

THE INCARNATIONS — Avatāras

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir-bhavati bhārata |
abhyutthānam-adharmasya tadā'tmānaṃ sṛjāmy-aham || Gita 4: 7 ||

Whenever there is a decline of Dharma, O Arjuna, and an increase of Adharma, then I incarnate Myself.

paritrāṇāya sādḥunāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām |
dharma saṃsthāpan-ārthāya saṃbhavāmi yuge yuge || Gita 4:8 ||

For the protection of the good and for the destruction of the wicked, for the establishment of Dharma, I advent myself from age to age.

The doctrine of the Incarnation of God is fundamental to Vaishnava theology, according to His declaration given in the Gita, Vishnu takes on many incarnations but there are only 10 major ones.

Avatāra	Form	Activity
Matsya	Fish	Saved the world from the flood by guiding the ship of Manu
Kūrma	Turtle	Assisted in the rejuvenation of the gods by facilitating the churning of the ocean to acquire the nectar of immortality.
Varāha	Boar	Rescued the Vedas which were stolen from Brahma and hidden in the ocean.
Narasimha	Man-lion	Destruction of the demon king Hiranyakashipu and liberating his son Prahlada.
Vāmana	Dwarf	Vanquished the demon king Bali by tricking him into donating three steps of land and then expanding his form to include the entire universe.
Paraśu-rāma	Rama with the Axe	Destruction of the dynasty of demonic kings who were tormenting the earth.
Rāma-chandra	Rama with the Bow	Killing of the demon king Ravana and his brother Kumbhakarna, establishing of the third brother Vibhishana on the throne and the liberating of his wife Sita who had been kidnapped by Ravana.
Balarāma	Rama with the Plough	The elder brother of Krishna whom he assisted in all his pastimes. Some texts give Buddha as the 7 th incarnation.
Kṛṣṇa	Prince of Dwarka	Krishna — the principal incarnation of Vishnu. Who vanquished many demon kings and taught the Bhagavad Gita — one of the principal scriptures of Hinduism to Arjuna his beloved disciple.
Kalki	The future Saviour	Expected at the end of the Age of Quarrel – in about 3000 years!

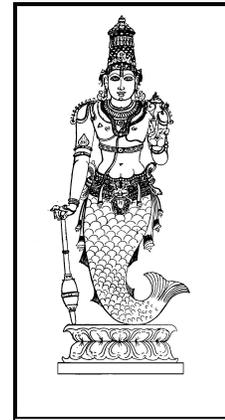
Some modern commentators have seen in these avatāras a quasi-scientific theory of evolution — from the sea-dwelling fish (*matsya-Avatāra*) through semi aquatic mammals (*kurma-Avatāra*) land-mammals (*Varaha-Avatāra*), half-man (*narasimha-*

Avatāra) primitive human (*vamana-Avatāra*), lower human (*parasurama-Avatāra*), superior human (*ramachandra-Avatāra*), god-man (*Krishna and balarama Avatāras*), future perfection (*kalki-Avatāra*). It is unknown whether this was the original intention of the myth-makers but merely a coincidence.

Some of the Symbology and interpretations of the Avatāras are as follows: _

1. Matysa — Fish.

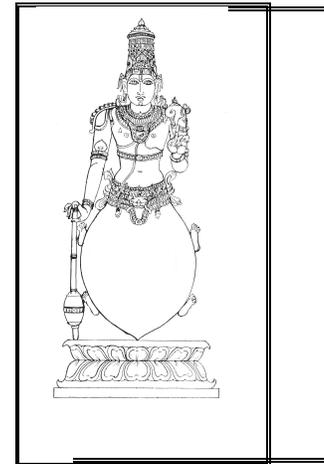
The cycle of birth and death and the cosmos of material existence is called Samsāra — the “ocean” of existence. It has vast unfathomed depths, and is filled with dangerous creatures such as sharks. The fish is representative of jivas (sparks of the divine) that have become sentient beings in the ocean of existence and are swimming around constantly in fear of being eaten by larger fish. And ultimately ending up in the jaws of the shark, which is the most efficient of predators — symbolic of Time that ultimately swallows all things. Śrī Vishnu thus incarnates as a “fish” in the form of the sentient beings that He has come to rescue. The Matsya incarnation thus teaches us that the Lord descends in various shapes and forms of beings in order to liberate them from samsāra.



2. Kūrma — Turtle.

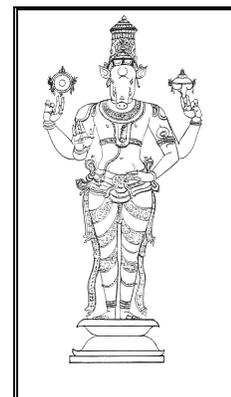
The turtle is symbolic of the embodied jiva. It lives both on land and in the water indicating the variety of environments in which sentient beings can survive. It has a hard outer-shell and can withdraw all its limbs. The body is our “shell” — it is not the real “I” but merely a vehicle for our sojourn in samsāra. True spiritual knowledge is of the difference between the mind-body complex and the Self. The process of meditation and spiritual unfoldment is analogous to the turtle withdrawing its limbs and going within itself.

Kurma Avatāra features in the story of the Churning of the Ocean which is a metaphor for the churning of the mind through spiritual practice (*sādhana*) in order to obtain the nectar of immortality (*amrita*) which is our true essence.



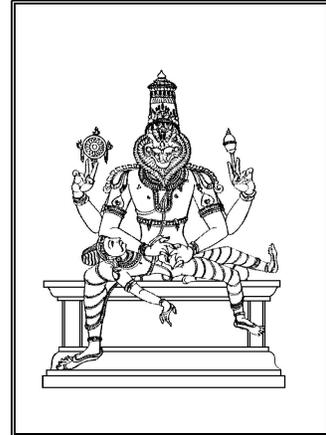
3. Varāha — Boar

The Boar is the personification of the Vedic Lore. The four feet represent the four Vedas, the sacrificial post its tusk, Syenacit its mouth. The fire was its tongue, the sacrificial ladle the mouth cavity, its huge and expansive eyes were the sun and the moon. The ponds and wells for holy water were its ears. The Sāman chant was its voice, its body was the sacrificial hall, the oblation was its nostril, the kuśa-grass the hairs on its body, Vedic Hymns were the bristles, the stars and planets formed its necklace, the whirlpool of deluge was its embellishment, thus was the boar the embodiment of Vedic Lore. (Narasimha Purāṇa 39:11-14)



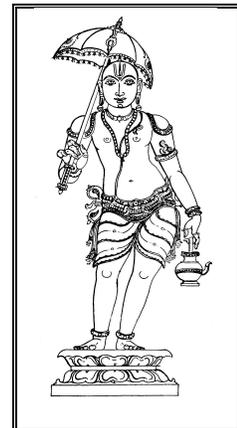
4. Narasimha — Man-lion

In the story of Narasimha, the demon king Hiranyakashipu requests and obtains a boon from Brahma that he could not be killed by anything which belonged to the realm of opposites — not on earth or the sky, not by day or night, not in his house or outside, not by god or by demon, not by human or beast, etc. etc. Once the boon had been guaranteed Hiranyakashipu became an egocentric tyrant. So in order to dispatch him Lord Vishnu incarnated in a form which transcended all pairs of opposites and killed the demon in the doorway to his house, upon his raised thigh, with his nails. This story teaches us the nature of the ego and its wayward ways and the nature of the Supreme Being which transcends all pairs of opposites.



