

Ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu



An Anglicized form of the Sanskrit, *avatara*, "descent", from the root *tr*, "pass" (cf. Latin *in-trare*), and the preposition *ava*, "down".

The word is used, in a technical sense, in the Hindu religion to denote the descent upon earth of a portion of the essence of a god, which then assumes some coarser material form, be it animal, monster, or man. Such descents are ascribed in the mythology of Hinduism to various gods, but those ascribed to Vishnu are by far the most important. They are believed to have taken place at different ages of the world, and to have consisted of different proportions of the essence of the god Vishnu. Their number is variously stated, ranging from ten to twenty-eight, finally becoming indefinitely numerous. Any remarkable man is liable to be regarded as a more or less perfect avatar of Vishnu, and the consequence one of the worst features of Hinduism - has been the offering of divine homage to men, especially the founders of religious sects and their successors.

It has also been used by extension to refer to the incarnations of the gods in other religions and mythologies such as Zeus.

The Ten Avatars



1. *Matsya* - The Fish - The basis of this is the story told in the Satapatha Brahmana of how Manu was saved from the Deluge by a great fish, which foretold him of the danger, commanded him to build a boat, and finally towed this boat to a mountain top. The Puranas afterwards declare that this fish was an avatar of Vishnu.



2. *Kurma* - The Tortoise - Vishnu in this form offers his back as the pivot on which rests Mt. Mandara, while the gods and demons churn with it various valuable objects from the ocean of milk. In Hinduism, Kurma was the second avatar of Vishnu. He took the form of a tortoise and sat on the bottom of the ocean after the Great Flood. A mountain was placed on his back by the other gods so that they could churn the sea and find the ancient treasures of the Vedic peoples.

The Churning of the Ocean itself forms an interesting legend. In the ancient times, both the Devas (divinities similar to Greek Gods) were mortal. Their enemies were the Asuras. One day, the King of the Devas, Indra was riding his elephant when he came upon a sage. The sage decided to honor Indra by giving him a scented garland. Indra took the garland, but placed it on the forehead of his elephant. The elephant was irritated by the scent and threw the garland off, trampling on it. The angry sage gave Indra a curse that he and the Devas would begin to lose all their energy and power.

The Devas feared that the Asuras would take over the whole world. Therefore, they prayed, and the Hindu Trinity suggested a solution: churn the Ocean of Milk in order to obtain the Nectar of Immortality. However, the Devas could not churn the Ocean themselves. They struck a temporary truce with their enemies so that all could participate in the churning.

The Ocean was churned by using the mountain Mandara and the snake Vasuki wrapped around it. Each side would hold an end of the snake and pull on it alternately, causing the mountain to rotate, which in turn would cause the Ocean to be churned.

However, once the mountain was put on the Ocean, it began to sink. Then, Vishnu incarnated in the form of a turtle to support the mountain. As the ocean was churned, a deadly poison known as Halahalal emerged. This poison threatened to suffocate all living things. In response to various prayers, Shiva drank the poison and held it in his throat. This caused the throat to turn blue. Then, various people, animals, and treasures emerged.

These included:

- Sura, goddess and creator of wine
- Apsaras, various divine nymphs
- Kasthuba, the most valuable jewel in the world
- Uchhaishravas, the divine horse
- Parijata, the wish-granting tree
- Kamadhenu, the first cow and mother of all other cows
- Lakshmi, the Goddess of Fortune and Wealth
- Dhanavantri, the Heavenly Physician, emerged with a pot containing nectar. As the Asuras rushed to take the nectar, the frightened Devas appealed to Kurma, who then turned himself into a maiden named Mohini. The damsel distracted the Asuras, while the Devas secretly drank the Nectar. One Asura suspected foul play, disguised himself as a Deva, and drank some Nectar. But before the Nectar could pass his throat, Vishnu cut off the head. The head, however, remained immortal. It is believed that this immortal head occasionally swallows the sun or the moon, causing eclipses. Then, the sun or moon passes through the opening at the neck, ending the eclipse.



