

Dashavatar- the Ten Incarnations

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Incarnation One

Matsya - The Fish

A long time ago a very good and religious king ruled the entire world. He was Emperor Satyavrata.

One day, whilst the King was bathing in the Kritamala River, he scooped some clear water up into the palms of his hands. He saw there a tiny fish and immediately dropped it back into the water. Then he heard a soft voice crying, “My dear King, why are you throwing me back when there are bigger fish who will eat me? I am afraid of them. Please help me.”

Astonished at this talking fish, the king put it in a jug and then returned to his palace.

The next morning when the King went to see the fish, he was astonished to see it had grown. It was now nearly as big as the jug!

The fish said, “My dear King, I do not like living in this water pot. It is too small. Please find me somewhere more comfortable.”

The King took the fish, called Matsya, and put him in a huge well in his palace gardens. Within a few moments, he grew and grew until he was feeling very cramped by the walls of the well. Again, he asked the King to find him a larger home.

The King took him to a nearby pond, but Matsya kept on growing. The king put him in the largest lake he could find. But when even that was not big enough, he decided to take him to the seashore.

As Emperor Satyavrata was putting the fish into the ocean, he heard the fish exclaim, “Oh hero, there are many powerful and dangerous sharks in this ocean who will eat me alive. Do not throw me in here!”

Hearing this, the king cried out, “How is it you can speak? You are a fish! Who are you? You must be an incarnation of God. My lord, I wish to know why you have taken this form. Please tell me!”

When King Satyavrata spoke in this way, Matsya replied, “Oh Emperor, your devotion has pleased Me. Thus I have revealed Myself to you in this form as a fish. Now please listen carefully as I tell you why.

This universe is not eternal. It will not last forever. Everything in this world is temporary. By My arrangement, on the seventh day from today the whole universe will flood with water.

When all the planets flood, a huge boat sent by Me will appear before you. I want you to collect all different types of herbs and seeds, and load them onto the boat. Then, along with seven holy men and all the different animals and other living beings, you should board the ship. You should not be disheartened. Even the sun and moon will become very dim. The only light will be from the halos of the seven saints.

“When the powerful winds toss your boat, tie it to My horn using the gigantic snake called Vashuki as a rope. Together we will travel over the waters until the storm has abated. During that time, I will instruct you in the knowledge of the Vedas. These sacred books reveal all the mysteries of the universe. Thus you will know everything about me and my creation.”

After instructing the King, Matsya swam away into the middle of the ocean, and the King Satyavrata began to wait.

Exactly one week later, huge inky-blue clouds gathered and rolled in the sky. Unending rain began to pour as thick as pillars. Gradually all the rivers overflowed onto the land.

As King Satyavrata remembered the order of the Lord, he saw a massive boat floating towards him. After loading the varieties of seeds, herbs and creepers, the King boarded the boat with the seven saints and all the different living creatures.

Fierce gales tossed the boat to and fro, but the King was not afraid as he remembered the Lord. Suddenly, against the black and stormy sky he saw the gigantic golden form of Lord Matsya swimming towards them. On his head was an enormous golden horn. The emperor anchored the boat to Matsya’s horn using Vashuki the snake. Then he offered prayers to the Lord.

Lord Matsya, swimming in the huge waves and pulling the boat, began to explain the wisdom of the Vedas. The King and the saints all listened attentively. The Lord taught them how this universe, with all its planets, was created. He explained how it remains for some time, and how eventually it is all destroyed. After this destruction, another creation follows, going on repeatedly- just like the seasons follow one another, year after year. He explained that the soul lives forever, even though the body must die. And finally, He taught that by serving Him everyone can be happy and live eternally in the spiritual world.

Upon hearing the words of the Divine Person in His form as a huge fish, the King and the saints all became peaceful and happy. Thus they developed their love of God.

Later these teachings of Lord Matsya became part of the Vedic scripture. Since then, many, many saints have spent their lives studying these books. In this way, they have tried to become perfect human beings by loving God and loving all His creatures.

Incarnation Two

Kurma – The Turtle

Once, the saint Durvasa was walking down the road and he saw the king of the demigods, Indra, on the back of his white elephant. He smiled and taking a garland of marigolds from around his own neck, offered it to the king.

Indra, however, was too proud of his wealth and power. He took the garland, and without respect for the sage, placed it on the trunk of his elephant. The creature immediately dashed the garland to the ground.