5. Vāmana — The Dwarf

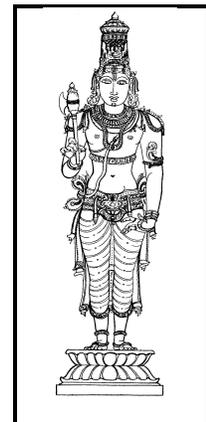
The story of Vāmana also involves an egocentric king Bali, although less malicious than Hiranyakashipu! Vishnu takes the form of a Brahmin dwarf — an insignificant being who is usually the subject of mockery and mirth. He requests the gift of land — enough to cross in three strides. The king condescends and Vāmana immediately increases his size — with one step he crosses the earth and the second step the manifest universe — he then asks for his 3rd step — Bali, in humility offers his head. He is forgiven and rewarded with the kingship of the nether regions. Vāmana is the only incarnation which is repeatedly mentioned and praised in the Vedas. It is said to be the best of all incarnations because no one was killed and everyone was benefited and liberated.



6. Paraśu-rāma — Rama-with-the-axe

This was a partial incarnation which was necessitated by the earth being burdened by a dynasty of oppressive kings (kṣatriyas). Paraśu-rāma was the son of an ascetic Brahmin who had been unjustly abused by the king, in order to avenge his father's honour he set about exterminating the wicked princes.

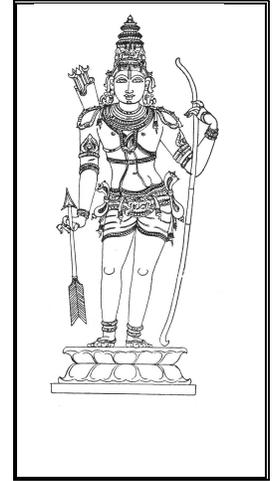
He was still present on earth during the following 3 incarnations:— Rama with whom he had an encounter, Balarama and Krishna.



7. Rāma-chandra — Rama-with-the-bow.

The essence of this incarnation was shared among four borthers: Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna. Rama was the most perfect person who ever lived and his biography as retold in the Ramayana serves as a blue-print for our own way of being in the world. Rama teaches by example – and his every act is a teaching on Dharma. Sītā was His wife who was the embodiment of Lakshmi — the mediatrix of compassion. The whole of the Ramayana is about śaraṇāgati — the path of surrender. The most effective way to liberation for sentient beings drowning in the ocean of saṃsāra is to surrender to God. In the Ramayana everyone ends up surrendering and being benefited – even enemies are pardoned and liberated

Rama is known as maryada-purushottama — The Supreme Exemplar of Dharma Practice.

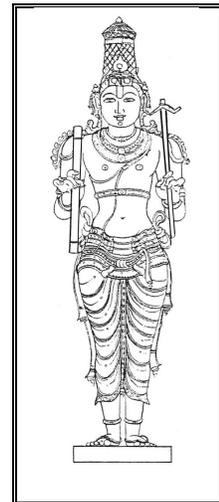


8. Bala-rāma — Rama-with-the-plough

Although considered among the ten principal incarnation of Vishnu Balarama is in fact an Incarnation of Ananta Sesha — the eternal servant of the Lord who acts as his couch — the thousand headed serpent. Born as the elder brother of Śrī Krishna, he serves as the companion and support person for his younger brother.

Ananta Sesha incarnates as the Sage Patanjali — the author of the Yoga Sūtras and according to Tengalai Śrīvaishnava theology as Manavalamahamuni — the last of the acharyas to be deified.

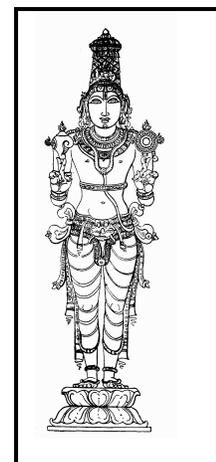
In some texts Balarama is omitted and the Buddha included as an Avatāra. This is seen by some scholars as an attempt to incorporate the Buddhists back into the Vedic Fold.



9. Śrī Kṛṣṇa

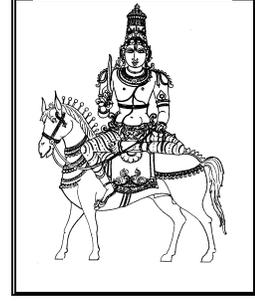
Krishna is considered to be the only complete incarnation of Vishnu (pūrṇa-avatāra). He is Vishnu himself in His totality of being — born on earth in order to establish Dharma. This was done primarily through the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna on the field of battle. His birth was also for the purpose of manifesting His accessibility and loving condescension for all his devotees and for facilitating their surrender to him.

He engaged in many wonderful pastimes — none of which should we attempt to emulate! Krishna is called the upadesha-purushottama — the Supreme Exemplar of Teaching. We listen to the teaching of Krishna but follow the example of Rama! Rama and Krishna are the most popular of all the incarnations.



10. Kalki

Kalki is the incarnation that is expected at the end of the current age of Kali in about 5000 years hence. As he has not yet appeared, there are no temples built to him neither is he the object of devotion or veneration.



God in the Para-Vāsudeva form is always accompanied by Lakṣmi or His three consorts Śrīdevī, Bhūdevī and Nīlādevī. In each of his emanations of hypostatic forms he is accompanied by a specific emanation or “expansion” of Lakṣmī. These are categorised as the eight śaktis or the twelve śaktis. The translations of the names give us some insight into their nature and functionality.

Manifestation of the Lord		Accompanying Consort	
varāha	<i>The giver of boons</i>	niśā	<i>dream</i>
mukunda	<i>The giver of Liberation</i>	vinadā	<i>Speechless</i>
nandaja	<i>Born of Joy</i>	sunadā	<i>The great roar of joy</i>
satya	<i>Truth</i>	bhukti	<i>Enjoyment</i>
bhūdhara	<i>Bearer of the earth</i>	kledinī	<i>Moisture</i>
vaikuṇṭha	<i>Heaven</i>	vasudhā	<i>Earth</i>
cakrī	<i>Wielder of the Discus of Time</i>	jayā	<i>Victory</i>
gadī	<i>Wielder of the mace of justice</i>	durgā	<i>Unassailable</i>
śārṅgī	<i>Wielder of the Bow of the mind</i>	prabhā	<i>Splendour</i>
khadgī	<i>Wielder of the sword of Knowledge</i>	satyā	<i>Truth</i>
śaṅkhī	<i>Wielder of the Conch of proclamation</i>	caṇḍā	<i>Wrathful</i>
halī	<i>Wielder of the plough of cultivation/revelation</i>	vāṇī	<i>Speech</i>
musalī	<i>The pestle of arduous self-transformation</i>	vilāsinī	<i>Manifestation, sport, pleasure</i>
śūli	<i>Bearer of the trident of victory over body, speech and mind</i>	vijayā	<i>Victory</i>
pāśī	<i>Bearer of the Noose of attachment</i>	virajā	<i>Dispassion, free from taint</i>
aṅkuśī	<i>Bearer of the Goad of motivation</i>	viśvā	<i>Cosmos</i>

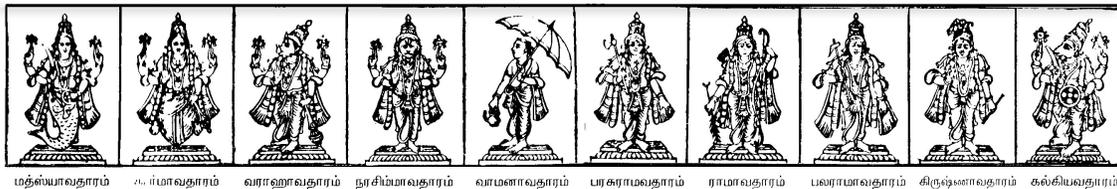
Avatāras and the Navagrahas

The avatāras are associated with the 9 Grahas of Hindu Astrology. The term “graha’ means seizer and includes the seven planets plus Rahu and Ketu which are not actual planets but mathematical points at which the paths of the sun and the moon bisect each other.