3. *Varaha* The Boar - Like the first, this avatar is concerned with the rescue of the Earth from a flood, the boar raising it from the water in which it had been submerged. A boar is sent to defeat Hiranyaksha, a horrible demon who had taken the Earth and carried it to the bottom of the ocean. The battle took a thousand years, but Varaha won.



4. *Narasimha* - The Man-lion - Vishnu takes this form to deliver the world from a demon, who had obtained from Brahma the boon, that he should be slain neither by a god, a man, nor an animal. In his previous avatar, Vishnu was Varaha and killed the demon Hiranyaksha, whose brother, Hiranyakashipu, was greatly angered by this. Hiranyakashipu decided to gain magical powers by performing a penance for Brahma. Hiranyakashipu asked for a boon from Brahma that he would not die on Earth or in space, nor in fire or water, not during the day or night, not inside or outside, and not by the hand of a human, god, animal or any other animate or inanimate species. Brahma was pleased with his penance and granted the boon.

Hiranyakashipu, a Daitya, hated the gods and most especially Vishnu, the followers of whom he began to torture. Hiranyakashipu's son, Prahlada, was a very devoted follower of Vishnu. Hiranyakashipu failed in convincing his son to join him against Vishnu, and tried to kill him, but Prahlada was protected by Vishnu. When asked, Prahlada refused to acknowledge his father as the supreme lord of the universe (though he had used his boon to conquer the entire world) and claimed that Vishnu was omnipresent. Hiranyakashipu asked if Vishnu was in a particular pillar and Prahlada answered he was. Hiranyakashipu smashed the pillar, and Narasimha came from it. Narasimha killed Hiranyakashipu, since he was neither human nor animal nor god (an avatar is a human, but this avatar was only part human and part animal) and did so during twilight (neither day nor night), placing him on Narasimha's thighs (not on earth, nor in space), on the threshold of the entrance to a courtyard (neither inside nor out) and using nails (neither animate nor inanimate) as weapons.



5. *Vamana* - The Dwarf - In Hinduism, Vamana is the fifth avatar of Vishnu, a dwarf. He tricked the Devas' enemy Bali into giving up all of the heavens and earth. Vamana asked for a piece of land only three paces wide and Bali agreed; Vamana grew in size and stepped across the earth in one step, the heavens in the second and elected not to claim the underworld, leaving that for Bali to keep. However, Bali did not wish to leave his promise unfulfilled. Therefore, Vamana agreed to use the third step for Bali's own head. Bali was made immortal, and is said to be in the underworld to this day. Bali is supposed to return every year to the land of his people, to ensure that they are prosperous. This is celebrated as the Onam festival in Kerala, where he is called Maveli or Mahabali.



6. *Parasu-rama* - Rama with the Axe - In the form of a hero, Rama, armed with an axe, Vishnu destroys the Ksatriyas, or warrior caste, in the interest of the priestly caste, the Brahmins. In Hinduism, Parashurama ("axe-wielding Rama") is the sixth avatar of Vishnu, and a son of Jamadagni. He received an axe after doing penance for Shiva. He is a Chiranjeevin.

King Kaartaveerya-arjuna and his army visited Jamadagni, who fed his guest and the whole army with his divine cow; the king demanded the cow and Jamadagni refused because he needed the cow for his religious ceremonies. King Kaartaveerya-arjuna sent his soldiers to take the cow and Parashurama killed the entire army and the king with his axe. In return, the princes beheaded Jamadagni. In revenge, Parashurama killed the entire clan of Kaartaveerya-arjuna, thus conquering the entire earth, which he gave to Kasyapa.

According to one legend, the story goes on that Parashurama was struck by remorse at his wanton killings, and offered penance on a mountain top. The sea god Varuna responded, and offered him land equal to the distance he could throw his axe. Parashurama threw his axe from Gokarnam and it fell at Kanyakumari. As promised the sea gave way to land, thus giving rise to Kerala.