His face red with anger, Durvasa cursed the king, “Because of your arrogance you will lose all of your opulence”.

Shortly afterwards the demons launched a powerful attack on the heavenly kingdom. Because of the curse, the demigods suffered heavy casualties. They feared total defeat at the hands of their enemies.

In desperation, their generals consulted Lord Vishnu who lives on an island within the ocean of milk. Standing on the jewelled shore of that ocean, they prayed to the Lord and received the following message, “My dear demigods, the demons have become too powerful for you. You must make a truce with them and offer to work together.” Vishnu then explained his plan of action.

Following this advice, King Indra approached the king of the demons. “My dear King Bali, I have plans to produce the most valuable medicine, the nectar of immortality. By drinking this anyone can live forever.”

Bali was interested and agreed to help. He thought “Once we’ve helped produce the nectar, we demons can easily steal it from the weakened demigods.” So he and Indra signed a truce.

With great effort the demigods and demons carried the golden mountain called Mandara to the ocean, to use as a churning rod. Together they requested the giant serpent Vashuki to serve as a rope for turning the rod. Vashuki reluctantly agreed.

Curling him round the mountain, the demons took hold of his head as they desired, leaving the demigods to hold his tail. First the demigods pulled, and the mountain turned one way. Then the demons pulled, and the mountain turned the other. After spinning only three or four times, the mountain sank deep into the mud at the bottom of the ocean. It needed a pivot on which to rest.

Both parties were frustrated and annoyed. As they pondered the problem, Lord Vishnu took the form of a gigantic turtle and lifted the golden mountain on his back. The demigods and the demons resumed their churning. This time the mountain turned smoothly on top of the turtle who enjoyed having his back scratched.

At first the churning produced a deadly black poison which floated over the waves, threatening to pollute the entire universe. The demigods were highly alarmed. They went to seek the help of Lord Shiva, the greatest of the demigods, who was sitting in meditation in the Himalayas. He agreed to help and by magic, he condensed all the poison into the palm of his hand. As he drank it, a few drops spilt and were drunk by scorpions, snakes and other poisonous creatures. The poison turned Lord Shiva's neck blue, and since then he has been known as "Nilakanta".

The demigods and demons continued to pull on the huge snake, churning the milky waters. Out of the ocean rose magical animals, sparkling gems, fragrant flowers and medicinal herbs.

At last, a beautiful blackish figure emerged from the waves. Dressed in yellow garments and decorated with red, green and blue gems, He carried a golden pot filled to the brim with nectar.

The demons immediately snatched the pot and ran off. They began to argue amongst themselves, "Hey! Why should you drink it first? What about me?"

The demigods were disappointed and prayed to Lord Vishnu for help. The Lord assumed the form of Mohini, an exquisitely beautiful woman. She had a darkish complexion, was dressed in a crimson sari and wore golden bangles. Her eyes moved restlessly, glancing over the demons.

The Asuras were enamoured by her feminine movements. Handing over the jug of nectar, they asked her to settle their dispute.

Mohini then seated them in a row and asked the demigods to do the same, some distance away. Sweetly addressing the demons, she said, "The demigods are very greedy to taste the nectar, so let me just give them a little. You are all great heroes. Because you are very patient, I know you won't mind waiting a little longer."

The demons were flattered and didn't dare say a word. They remained silent as Mohini served the nectar to their enemies – not just a little but every last drop.

Mohini then turned herself back into her original form of Vishnu. The demons' jaws dropped open; they had been tricked! They had worked so hard but achieved nothing.

The demigods had also worked very hard, but they had depended on God. Now they were freed from the miseries of old age, disease and death.

Incarnation Three

Varaha – The Boar

Hiranyaksha was a powerful demon. At the time of his birth unlucky omens appeared everywhere. Violent winds uprooted trees, volcanoes erupted and inky clouds rained endlessly as lightning slashed the sky. Owls screeched fiercely, wolves howled at the moon and trembling cows gave blood instead of milk.

Hiranyaksha grew to be as large as a mountain. His golden crown appeared to kiss the sky. The earth quaked as he walked. Greater than his height was his pride, but even greater was his greed. He mined so much gold from the Earth that the planet lost its balance, fell out of orbit and plunged into the ocean at the bottom of the Universe.

The proud Hiranyaksha dived into the ocean, terrifying all the sea creatures as he whirled his golden club. He was eager to fight and looked for Varuna, the lord of the waters. Coming face-to-face with Varuna, he challenged him to combat.

