place in the capital. The intention of Kamsa was to destroy the Divine brothers by deceptive means, but Krishna and Balarama defeated all the attempts made against them. Finally, Lord Krishna killed Kamsa, thus fulfilling the prophesy of the past.

Krishna then visited the prison and released Ugrasena, the father of Kamsa, and reinstated him on the throne. At the same time, Vasudeva and Devaki, Lord Krishna's actual parents, were joyfully released from their long imprisonment.

Now that Lord Krishna had been safely reunited with his parents, Nanda and his party returned home with heavy hearts. The *gopis* of Vrindavana, who were steeped in love for Krishna, passed their days in the sweet memory of the times when he played and sported in their midst, his music flooding the atmosphere through his flute. Their intense love enabled them to perceive the presence of the Lord, even when he was physically absent.

After restoring righteous rule in Mathura, the Divine brothers were sent by their parents to a *gurukula* (ancient school) to be educated. There they received knowledge and training in the spiritual and material fields of life under Guru Sandipani.

### Krishna Drives Arjuna's Chariot in the Mahabharata War

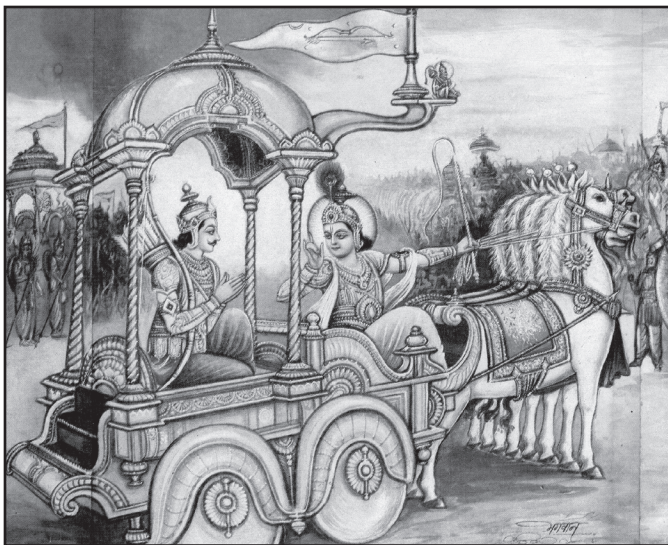
The Mahabharata, a great poetical work of the ancient past, sings the glory of Lord Krishna in glowing terms. The Bhagavad Gita is a portion of this vast epic. In the profound mystic insight contained in these texts, we find Lord Krishna as a great statesman, a great king-maker, a savior of mankind, a great

teacher, a philosopher, guide, Guru of all, and above all as the Supreme Manifestation of Divine glory and power for those who are endowed with devotion and wisdom.

During the period of time allegorically highlighted in the Mahabharata, the country was torn by political rivalries, and there were many small dynasties ruled by proud warriors. The greatest among them were the rulers of Hastinapur (Old Delhi), who experienced troubling disharmony in the royal family. In the line of King Shantanu, Dhritarashtra and Pandu were the two kings entitled to the throne. Because Dhritarashtra had been born blind, Pandu, the younger brother, ruled the kingdom. However, after Pandu's death, the crown was worn by Dhritarashtra.

Dhritarashtra had one-hundred sons who were demonic in nature. The eldest of his sons, Duryodhana, along with his sinful brothers, were known as the Kauravas. Pandu had five righteous sons—Yudhishthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, who were known as the Pandavas.

The conflict between the Pandavas and Kauravas grew to such an extent that Lord Krishna's Divine plan promoted a great war that would allow the Pandavas to regain their rights and restore virtuous rule in Hastinapur. In this great battle, Lord Krishna acted as a chariot driver for his friend, Arjuna. In the beginning of the fight, Arjuna exhibited confusion and grief about fighting some of his dearest relatives and wanted to withdraw himself from the battle. At this time Lord Krishna conveyed to him the immortal teachings of the Gita and guided the Pandavas to victory.



## The Conclusion of Krishna's Earthly Mission

Many years had passed since the destruction of the Kauravas in the Mahabharata War, and the righteous Pandavas enjoyed a harmonious rule in Hastinapur while Krishna continued to rule his kingdom in Dwaraka. One day, Krishna thought within himself, "The main purpose for which I have incarnated has been accomplished. I have rid the earth of its burden. Further, all these thousands of powerful relatives of mine, the Yadavas, have also fulfilled the purpose of their existence. It is time for me to work out their destruction. Let me retire from this world along with all these manifestations of mine."

So, with that idea in view, Krishna said goodbye to a congregation of Sages who had been living close to his palace, enjoying Krishna's presence. These Sages, knowing what was in the mind of Krishna, then left the immediate area of the palace and went to a holy place on the outskirts of the royal city.

### The Curse of the Sages

One day, some Yadava youths passed by and noticed these Sages. Having nothing else to do, they decided to play a prank. They dressed up Samba, the son of Krishna and Jambavanti, as a pregnant lady and brought him before the Sages. "Oh gracious Sages," they said, "here among us is a woman who is pregnant. She would like to know whether she will have a male or female child, but she is too shy to ask you herself. Because you Sages are wise and nothing is hidden from your view, please tell her what child she will have."

The Sages became incensed when the boys asked this question and one of them immediately pronounced a curse. "You dull-wits," he said, "this personality is going to give rise to a *mausala* (a pestle or iron rod) that will destroy your entire family, all the Yadavas."

These young men had never really intended to arouse the wrath of the Sages, but merely to play a joke on them. Terrified by the curse they had received, they rushed home and removed all the cloths they had wrapped around Samba. To their amazement, within the folds of the cloths, they found an iron pestle!

They began to grieve over what they had done, but their actions could not be reversed.