Each of the grahas has a regent deity and a vice regent deity

Graha	Adi-Devata — Regent	Pratyadi-Devata — vice-regent	Avatāra
Sun	Agni	Siva	Rama
Moon	Uma/Lakshmi	Apa — The Waters	Krishna
Mars	Skanda	Bhu-devi	Narasimha
Mercury	Narayana	Vishnu	Buddha
Jupiter	Brahma	Indra	Vamana
Venus	Indra	Indrani	Parasurama
Saturn	Prajapati/Siva	Yama	Kurma
Rahu	Bhairava/Durga	Naga	Varaha
Ketu	Ganesha	Chitra-gupta	Matsya
Lagna			Kalki

Śrīvaishnavas as uncompromising monotheists substitute forms of Vishnu for other deities that are prescribed to be worshipped for various astrological maladies. So instead of worshipping the 9 grahas they worship the avatāras instead.



மதீஸ்யாவதாரம் கர்மாவதாரம் வரஹாவதாரம் நரசிம்மாவதாரம் வாமனாவதாரம் பாகுராவதாரம் ராமாவதாரம் பவராமாவதாரம் கிருஷ்ணாவதாரம் கல்கிவதாரம்

Viṣṇu as Sūrya-Nārāyaṇa

Vishnu is also identified with the Sun as the Self of the universe. The Sun is the controller of time and seasons and is the preserving force as well as the destroying force of the Universe. According to the Śrīmad Bhagavatam (12.11.27-50) the Lord Narayana is the Sun, Lord of Time, He manifests Himself in 12 forms known as the Adityas — the Sons-of-the-primordial-vastness, each with 6 associates as follows:—

Month	Aditya	Apsara	Rākṣasa	Nāga	Yakṣa	Rishi	Gandharva
Caitra	Dhātā	Kṛtasthali	Heti	Vāsuki	Rathakṛt	Pulastya	Tumburu
Vaiśakha	Aryama	Punjikasthali	Praheti	Kacanira	Athaujas	Pulaha	Narada
Jyeṣṭha	Mitra	Menaka	Pauruṣeya	Takṣaka	Rathasvan	Atri	Haha
āṣāḍha	Varuna	Rambha	Citrasvana	Sukra	Sahajanya	Vasiṣṭha	Huhu
śrāvana	Indra	Pramloca	Varya	Elāpatra	Srotā	Angirasa	Visvāvasu
Bhādra	Vivasvān	Anumloca	Vyāghra	Sankhapāl	āsārana	Bhrigu	Ugrasena
Māgha	Pūṣā	Ghritāci	Vāta	Dhananjaya	Suruci	Gautama	Suṣena
Phālguna	Parjanya	Senājī	Varcas	Airāvata	Kratu	Bharadvāj	Visva
Mārga	Amśu	Urvaśi	Vidyucatru	Mahā-śankha	Tārṣya	Kaśyapa	Ritasena
Puśya	Bhaga	Pūrvacitti	Sphurja	Karkoṭaka	ūrna	āyu	Ariṣṭhanemi
āśvina	Tvaṣṭha	Tilottama	Brahmāpeta	Kambala	śatajit	Jamadagni	Dhritarāstra
Kārtika	Viṣṇu	Rambha	Makhāpeta	Aśvatara	Satyajit	Viśvamitra	Sūryavarcas

The **Nagas** bind the wheels of the chariot, the **Yakshas** harness the horses, the **Rakshasas** push the chariot from behind, the **Gandharvas** sing and the **Apsaras** dance before the chariot.

The Sun is the center of creation, it represents the limit, the point where the manifest and the unmanifest worlds unite. (Chandogya Up. 3.19.1.[133]) It is for us the gateway to the path of the gods. As the source of light, physical, mental and spiritual the sun is the nearest image we can conceive of for the Supreme Divinity. The Sun is the visible source of the world in which we live. All that exists was born from the sun. [135]

The sun consists of a fire that consumes its own substance, and thus it is identified with the cosmic sacrifice.

He who dwells in humans and the sun is the same. Taittiriya Up, 2.8.

As our inner self the sun is always directing our minds and inner faculties just as it directs all our vital cycles. This is why the Sun is known as Savitar — the Impeller.

Sūrya Nārāyaṇa has four wives:—

Knowledge (also known as Suvarcala — the Resplendant),
 Light — jyoti
 Shade — Chaya
 Sovereignty — Aishvarya



The 12 Adityas represent the sovereign principles, the personification of the laws that rule the universe and society. They are the pre-existent principles upon which the Universe is based. They are born from Kaśyapa (“Clear vision”) and Aditi (“Primordial Vastness”), the totality of Being the first Goddess.

These Cosmic Principles rule the relationship between human beings as well as the relationship between human beings and the forces of Nature.

Thus there are two corresponding sets of sovereign principles one that rules this mundane world and the other that rules the spiritual realm.

Thus there are 6 pairs.—

The Six Major Sovereign Principles

Material World		Spiritual World	
Mitra	"Friendship", solidarity, sanctity of the promise.	Varuṇa	"The Binder" the mysterious laws of fate
Aryaman	Chivalry, honour, the rules of society	Dātā	Cosmic Order
Bhaga	The inherited share	Aṃśa	the gods given share

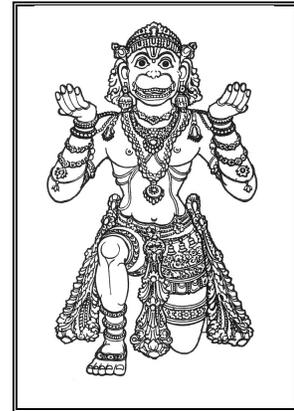
The Six Minor Sovereign Principles

Tvaṣṭra	The Shaper, craftsmanship	Savitra	The Vivifier
Puṣan	the Nourisher, Inner security, prosperity	Indra	The Mighty, courage, outer security, heroism
Vivasvan	The Resplendent, ancestral custom, morality, ethics, the law of righteousness, the traditional law	Viṣṇu	The Pervader, knowledge, the omnipresent cosmic law which governs the order of the Universe.

HANUMĀN

Last but not least, a few words about one of the most popular deities of the Hindu pantheon; Hanuman — the monkey-god. He is considered to be an incarnation of Lord Shiva who was born to assist Rama in his adventures and pastimes. He is one of the main characters in the Rāmāyana and is the embodiment of love and devotion, as well as the paragon of dedicated and unmotivated service.