Parashurama also went to visit Shiva once but the way was blocked by Ganesha. Parashurama threw the axe at him and Ganesha, knowing it had been given to him by Shiva, allowed it cut off one of his tusks.

Alternative: Parashurama



7. *Rama*, the great hero of the Hindu Odyssey, the *Rama yana*, who is made into an avatar of Vishnu. Rama was a real or mythical king in ancient India, whose life and heroic deeds are related by the Sanskrit epic Ramayana. Astronomical data in the Ramayana has been interpreted to suggest that his reign would have been at approximately 2015 BC, however the Ramayana was written many centuries after this date, probably two thousand years later. It cannot be taken as an accurate guide to the life of the historical Rama, except by devout Hindus. In Hinduism, Rama is regarded as the seventh avatar of the god Vishnu and worshipped together with his companion Hanuman, the monkey-god who assists him in the epic narrative of the Ramayana. He is the Prince of Ayodhya and is banished to a forest by his stepmother. While in exile, his wife, Sita, is kidnapped by Ravana, King of the Rakshas on Lanka (cur: Sri Lanka). Rama, along with Hanuman, rescued her, killed Ravana and becomes King of Ayodhya. Rama also killed Vali, the monkey-King of Kishkindhya. He is protected during his adventures by Agastya, and also rescued Ahalya after she was turned to stone by her husband for having an affair with Indra. In recent years the cult of Rama has become associated with Hindu Nationalism. Rama is held up as a model of Hindu devotion to caste and the rules of dharma, and as a militant opponent of those who would break with it.



8. *Krishna* the Indian Hercules, as he is styled by Megasthenes, the most popular hero of India, is the most perfect avatar of Vishnu. Krishna or Kr̥ṣṇa (meaning black as well as all-attractive one) is a Hindu god, and is popularly considered one of the avatars of Vishnu. Another perspective presents Krishna as existing prior to any material manifestation and prior to any God such as Vishnu, who is assigned the task of maintaining the material manifestation. In this view, Krishna is considered the Supreme Lord. Perhaps the best way to explain the relationship between Krishna and Vishnu is to consider them to be irrevocably linked and that one is the expansion of the other. The Bhagavad Gita, a section of the ancient epic Mahabharata, describes the teachings imparted by Krishna to Arjuna at the beginning of the great battle at Kurukshetra.

Parthasarathy is a name of Krishna that refers to his being the charioteer (sarathy) of Arjuna at this time, a name that endears Krishna to Arjuna, who becomes blissful whenever he contemplates how merciful it is that Krishna has consented to become his charioteer. Stories of Krishna's childhood and youth depict him as mischievous and clever, showing that even God has a sense of humor. He is found stealing clothes from the Gopis, breaking the butterpot for ghee, and playing transcendental pranks. This is a counterpoint to another avatar of Vishnu: Rama, he of the straight and narrow path. Krishna also is involved in defending honor, and in fighting demonic personalities. In one such story, Vishnu told Krishna to kill Kamsa, a tyrant and a son of a demon. Krishna and his brother Balarama were threatened by Kamsa, who had been told a son of his half-sister Devaki would kill him. He therefore murdered her first six children. Krishna and Balarama were moved to Rohini's womb to protect them. Krishna was then given to Nanda and Yasoda to hide him from Kamsa; as a child, he was known as Balakrsna, one of hundreds of names for Krishna.

Of all names, Krishna, or all attractive, is considered the topmost. Krishna is 'Sat Cit Ananda', full of bliss and knowlege. To a Hindu, all living entities are part and parcel of Krishna, and each living entity walks within a world made up of the material energy, another one of Krishna's unlimited energies. The amorous pastimes of Krishna are popularly misunderstood and should

not be attempted until the nature of Krishna is fully understood. For example, to fulfill the desires of his devotees he expanded to be personally present to His sixteen-thousand wives. On one hand this seems adulterous, whereas on the other hand, as expansions of Krishna, all husbands are part and parcel of Krishna and therefore ultimately Krishna is indirectly married to all wives.