With sad faces they, along with Krishna, went to King Ugrasena, the acting king in Dwaraka and told him the story of the iron rod and how the Sages had pronounced the curse. Ugrasena immediately ordered that rod to be ground into powder and thrown into the ocean. So the rod was ground up, except for one small fragment that could not be ground any further. Then the powder and the little fragment that remained were all thrown into the ocean. By doing so, they hoped to nullify the curse that the Yadavas had received from the Sages. However, once a karmic process guided by Divine will is in motion, it cannot be withdrawn.

Thus, as the waves of the ocean brought the powdered particles of the iron rod to the shore, out of every little particle grew a special type of grass, the edges of which were like terrible swords. These began to grow in abundance by the shores of Prabhasa Kshetra beach, waiting silently for the right opportunity to perform the job of destruction that was foretold by the Sages' curse.

### **The Destruction of the Yadavas**

Urged by Krishna to move swiftly, the thousands of Yadavas crossed to the mainland, proceeding by horse and chariot to Prabhasa Kshetra for the purificatory retreat. For a while after arriving at that sacred place, they felt very inspired. But by the force of Krishna's will they began to drink a special type of alcoholic beverage that not only intoxicates but twists the intellect as well.

The moment they started drinking, their personalities changed. Each one started bragging of his power and began to express hatred for others. Soon people started fighting and killing each other, and the mob became completely out of control. Quickly Prabhasa turned into a beach of terrible human destruction. When the men had used up all the arrows and weapons they already possessed, they began plucking those unique grasses (generated from the powdered *mausala*) growing by the shore to use as weapons. The power generated by each leaf was as infallible as Indra's thunderbolt. Once directed to anyone, it killed the person immediately. Thus, within a very

short time, in a most amazing fashion, the Yadavas were utterly destroyed

### **The Departure of Balarama**

After seeing the destruction of all those men, Balarama seated himself by the ocean and entered into deep meditation in order to bring his earthly existence to an end. At that moment, something unique happened. From Balarama's body, breaking the crown of his head, a thousand-hooded snake emerged and ascended to the heavens to merge in the Absolute—illustrating that Balarama was an incarnation of Sheshanaga, the thousand-hooded serpent upon which Lord Vishnu reclines, as it were, in the milky ocean of eternity.

Mystically speaking, behind the material world, there is a mental force—the Mind of God, the Cosmic Mind. That mental force that sustains the entire universe was represented by Balarama and, at the time of his death, his spirit assumed its true identity as Sheshanaga, another aspect of the Divine Self.

### **The Departure of Krishna from the Earth Plane**

Seeing that Balarama had departed, Krishna sat under a peepal tree (a kind of banyan tree) and assumed his beautifully radiant, four-armed, super-human form. Krishna then placed his legs in such a way that his left foot rested upon his right thigh, with the sole turned upward.

At just that moment a hunter named Jara was passing by, looking through the foliage in the light of the moon. The hunter, mistaking the foot of Krishna for the ears of a deer, discharged an arrow to bring down the deer. According to the Divine plan, that arrow had a special tip fashioned from the fragment of the iron rod (*mausala*) that had been thrown into the ocean at the time of the Sages' curse.

Having discharged the arrow, Jara immediately rushed forward, thinking that a deer had been killed. To his great surprise, however, he found Krishna seated there, his foot punctured by the arrow. The hunter began to tremble with great fear. Prostrating himself before Krishna he begged for a swift death.

However, Krishna comforted him, saying: “Oh hunter, do not be afraid. What you have done is what I have made you do. My death is by my own will—securing for you limitless Bliss in heaven.”

## The Symbolism behind the Life of Lord Krishna

As we have seen in this very brief summary, Krishna’s life is replete with intriguing colorful stories and filled with suspense and captivating drama. Apart from its external details, however, each one of the Lord’s sportive deeds (*leelas*) conveys many deep mysteries of life.

To a devotee, the historicity of Krishna’s earthly mission is of very little importance compared to its symbolism. Each and every episode in his life, every movement of his personality, is highly symbolic of a spiritual development in the life of an aspirant, as well as a living commentary on the glory of Divine ecstasy.

For example, one dramatic episode in Bhagavata Purana describes Krishna’s encounter with the demon Kaliya:

One day, while Krishna was playing a game with his friends, he entered into the depths of the Yamuna River under the pretext of retrieving their ball. There he encountered the poisonous five-hooded cobra called Kaliya. Lord Krishna fought with Kaliya, subjugated him, and danced on his many hoods until the snake requested the Lord to release him and send him away from the river to abide in the ocean.

Mystically, the woodlands of Vrindavana represent the unconscious realms within the mind of an aspirant in which there abound Divine impressions of universal love, purity, contentment, peace, and bliss. It is the goal of an aspirant to abide in Vrindavana and sport with the Divine Self forever through the attainment of Self-realization.

The Yamuna River represents the mental process within an individual that has become

poisoned due to the presence of Kaliya—the very embodiment of the five *kleshas* or afflictions that abide deep in the unconscious: ignorance (*avidya*), egoism (*asmita*), attachment (*raga*), hatred (*dwesha*), and fear of death (*abhinivesha*). The many hoods of Kaliya are the *klishtha vrittis*, the impure thought-waves of the mind that arise due to the manifold ramifications of those *kleshas*.

As your personality becomes spiritually disciplined, you welcome Lord Krishna—the Divine within—and surrender eagerly as Krishna dances upon your egoistic illusions and crushes them with Yogic skill. Krishna’s sending Kaliya away from the Yamuna River to abide in the ocean symbolizes the transition from ordinary egoistic awareness in a conditioned mind to the awareness that “I am That, I am the Self, I am all!” The moment ego establishes that identity with the Absolute, one’s mind—the unconscious realm of Vrindavana—regains its essential Divine Purity.

