

## **Incarnation Four**

### **Narasingha – The Man-Lion**

When Hiranyakashipu heard of the death of his twin brother Hiranyaksha, he became enraged. Staring up into the sky with blazing eyes, he clenched his fists. “Fellow demons,” he cried out, “I will defeat the demigods and conquer the entire universe. I will destroy Vishnu by slicing His head from His body.”

Afraid, though, of meeting the same fate as his brother, Hiranyakashipu decided to become immortal. He went to a quiet and lonely valley where he performed austerities. He stood on tiptoe, raising his arms above his heads and fixing his gaze on the top of the sky. He did not eat, drink or sleep. He remained fixed in that position for a hundred and twenty five years – so long that the ants built a nest around him and devoured his flesh. Blazing fire issued from his hair, drying up the seas and scorching the entire universe.

Lord Brahma, the creator of the world, became alarmed. Riding on his swan, he appeared before the demon. “Oh king of the Asuras,” Brahma said, “I am astonished at your determination. Please tell me, what is it that you want so badly?” He sprinkled holy water on the skeleton, which immediately changed it into the body of a muscular, young man.

Bowing down respectfully to Lord Brahma, Hiranyakashipu requested, “My desire is to become immortal. I wish to live forever.”

“I can’t help you,” Lord Brahma replied, “for though I live for millions of years, even I must die one day. How can I give you something which I myself do not have?”

Hiranyakashipu was disappointed. After all these years of hardship, he was not going to give up his life’s ambition. His eyes lit up with an idea. “Then let me not be killed by any creature created by you – by any demigod, human being or animal,” he requested.

“That benediction I can grant,” replied Lord Brahma.

“And let me die neither inside nor outside any building.”

“That’s fine,” agreed Lord Brahma.

“And let me die neither during the day nor during the night. Let me not be killed either in the sky, or on the land, or in the sea. And let me not be killed by any weapon.”

“Yes, those wishes I grant you,” Said Lord Brahma. And smiling, he mounted his swan aeroplane and left for his heavenly home.

Hiranyakashipu laughed, believing himself now to be immortal. Travelling throughout the universe, he defeated the rulers of each planet, until he conquered Indra, King of the demigods. Living in Indra’s palace, Hiranyakashipu enjoyed a life of great luxury. He was very proud of his wealth, his huge army and his beautiful wife. He took even greater pride in his young son, called Prahlad, hoping he would grow up to be a powerful demon.

Though constantly drunk with wine, Hiranyakashipu never forgot his vow to kill Lord Vishnu. When Prahlad was five years old his father began to notice there was something strange about the boy. He was neither proud nor greedy. Indeed, he was quite calm and kind-hearted. Hiranyakashipu was concerned. Taking his son onto his lap he said: "You are very intelligent. But tell me, what is the most important thing you have learned at school?"

The small boy replied "Studying about politics and the art of war is a waste of time. Those who are really intelligent have no enemies because they understand that they are servants of Lord Vishnu, who lives in everyone's heart."

"You fool!" Hiranyakashipu bellowed, thrusting his son to the floor. "Guards! This boy serves my enemy. Take him and kill him!"

The king's servants were frightful, with long sharp teeth and twisted faces. Prahlad, however, remained calm as they surrounded him. Though they attacked him viciously with spears, swords and tridents, they failed to pierce his tender skin.

Hiranyakashipu ordered him to hurl the child from the top of a cliff. But, protected by the Lord, Prahlad floated like a feather to the ground. They threw him before a charging elephant, which came to a sudden halt just short of the boy. They cast him into a pit of seething snakes that refused to bite him. They tried everything to kill Prahlad – poisoning him, starving him, freezing him, burning him, and frying him in a cauldron of oil. None of these had even the slightest effect on the boy, who remained smiling as he prayed to his Lord.

The servants defeated, dragged Prahlad again before his ferocious father. "How dare you defy me," Hiranyakashipu demanded, "for I control the entire universe. But tell me, where do you get this power of yours that you cannot be killed?"

"Dear father, " Prahlad replied" the source of my strength is also source of yours – Vishnu Himself."

"What? You dare to say there is someone greater than me? You must wish to die by my hands. You speak of a god, but tell me Prahlad, where is this god of yours?"

"He is everywhere, father."

"Is He here? Is he in this pillar?" the demon taunted. "Then let me see him protect you now." Drawing his sword, Hiranyakashipu struck its hilt against the pillar.

As it crumbled in a cloud of dust, a deafening roar reverberated throughout the palace. The earth trembled. Hiranyakashipu watched with wide eyes as an enormous creature emerged from the remains of the pillar. Though walking on two legs, he had the head of a lion. His eyes blazed like fire, his golden mane shook like a million snakes and his long tongue flicked about like a duelling sword. "Who is this strange creature?" Hiranyakashipu thought, "Is this Lord Vishnu, my arch enemy?"

Never before had he seen such awesome anger. But remembering that he, the king of the demons was immortal, he was unafraid. Flashing his razor-sharp sword, Hiranyakashipu charged the creature.

And so they fought, sometimes on the ground, and sometimes in the sky. Lord Narasingha was playing with the demon as an eagle plays with a mouse. Sometimes He caught him, sometimes He let him escape. Finally, in the doorway of the palace, the Lord seized Hiranyakashipu. He placed him on His lap and with His lion claws, ripped open the demon's belly.

The demon king was killed in neither the day nor night but at dusk, as the sun touched the horizon. He was not killed in the air, nor on the land, nor in the sea, but on the lap of Lord Vishnu. He was not killed inside a building or outside, but the porch of the palace. He was not killed by any weapon, but by the nails of the Lord Himself. Not did he die of any creature, be it be demigod, human or animal, but the Lord in His form as half man-half lion.

In this way, Lord Vishnu protected His dear devotee Prahlad, and at the same time ensured that Lord Brahma's promises were not broken. Hiranyakashipu had failed to outwit the lord.

Pacified by the selfless prayers of the gentle Prahlad, Narasingha said "Mr dear Prahlad, best of the Asuras, all good fortune to you! You may ask Me any benediction you may desire."

"My Lord," the boy replied, "please do not tempt me. I am not a businessman, serving You only to meet my own ends. I am happy simply to remain Your servant, life after life."

Narasingha, however, insisted.

"Then I ask You only one benediction," Prahlad consented. "That You please excuse my father for all his sinful activities."

"My dear Prahlad," The lord replied "because your unflinching devotion your father and twenty one generations of your family have already been liberated from the endless cycle of birth and death."

To this day, whenever there is danger from enemies, the devotees of Vishnu remember how Narasingha rescued Prahlad, and they pray for His protection.