Despite all these transcendental activities, Krishna's favorite is Radha, daughter of Vrishabhanu. When Krishna advented in Vrindavana, Radha followed within two years. However, she would not open her eyes until Krishna was present before Her. At Her first birthday Krishna, then three, came and pulled down the veil of her crib. She opened her eyes for the first time then. Until Krishna appeared before her, it was as if there was nothing on this earth worthwhile for Radha to see. Radha is the prime object of Krishna's love, and is joined with Him as the Fountainhead of all Spiritual Energy from which the material universes emanate.



9. [Buddha](#) - this represents a curious result of the triumph of Hinduism over Buddhism. In one version it is explained that Vishnu's purpose was to destroy the wicked by leading them into a false religion. Gautama Buddha was an Indian spiritual leader who lived between approximately 563 BC and 483 BC. Born Siddhartha Gautama (Sanskrit, Siddhattha Gotama Pali), he later became the Buddha (lit. Enlightened One). He is also commonly known as Shakyamuni or Sakyamuni (lit. "The sage of the Shakya/Sakya clan") and as the Tathagata (lit. thus-gone one), emphasizing the nature of a Buddha to go about in the world without adding or subtracting anything from his experience.) The Buddha is the key figure in the religion of Buddhism. Accounts of his life, discourses and monastic rules were summarized shortly following his passing and memorized by his disciples. Passed down by oral tradition, the holy Tipitaka was first written roughly a hundred years after his death in the Magadhi (Pali) language spoken by Gautama.

Biographical sketch

Under the full moon month of May was born in Lumbini (now modern day Nepal) an infant to the Kshatriya caste of warrior-aristocrats. During the celebrations, a seer announced that this baby would become either a successful emperor, or a Buddha. Siddhartha would be the heir to the position of "prince" of the Shakya clan's village of Kapilavatthu (or Kapilvastu) in the foothills of the Himalayas. At age 29, while still living lavished in luxury, he would become deeply unsatisfied with worldly life. Upon being escorted by his attendant Channa, he came across four sights: an old crippled man, diseased man, a decaying corpse, and finally a mendicant (austere monk). Abandoning his inheritance with the disgust of knowing his fate was in the first three sights, he chose the robes of a mendicant monk and headed for the forests of ancient India for spiritual discipline. He began training in the ascetic life and practicing vigorous austere practices. After 6 years, and at the brink of death, he found that the severe ascetic practices did not lead to greater understanding.

Once discarding them and concentrating on meditation, he discovered the middle way, a path of moderation away from the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. Under the fig, now known as the Bodhi tree, he vowed never to leave the position until he found Truth. At 35, he attained Enlightenment under the full moon month of May; now known as Gautama Buddha, or simply "The Buddha". He claimed he had realized complete Awakening and insight into the nature and cause of human suffering along with the steps necessary to eliminate it. This supreme Awakening, possible to any being, is called the state of Bodhi and at this point, he won Nirvana.

He emphasized that he was not a God but that the position of Buddhahood is reserved for the human, in whom possesses the greatest potential for Enlightenment). Explained by Gautama Buddha, he also stated that there is no intermediary between mankind and the divine; distant gods and God are subjected to karma themselves in decaying heavens. The Buddha is solely a guide and teacher for those sentient beings who must tread the path themselves, attain spiritual Awakening, and see truth & reality as it is. The Buddhist system of insight, thought and meditation practice was not divinely-revealed, but rather, the understanding of the true nature of the human mind which could be discovered by anyone for themselves. Penetration of this reality accompanies the shocking truth that ignorance can be eliminated.