He also represents the unrealised potential in each and every one of us – if the mythology Hanuman is the son of the Wind-god but doesn't know his true potential until reminded by Jāmbavan the bear. He then accepts the challenge and flies through the air to seek for Sītā in Laṅka.



He performs all sorts of miraculous feat and is rewarded by the boon of perpetual service to the lotus feet of Rāma. So wherever an icon of Rāma is established there will always be one of Hanumān as well.



KĀMA DEVA — Lord Viṣṇu's son

Lord Viṣṇu is the preserver of the Natural as well as Moral Order of the Cosmos (ṛta) and Lakṣmi presides over resources and all forms of prosperity and pleasure. Together they give birth to Kāma Deva or the God of Desire which is most primal drive in the universe and therefore a force which must be reckoned with. Kāma is said in some texts to be Self-born but in other texts like the Harivamśa he is said to be the son of Lakṣmī. He was also reborn after his destruction by Lord Śiva as Pradyumna the son of Kṛṣṇa.



Kāma is the personification of Desire in general, but the most specific and powerful of all desire-forces is the libido or sex-drive which is linked to the procreation and preservation of the Universe.

Kāma has 2 wives:— 1. **Rati** — the pleasure obtained from intercourse and 2. **Prīti** — love and affection for another. He also has a younger brother named **Krodha** — Anger, a daughter named **Tṛṣṇā** — thirst or craving, and a son named **Aniruddha** — the Unobstructed. His best friend and eternal companion is **Vasanta** — spring, and he is always accompanied by the demons called the **Māras** — strikers or killers. He is served by the Gandharvas and the Apsaras.

The Accoutrements

Kāma Deva is the presiding deity of the mind, the god of beauty and youth. He is usually pictured as a handsome proud adolescent riding a parrot. He carries a bow made of sugarcane with a string comprised of bees. He holds five arrows.

Śuka — the parrot symbolizes Truth for whatever is taught to the parrot is repeated verbatim. The parrot does interpret or process what it hears and learns but only repeats it exactly.

Ikṣu-kodaṇḍā — the sugarcane bow. Sugarcane is sweet at the oldest part signifying that true love comes with age. The leaves of the sugarcane are sharp and capable of cutting one, the powder from the leaves is also a severe irritant, indicating that desire is always accompanied by hurt. This idea is further strengthened by the bees forming the string of

the bow. Bees produce honey but they also sting. Honey cannot be gotten without some risk of pain!

Pañca-bāṇa — the five arrows symbolize the five flowers associated with romance as well as the five senses which are all affected by the active libido. Desire is fulfilled through all the senses — sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell.

Vasanta — Kāma deva is most active when accompanied by his mate Spring, all the biological universe is aroused and active in reproduction.

Māras — wherever Kāma goes the Striker follow. All desire is accompanied by suffering in some form — either suffering from the intensity of the love or deprivation of it or its loss. It is well attested that Love so very easily turns into Hate, which is another aspect of the same Love force.

Some of Kāmadeva's names are:—

Madana — "He who intoxicates with love." *Manmatha* — "He who agitates the mind."
Māra — "He who injures." *Pradyumna* — "He who conquers all" or "He who illumines all"
Anaṅga — "He who is without a body."

ŚUKRĀCĀRYA — Lakṣmī's Brother

Both Lakṣmī and Śukra (The planet Venus) are the offspring of the sage Bhṛgu. Śukrācārya was the preceptor of the anti-gods and promulgated materialism. As the preceptor to Bali Maharāja he also confronted Lord Viṣṇu in the Vāmana incarnation and was blinded by Him in his one eye.

Lakṣmī as the goddess of resources and prosperity is suitably regarded as the sister of 'Materialism' — but when the teachings of Śukra are restrained and tempered by the compassion and ethical character of Lakṣmī then materialism works for the benefit of all sentient beings and becomes a source of Universal welfare.

THE MINOR INCARNATIONS OF VIṢṆU

1. Nara & Nārāyaṇa (Divine Love & Devotion)

The twin sons of Dharma (Righteousness) and his wife Ahimsā (non-violence) are credited with promulgating the message of Prema (divine love) and Bhakta (devotion). They engaged in extreme austerity (*tapasya*) which terrified the gods who sent the most beautiful apsaras to divert them. Narayana slapped his thigh and from it arose a nymph more beautiful than the celestial ones, the new apsaras was called Urvaśī — “Born-of-a-thigh” and became the most prominent nymph in Indra’s paradise. Later they vanquished a demon called Sahasra-kavaca (A thousand armours).

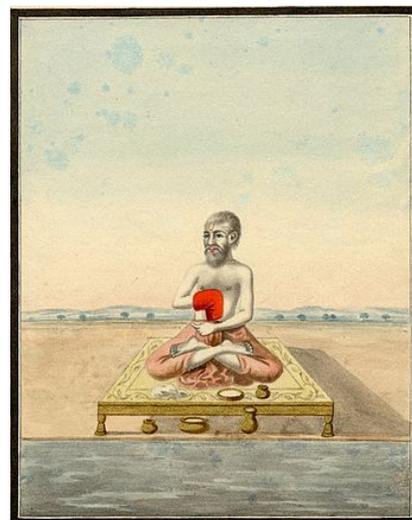


This story has an important lesson for us. Every one of us is a mixture of the human and the divine elements. The anti human and the anti divine demon is ever attempting to seduce us with his thousand wiles. To successfully vanquish him, we need to perform Tapas or austerity. These sages were reborn later as Sri Krishna and Arjuna.

2. Kapila (philosophy)

Kapila was the celebrated teacher of Sāṅkhya philosophy. Kapila was a Vedic sage credited as one of the founders of the Sāṅkhya school of philosophy. He is prominent in the Bhagavata Purana, which features a theistic version of his Sāṅkhya philosophy. Traditional Hindu sources describe him as a descendant of Manu, a grandson of Brahma. The Bhagavad Gita depicts Kapila as a yogi hermit with highly developed siddhis, or spiritual powers.

Many of the details about sage Kapila's life are described in Book 3 of the Bhagavata Purana, where it is mentioned that his parents were Kardama Muni and Devahuti.



Kapila is considered an incarnation of the supreme-being Vishnu and listed as such in the list of incarnations in Bhagavata Purana. After his father left home, Kapila instructed his mother, Devahuti in the philosophy of yoga and devotional worship of Lord Vishnu, enabling her to achieve liberation (moksha). Kapila's Sankhya is also given by Krishna to Uddhava in Book 11 of the Bhagavata Purana, a passage also known as the "Uddhava Gita."

Considering him as an incarnation of Viṣṇu was probably a social manoeuvre to include some non Aryan elements into Aryan civilization.

3. Dattātreya (Magic)



Dattatreya was a teacher of the Anti-gods (Asuras) and the originator of Tantra and also restored Vedic rites (Mahabharata 2.48.2 – 4) He is said to have been born from an emanation of Viṣṇu which impregnated the wife of Sage Atri (The Devourer).

Dattatreya created the soma creeper, he was a libertine who was addicted to wine and women and music. His habitual association with people of low birth made him ritually impure. But in spite of this life-style he was a favourite of the gods whom he had saved from the anti-gods.

In the Bhagavatam there is an account of Dattatreya explaining to King Yadu what he has learned from 24 “gurus” including animals, insects, the earth etc.

4. Yajña (Ritual Sacrifice)

Viṣṇu has always been identified with yajña and is designated as yajña-puruṣa. Many of the legends of Viṣṇu in the Vedas link him in some way or other with the yajña. According to the Viṣṇu Purāṇa (1:7:19 – 21) one of the Prajāpatis (Lords-of-progeny) who assist Brahma in the work of creation, named Ruci (Desire) married Ākūti (Will). From them were born Yajña (Ritual Sacrifice) and his sister Dakṣiṇā (Sacrificial fee). These two united as a couple and had 12 sons called Yāmas (Invocations).

Yajña had the head of a deer and was decapitated by Vīrabhadra at the sacrifice held by Dakṣa. The head then arose into the sky and became the constellation Mṛga-śīrṣa.

The entire universe which is in a constant state of flux is like a sacrifice and the Lord responsible for this creation is looked upon as the personification of that sacrifice. Hence he is Yajña or Yajñesvara.

His image has two heads, seven hands, three legs and four horns. The hands carry the sacrificial implements like ājyapātra (vessel holding the ghee) Sruk, Sruva and Juhu

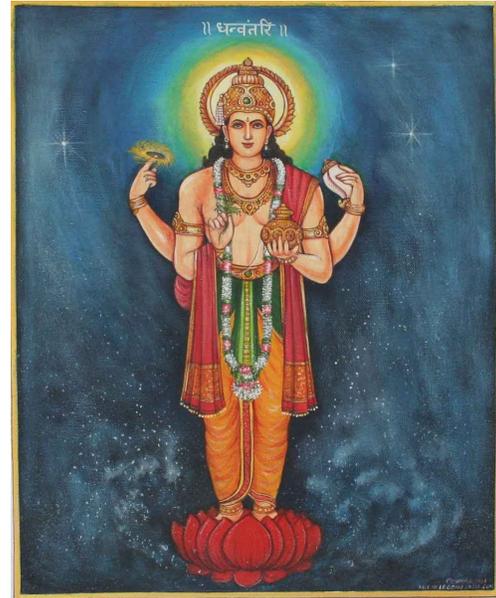
(various kinds of spoons and ladles), apart from Sankha and Chakra. Obviously this is a symbolical representation, the various limbs representing the various items of the sacrifice.

5. Dhanvantari (Medical Science)

Dhanvantari (Moving-in-a-circle) emerged from the 'Ocean of Milk' and appeared with the pot of nectar during the story of the Samudra or Sagar manthan whilst the ocean was being churned by the devas and asuras, using the Mandara mountain and the serpent Vasuki. The pot of Amrita was snatched by the Asuras or Demons, and after this event another avatar, Mohini, appears and takes the nectar back from the Asuras.

Dhanvantari is the patron god of Āyur-veda and was a master of universal knowledge. He was originally a Vedic god who had offerings made to him in the north-eastern corner of the yāga-śālā at twilight.

Dhanvantari is depicted with four hands, holding medical herbs in one hand and a pot containing rejuvenating nectar called *amrita* in another.



6. Hayagrīva or Hayaśīrṣa (Promulgater of Scripture)



Hayagrīva was an incarnation of Viṣṇu who dove to the bottom of the ocean to rescue the Vedas which had been stolen by two Dānavas who had also assumed horse-heads.

Yajñavalkya, the great sage, lost the Yajur-veda as a result of his Guru's curse and performed sever penance. Sun god, pleased by his penance, appeared before him as a deity with the horse's head and taught him the same Veda in another form. This section has come to be known as the Vājasaneyi Saṃhita (*Vāji* = horse).

The origins of the Hayagriva Avatāra (the deity with the horses head) are perhaps found here. He is the guardian and patron of all Vedic scriptures and is essential a wisdom-deity.

7. Vyāsa (Compiler of Scripture)



It is said that there have been twenty-eight Vyāsas before the present Vyāsa-Krishna Dvaipayana—took his birth at the end of Dvapara Yuga. Krishna Dvaipayana was born of Parasara Rishi through the Matsya-kanya-Satyavathi Devi. At a very tender age Vyāsa gave out to his parents the secret of his life that he should go to the forest and do Akhanda Tapas. His mother at first did not agree, but later gave permission on one important condition that he should appear before her whenever she wished for his presence. Puranas say that Vyāsa took initiation at the hands of his twenty-first Guru, sage Vasudeva. He studied the Shastras under sages Sanaka and Sanandana and others. He arranged the Vedas for the good of mankind and wrote the Brahma Sūtras for the quick and easy understanding

of the Srutis; he also wrote the Mahabharata to enable women, Sudras and other people of lesser intellect to understand the highest knowledge in the easiest way. Vyāsa wrote the eighteen Puranas and established the system of teaching them through Upakhyanas or discourses. In this way, he established the three paths, viz., Karma, Upāsana and Jñāna. To him is also attributed the fact that he continued the line of his mother and that Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura were his progeny. Vyāsa's last work was the Bhagavata which he undertook at the instigation of Devarshi Narada who once came to him and advised him to write it as, without it, his goal in life would not be reached.

There are six important systems of thought developed by our ancients known as the Shad Darshanas or the six orthodox schools of philosophy, viz., Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisesika, Purva Mimamsa and Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta. Each system has a different shade of opinion. Later, these thoughts became unwieldy, and to regulate them, the Sūtras came into existence. Treatises were written in short aphorisms, called "Sūtras" in Sanskrit, meaning clues for memory or aids to long discussions on every topic. In the Padma Purana, the definition of a Sutra is given. It says that a Sutra should be concise and unambiguous; but the brevity was carried to such an extent that the Sutra has become unintelligible and particularly so in the Brahma Sūtras. Today we find the same Sutra being interpreted in a dozen ways. The Brahma Sūtras written by Vyāsa or Badarayana — for that was the name which he possessed in addition—are also known as Vedanta Sūtras as they deal with Vedanta only. They are divided into four chapters, each chapter being subdivided again into four sections. It is interesting to note that they begin and end with Sūtras which read together mean "the inquiry into the real nature of Brahman has no return", meaning that "going by that way one reaches Immortality and no more returns to

the world". About the authorship of these Sūtras, tradition attributes it to Vyāsa. The oldest commentary on the Brahma Sūtras is by Sankaracharya; he was later followed by Ramanuja, Vallabha, Nimbarka, Madhva and others who established their own schools of thought. All the five Acharyas mostly agree on two points, viz., (i) that Brahman is the cause of this world and (ii) that knowledge of Brahman leads to final emancipation. But they differ amongst themselves on the nature of this Brahman, the relation between the individual soul and the Supreme Soul, and the condition of the soul in the state of release. According to some, Bhakti and not Jñana, as interpreted by Sankara, is the chief means of attaining liberation.

8. Mohinī (Enchantress)



Lord Vishnu as Mohini

This is a female form assumed by Viṣṇu to delude the anti-gods and to cheat them out of the amṛta which they had stolen from the gods. But Mohinī has a much deeper philosophical significance. There are two sources of Truth — Material Truth (*sakala*) and Spiritual Truth (*niṣkala*). The transient and relative Material Truth is embodied in a feminine form of Prakṛti and the Absolute timeless Spiritual Truth is embodied in the masculine aspect of Puruṣa (That which fills the Universe). The incarnation of Mohinī illustrates that these are not separate Truths but rather integrated versions of the same reality. We should

recognise them as being different but accept them both and integrate both of them into our lives.