For the remaining 45 years of his life, he traveled the Gangetic Plain of central India (region of the Ganges/Ganga river and its tributaries), teaching his doctrine and discipline to an extremely diverse range of people, from nobles, street sweepers, outcastes, and including many adherents of rival philosophies and religions. He founded the community of Buddhist monks and nuns (the Sangha) to continue the dispensation after his Parinirvana or complete Nirvana. Gautama Buddha realised that his bodily end was fast approaching. He told his disciple Ananda to prepare a bed between two Sal trees. Just before his passing, a 120 year-old mendicant monk named Subhadra, walked by. Being earlier turned away by Ananda, Buddha overheard this and called the Brahmin to his side.

He was admitted to the Sangha (Buddhist order) and immediately after, Gautama passed away on that full moon day in May. After intermittent illness, Gautama Buddha passing at Kushinagar under the full moon month of May, India at the age of 80. His last meal was a mushroom or truffles delicacy which he had received as an offering from a blacksmith. Vegetarianism is for Buddhists an ideal rather than a mandate, and monks and nuns in particular are enjoined to accept all offerings of food made to them (unless they see, hear, or suspect an animal has been killed especially to satisfy hunger). The Buddha's final words were, "All conditioned things are subject to impermanence. Strive on with diligence".

Personality and character

The Buddha as presented in the Buddhist scriptures is notable for such characteristics as:

- Both a comprehensive education and training in those fields appropriate to a warrior aristocrat, such as martial arts, agricultural management, and literature, and also a deep understanding of the religious and philosophical ideas of his culture.
- Gautama Siddharta was reported to have been athletic and fit throughout his life, competent in martial arts such as chariot combat, wrestling, and archery, and later easily hiking miles each day and camping in the wilderness. Images of a fat "Jolly Buddha" or Laughing Buddha are actually depictions of a different character, sometimes called Hotei (or Hoti).
- A superb teacher, with a fine grasp of the appropriate metaphor, and tailoring his teachings to the audience at hand.
- Fearless and unworried at all times, whether dealing with religious debate, a patricidal prince, or a murderous outlaw. He was not, however, past exasperation when monks of his order misrepresented his teachings.
- Completely temperate in all bodily appetites. Lived a completely celibate life from age 29 until his death. Indifferent to hunger and environmental conditions.



10. *Kalki* - In this form Vishnu will descend when the world is wholly depraved, destroy utterly the wicked, and restore the happy conditions of the Age of Virtue. In Hinduism, Kalki (alt. spelling: Kalaki) ("Time") is the tenth and last avatar of Vishnu. Kalki is expected to appear on Earth at the conclusion of the current Kali Yuga; He will come from the sky on a white horse, brandishing a flaming sword with which to destroy the wicked people of the current world, renew creation and bring righteousness back to Earth.

According to Hindu scripture, *Kali Yuga* (the *Age of Kali*) began at the end of Krishna's bodily lifespan near the end of the 15th century BC and will last exactly 432,000 years - placing its conclusion near the middle of the 431st millennium AD. Kalki, the 10th and final avatar of Vishnu, is expected to appear at this time, riding a white horse and wielding a flaming sword with which to strike down the wicked. Kali Yuga is the last of 4 Yugas; upon its conclusion, the world will "reboot" into a new Satya Yuga (Golden Age.) This involves the *end of the world as we know it* and the return of the earth to a state of paradise.

The importance of this theory of avatars to Hinduism is the way in which it has contributed to the wonderful adaptability of that religion. In the Buddha avatar the fact is particularly patent, but, in the Rama and Krsna avatars also, we clearly have the adoption into Hinduism of the cults of these heroes. It is a mere guess that similar compromises with some totemistic forms of religion are to be seen in the Fish, Boar, and Tortoise avatars, and the same might be said of an attempt to see in the Man-lion and Dwarf avatars, traces of the aboriginal religions. The resemblance of these avatars to the doctrine of the Incarnation is most superficial, and as the theory of the avatars has a sufficient basis in Hindu philosophy, several points of contact with the earlier mythology, it is unnecessary to suppose with Weber (*Indische Studien*, II, 169) that it is the result of an imitation of this dogma.