9. Vaṭa-patra-śāyin

At the end of a cycle of time the Lord dissolves the entire universe and absorbs it into his own Being. Mythologically he then takes the form of a baby lying upon a banyan leaf floating on the ocean of undifferentiated Unity sucking his own toe. The entire universe is contained within his belly.

At the end of a refractory period the Lord again projects the universe into being again. This constitutes an eternal circular process of projection and withdrawal of the universe. 'Big-bang' (*śṛṣṭi*) followed by the 'Big-crunch' (*pralaya*) and so on and so forth.



Other Popular Forms of Viṣṇu Worshipped

Throughout the provinces of India, the Supreme Lord is worshipped in various forms. In Andhra Pradesh He appears as Tirupati Balaji, in Kerala as Guruvayurappan, in Karnataka as the beautiful Udupi Krishna, in Gujarat as Dvarakadhisha and Ranacora Raya. And in Pandharpur, the spiritual capital of Maharashtra, the Lord is worshipped as Sri Vitthala. His devotees also fondly call Him Vithobha or Panduranga.



The Padma Purana and the Skanda Purana briefly describe why the Lord journeyed to Pandharpur and why He stays there in this form.

Once Srimati Radharani, Lord Krishna's consort in the village of Vrindavana, visited Dvaraka, where Lord Krishna lived as a king. At that time, Rukmini Devi, Lord Krishna's queen, noticed that Krishna was dealing more intimately with Radharani than He had ever done with her. Upset, she departed for the forest of Dindirvana, near Pandharpur.

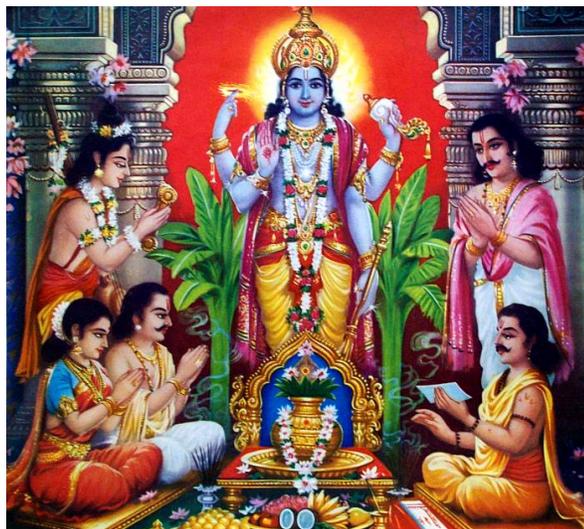
Lord Krishna followed Rukmini to apologize, but His apology left her unmoved. So the Lord moved on to Pandharpur to visit one of His devotees, Bhakta Pundarika, now popularly known in Maharashtra as Pundalika.

When the Lord reached Pundarika's ashrama, Pundarika was serving his elderly parents. So Pundarika gave the Lord a seat of brick and asked the Lord to wait. The Lord did as told. He stood, lotus hands on His hips, waiting for Pundarika to return.

While He was waiting, Rukmini, having forgotten her distress, came from Dindirvana and rejoined Him. Both of Them stayed in Pandharpur in Iconic form. To this day the Lord stands on the same brick, but now He's waiting for all His devotees to come see Him.

Satya Nārāyaṇa

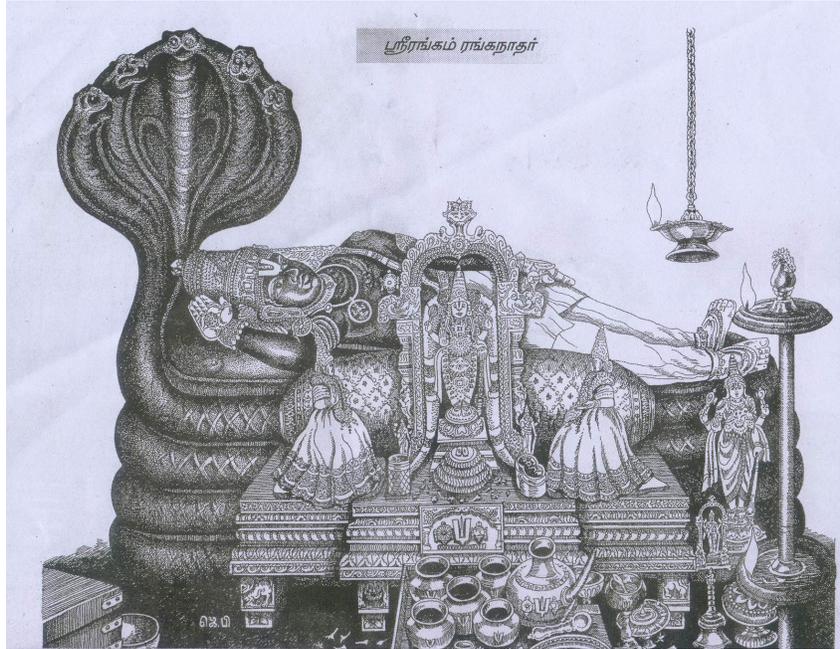
This is one of the most popular forms of Viṣṇu widely worshipped by all Hindus all over the world. The observance of this vow (vrata) which consists of a fast and a puja is described in the Skanda Purāṇa 4th section. There are a number of material and spiritual results mentioned through it's performance. The ceremony is often performed as an adjunct to marriages or house-warming ceremonies.



THE FOUR MAJOR VIṢṆU TEMPLES

There are 108 Divya Deshams or pilgrimage sites located all over India. For Srivaishnavas the four most important temples are:—

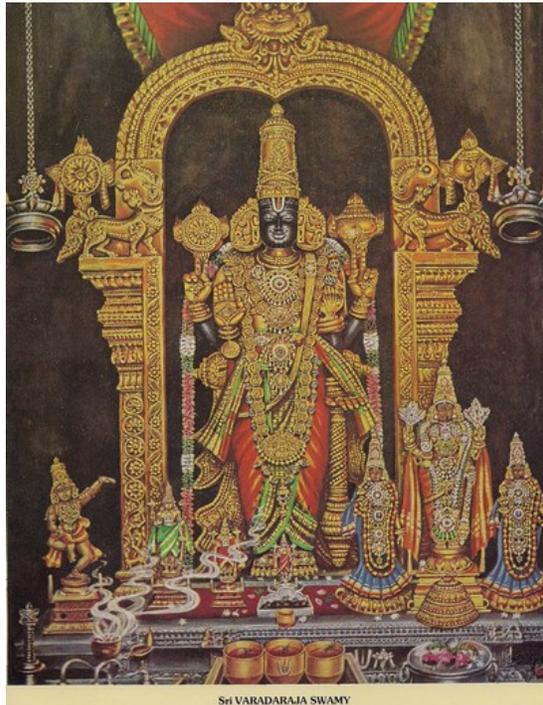
1. Ranga-nātha Swami at Srirangam



2. Venkateswara Swami at Tirupati



3. Varadaraja Swami at Kanchi



4. Selva-Narayana Swami at Melkote



Procession of Ranganatha



EXPLANATORY TEXTS

1.

Astra-abhūṣana-adhyāya (Vishnu Purana 1;22)



Maitreya said:

Tell me in what manner Vishnu bears the whole world, abiding in his nature, characterised by ornaments and weapons. 65

Parashara said:

Having offered salutation to the mighty and indescribable Vishnu, I now recount to you what was formerly related to me by Vasishitha. 66

The glorious Hari wears the pure jivatman of the world, undefiled, and void of all qualities, as the Kaustubha gem. 67

Material Nature (Pradhana/prakrti) is established on the Eternal One, as the Śrīvatsa mark. Intellect abides in Madhava, in the form of his mace (gada). 68

The lord (Iswara) supports the principle-of-Individuality (Ahamkara) in its twofold division & into elements (tamasika) and organs of sense (sattvika) in the form of his conch-shell (Shankha) and his bow (saranga) respectively. 69

In his hand Vishnu holds, in the form of his discus (sudarshana); the cosmic mind, whose thoughts (like the weapon) fly swifter than the winds. 70

The necklace of the Lord called Vaijayanti-mala, composed of five precious gems (pearl, ruby, emerald, sapphire and diamond) is the aggregate of the five elemental forms of matter (maha-bhutas). 71

Janardana bears, as his numerous arrows, both the faculties of action (karmendriyas) and of perception (jñanendriyas). 72

The shining sword of Achyuta is sacred wisdom, usually concealed in the scabbard of ignorance. 73

In this manner, jivatman, Material Nature, intellect, notion-of-individuality, the elements, the senses, mind, ignorance and wisdom, O Maitreya, are all located in the person of Hrshikesha. 74

Hari, in a mystical form, embodies the formless elements of the world, as his weapons and his ornaments, for the salvation of humankind. 75

Pundarikaksha, the lord of all, supports Nature, with all its products, the individual selves and all the world. 76

All wisdom, all ignorance, O Maitreya, all that is, all that is not, all that is everlasting, is centred in the Destroyer-of-Madhu, the lord of all creatures. 77

The supreme, eternal Hari is [the personification of] Time with its divisions of seconds, minutes, days, months, seasons, and years. 78

He is [the embodiment of Space in the form of] the seven worlds, the earth, the sky, heaven, the world of patriarchs, of sages, of saints, of truth: whose form is all worlds; first-born before all the first-born, the supporter of all beings, himself self-sustained. 79 — 80

He exists in manifold forms, as gods, humans, and animals etc. and is thence the eternal sovereign Lord of all. His form is all visible things; but He himself is without shape or form. 81

He is celebrated in the Rik, Yajush, Sama, and Atharva Vedas, Itihasas, the Upavedas and the 6 divisions (angas) of the Vedas and also the Vedanta. 82

The Vedas and all their divisions, the Institutes of Manu and other lawgivers; traditional scriptures, and Religious manuals (Puranas and Kalpa-Sūtras etc). 83

The poems, and all that is said or sung; are the body of the mighty Vishnu, assuming the form of sound. 84

Every kind of substances, that which is with form or without form, here or elsewhere, are all the physical manifestation (vapu) of Vishnu. 85

“I am Hari. All that I behold is Janardana; cause and effect are from none other than Him.” — The person who knows these truths shall never again experience the afflictions of the cycle of birth and death. 86

2.

The Divine Form Explained S.B.12:11



The Cosmic Form of the Lord (1-9)

Saunaka said: 1. Now we have got to ask one more question to you who are a master of all learning. You are well acquainted with the doctrines of the Tantras. 2. To the Supreme Being, the Lord of Śrī, who is One only, the masters of the Tantra have for purposes of worship given physical features, accessories, weapons, decorations etc. We would like to know the significance, the principle, behind such conceptions. 3. Describe to us, who are anxious to hear, all about ritualistic worship prescribed by the Tantras, by means of which man can attain the immortal state.

Suta said:— 4. Saluting my teachers, I shall impart to you what has come down from teachers like Brahma and others, as taught by them through the Vedas and the Tantras, about the glory and greatness of the Supreme Being Maha-vishnu. 5. The changeful Cosmic Form of the Lord known as Virat is constituted of nine categories — Prakriti, Sutratma, Mahat-tattva, Ahamkara, and the five Tanmatras. The whole of the cosmos is

seen subsisting in the Cosmic Form (Virat) which is based in Consciousness. 6. As the Virat is based on the Supreme Being, He is said to be embodied as the Purusha or Virat. The earth is His feet; the heaven, his head; the intermediary space, His navel; the sun, his eyes; the air, His nose; and the quarters, His ears. 7. Prajapati is His sex organ; Mrityu (Death), His rectum; the Lokapalas, His arms; the moon, His mind; and Yama, His eye-brows. 8. Bashfulness is His upper lip; greed, His lower lip; light, His teeth; Maya His smile; the trees, His hair; and the clouds, His locks. 9. Just as the individual, when measured by the span of his palm, is of seven span dimension, so is the Virat too, when measured by His span of cosmic dimension. So also whatever parts there are in the individual body, they are in the Purusha too.

The Symbolism of the Paraphernalia of Mahavishnu (10-20)

10. What He wears under the guise of the jewel Kaustubha is the pure Jiva-consciousness. The spreading effulgence of the Jiva is what is seen on His chest as the mark Śrīvatsa. 11. The garland of wild flowers worn by the Lord is His Maya with diverse attributes; His yellow wearing cloth is the Veda, and the sound symbol OM with its three syllables, the sacred thread he wears. 12. He has Sankhya and Yoga as the crocodile-shaped earrings and the crown on His head is the Satya-loka, superior to all other Realms. 13. His seat, the well-known Ananta or Adishesha (conceived as the Serpent of Infinity) is Avyakrita, the undifferentiated Prakriti. The lotus on His seat is Sattva Guna having attributes like Dharma and Jñana [*vairagya, aishvarya, adharma, ajñana, avairagya* and *anaishvarya*] as petals. 14. The Prana, the vital energy of the cosmos, which includes the strength of the senses, mind and body, is represented by His mace Kaumodaki; the category of water, by His conch Panchajanya; and the category of fire, by His discus Sudarsana. 15. His sword, with its blue sheen, is the category of space; His shield, Tamas, the element of darkness; His bow Sarnga is the principle of Time; and His quiver, the accumulation of Karma. 16. His arrows represent the Indriyas (sense-organs); His chariot, the mind dominated by will; His power of manifestation, the Tanmatras; and His hand gestures represent the desire to bless and to protect. 17. The Mandala for offering Him worship is the orb of the sun. The qualification for worshipping Him is initiation with Mantra from a teacher. His service is for the absolution of all one's sins including negative tendencies. 18. The play-lotus in His hand symbolises his six majesties like lordship (Aishvarya) and the rest. The two ceremonial fans (Chamaras) held on either side are righteousness (Dharma) and Yashas (glory). 19. O twice-born ones! The royal umbrella held over Him represents the Realm of Vaikuntha, the state of bliss and freedom from fear. The Lord, who is known as Yajña and who has Yajña as His form, is borne by his vehicle Garuda, who is the embodiment of the three Vedas. 20. Śrī, who remains inseparable from Him, is the Shakti, the manifesting Power of Śrī Hari. Vishvakṣena, the leader of his attendants, is the embodiment of the Tantras. His eight guards headed by Nanda are His eight psychic yogic powers like Anima etc.

The Vyuhas (21-26)

21. The one Supreme Being can be worshipped as the four Vyuhas — Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, who are only the four presentations of the one

Vishnu - Narayana

By Swami Chinmayananda



Analyzing the human personality, the Vedanta takes the student to discover the State of Pure consciousness in the innermost depths of his being, which is the One Source at once for all his perceptions, feelings and thoughts,

This great Self, functioning as the Spark of Existence in each one of us, is the One Eternal Reality. When it expresses through the vehicles of the mind and intellect there is the dynamic creature - constantly acquiring and possessing, gaining and achieving good and bad in the world - and this all-pervading Reality that expresses from behind the mind and the intellect is the theme of all the great scriptures of the world.

Vyāsa describes this great Reality, in his "Vishnu-Purana" as Śrī Narayana. Śrī Narayana has been shown as resting in yogic-sleep in Vaikuntha. It is described that in an ocean of milk (Ksheerabधि) Śrī Narayana lies in yoga-nidra on a great serpent-bed (Ananta), protected by the hood of the serpent. He is served by Lakshmi, His consort, who is ever at His feet.

Deep in the recesses of our personality (Vaikuntha) lies the Infinite Truth (Vishnu) upon the serpent-Ananta (the mind) who is depicted as thousand-headed. In an religions the serpent represents the vicious mind which, at one and the same time, can think a thousand thoughts and, perhaps, spin its venom through its thousand urges, inclinations, desires and passions. In life it is found that the hooded cobra, to strike its victim, turns its hood away from his body. When the mind is turned towards the world of objects outside, it is capable of spilling its poison on to the world outside.

Here in the description, the hoods are turned upon the body of the serpent and it is lying coiled upon itself, forming a soft bed upon which reclines the Lord Vishnu (All Pervading). When the multi-headed human mind turns its attention inward upon" itself, and the mind lies coiled upon itself, there is the state of a meditator at the moment of his greatest quietude (Samadhi). At such moments the Infinite Vishnu can be recognized as resting upon such a thought-less mind held in animated suspension in an atmosphere of breathless devotion. The Lord is in "yogic-sleep". It means that looking from the Pure Consciousness., the world known to us constituted of the perceptions, emotions and thoughts, is not there at all; just as in our sleep we do not recognize the world-of plurality. But this is not the ordinary sleep (nidra); it is a moment of positive experience of the All-Pervading Reality, and hence it is called the yoga-nidra.

Such a vision of the Lord can be experienced by the mind when it turns upon itself; and the mind can gain this steady introversion only in an atmosphere of supreme purity. Hence it is described that He is resting in the "milky-ocean" in the ocean of the milk of human kindness.

Lakshmi (Wealth, Power and Glory) rests at His feet, serving Him. A Man of Realization, who, through meditation has thus experienced the Soul of the Universe in himself, does not thereafter run after the wealth of the world of objects ; all glory follows him at his heels, wanting to serve him as his dutiful mistress.

Lord Narayana is, the One among the Trinity, representing the Power-of-Sustenance. He is the One who manifests Himself in the mortal world at appropriate eras in His various incarnations to rid life of its evil propensities and to make the world ready for greater evolution. When this benign Lord wakes up from His yogic-sleep and comes down to bless those who are His devotees, He assumes the form of Lord Narayana, and the description of Him is given in a dozen places in the "Vishnu Purana", bringing out the entire symbolism in Him clearly. Whether it is in Dhruva's poetic words at the time of his great "vision of Narayana", or in the beautiful song of Prahlada, or in the various songs of Narada, we find the symbolism described to explain what Vishnu stands for.

Traditionally, He is described as blue in colour clothed in yellow, wearing a crown and standing upon a lotus divine. He has four hands and He holds in them the Conch, (Sankha), the Discus, (Chakra), the Mace, (Gada), and the Lotus, (Padma). Every one of these represents a significant symbolism very scientifically employed to indicate that Vishnu is none other than the Divine mighty Self which is the Changeless Center around all changes, the Imperishable Essence in the midst of all the perishable finite things.

Blue is the colour of the Infinite and whatever is immeasurable can appear to the mortal eye only as blue; thus a cloudless summer sky is blue to us because the endless distance of space is interpreted by the physical eye as blue in colour. The yellow represents the earth. Anything that is buried in the earth gathers a yellowish hue, and in fire, earth (mud, silica) glows yellowish. Thus, Śrī Narayana represents the Immeasurable, All-Pervading Reality (blue colour) clothed in earthy matter (yellow colour), meaning Śrī Narayana is the Infinite clothed in matter; He is the Infinite expressed through a form.

When the Self (Atman) thus expresses through a form, an individual (jīva) is manifested. Every individual acts and accomplishes in the world, not with the mortal two hands alone, but with a subtle set of four hands. These four aspects that function from within the physical equipment, together are called the "subtle body"; in Vedanta it is known as the inner equipment," constituted of the Mind, the Intellect, the Consciousness-of-them-all and the Ego. These four are symbolized in the form-representation of Lord Vishnu, having four hands.

The Lord wears a Divine Crown on His head to indicate His Sovereignty and Lord-ship over all names and forms. He is the sole proprietor of the entire universe. This mighty Infinite Lord dwells in the core of our personality as the very Self in us.

His hands are never empty — each is carrying a symbol, together indicating how He carries out his Divine duties as the preserver of the Universe. He blows the Conch, calling man to live the nobler values-of-life so that he may turn away from all his worldly preoccupations and ultimately reach Him and receive from Him the Infinite

Bliss of unbroken peace and perfection. This "final goal", indicated in our scriptures, is represented in Hindu tradition as the Lotus.

With a tender anxiety to give the devotee the highest experience of perfect happiness when He calls, man, roaming with his sensuous urges and animal propensities, hears the echoes of the shrill notes of his inner conscience calling him to stop and retire. Generally man has no ears to hear, or even when he hears he has no heart to obey. He still dashes forth in the quest for sense gratification — it is at such times, out of sheer love, the Lord wields His Mace to knock man down with disappointments, dissatisfactions and a growing sense of restlessness.

Even in spite of these punishments, if the devotee is not turning towards the spiritual path and is not progressively moving towards the final destination, the Lord has the total annihilating power of the Discus which can destroy the equipment and lift him from his present life of unhealthy circumstances. This is true of an individual, a community, or a nation. Fascinated by the delusory joys of the sense-objects the human mind may dance forth to live a ruinous life of sense gratification. And if this material and purely sensuous way of life is continued in spite of the consequent mental tensions and strains, the society dissipates all its higher urges, loses even its common efficiencies and ultimately comes to lose all that it possessed and ends in a pitiful and disastrous fall. This is what history records and commonsense ever dictates.

We may even consider the 'hand that holds the Conch' as the intellect (buddhi), the 'hand that holds the Discus' as the ego, 'that which holds the Mace' as the mind (manas), and 'that which holds the Lotus' as the consciousness (chitta). The discriminating intellect gives us the call and points out a more rewarding way-of-life, and in case we ignore this silent whisper of the heart and plunge into a life of extroversion, the mind gives endless knocks to that personality. If even then, we are not able to realize our folly and withdraw our selves from the dissipating ways of living, the arrogant ego fattened by these stupidities of the mind in revolt against the intellect, ultimately drives the individual to its total doom.

On the other hand, in case we are able to listen to the call and surrender our ego and the mind in devotion to the Lord, we can surely come to His sacred feet, and receive the Lotus that He is offering to us as an eternal reward for an insignificant renunciation on our part.

When the inner organ of the mind, intellect and ego, are transcended, the Light of Consciousness that illumines them for us, Itself is discovered as the Pure Infinite Self.