“I have stopped fighting now due to old age,” said Varuna. “However, you are so expert in fighting that the only person equal to you is Lord Vishnu himself. When you meet him, he will destroy your pride and you will lie down to sleep on the battlefield.”

Not caring for the words of Varuna, Hiranyaksha left in search for his enemy. Meanwhile, Lord Vishnu, in His form as a huge red boar, entered the cosmic ocean. Sniffing through the mud at the bottom, He found the earth planet. Then, lifting it on His two white tusks, He rose out of the water.

Hiranyaksha was waiting, very angry. “Oh amphibious beast,” he cried, “this Earth is mine. Today I will please my demon friends by smashing your skull.”

Lord Varaha was concerned to protect Mother Earth and so raced through space with the planet on His tusks.

Hiranyaksha followed him shouting “Coward! Come back! Come back!”

Lord Varaha is in charge of the law of gravity. Making the Earth very light, he gently placed her on the surface of the sea where she floated like a turquoise ball.

With the earth now safe, Varaha turned to Hiranyaksha and laughed mockingly, “I am indeed the beast out to kill dogs like you. I am not afraid for you are a mortal, bound by the laws of death. Give up your foolish talk and fight.

Hiranyaksha, trembling with anger and hissing like a cobra, sprang at the Lord with his golden club. Varaha dodged the blow and struck out with His own mace. As the fight raged on, both were injured and the smell of blood increased their fury.

From up on high the residents of the heavens watched this terrible fight. They begged Lord Varaha “please, do not play any longer with this wicked demon. Finish him off quickly.”

Lord Varaha glanced lovingly at His devotees, then sprang at Hiranyaksha, aiming His mace at the demon's chin. But Hiranyaksha knocked the mace from Varaha's hand and sent it spinning deep into space.

The demigods cried in alarm, 'Alas! Alas! What will happen now?'

Lord Varaha called for His famous disc weapon and it appeared in the sky, razor-sharp and whirling like a circular saw.

Seeing this, Hiranyaksha exploded with fury. Glaring at the Lord with burning eyes, he hurled his mace, screaming "Now you are slain!"

The Lord deftly knocked it away with His left foot. Then coolly and calmly He said, "Pick up your weapon and try again?"

Roaring like a lion, the demon again hurled his mace. But the divine boar easily caught it just like a hawk catches a mouse. He offered it to the demon. "Why don't you try again?" He asked.

Hiranyaksha became ashamed and angry. Taking instead a flaming trident, he hurled it with all his might towards the Lord.

Varaha easily cut it into seven pieces with His razor-sharp disc.

Using his magical powers the demon became invisible. Fierce winds blew from all directions: stones dropped out of the sky; angry clouds poured down blood, urine, hair and bones; armies of fierce demons appeared as if from nowhere riding on phantom horses and elephants.

Using His own mystical powers, the Lord dispelled the demon's magic. Still Hiranyaksha did not give up. He ran up to the lord, embraced Him and tried to crush Him with his powerful arms.

The demigods watched in horror. Seeing their forlorn faces, Lord Varaha decided; "I've played with this demon long enough."

Casually, He slapped Hiranyaksha at the base of his ear. Hiranyaksha's body quivered; his eyeballs bulged out of their sockets; and he fell down dead like a huge tree cut down by a hurricane.

Lord Varaha placed the earth back into its correct orbit. The demigods were overjoyed and praised the Lord, "You are not forced like us to take your birth but you do so by your own free will. You appear in a form just suitable to perform your mission of rescuing the Earth from a dirty place."

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.

Incarnation Five

Vamana – The Dwarf

Millions of years ago, the head of the demons, King Bali, attacked the demigods. With hordes of elephants, cavalry, chariots and footmen, they fought for control of the universe.

After being heavily defeated, Indra, the king of the demigods, consulted his spiritual teacher. “Even those who are evil may achieve temporary success,” said his guru. “Because of his penances and charity, Bali has become extremely powerful. Don’t try to resist him at the moment.” Taking their guru’s advice, the demigods retreated, giving up their kingdoms and taking refuge in the lower planets. Bali moved into Indra’s palace and began to rule the universe.

Indra’s mother felt sorry for her son and appealed to Lord Vishnu for help. In response, the lord agreed to become her son. He entered her womb and in due course took birth, appearing in his blackish form, with four arms and dressed in yellow garments. Soon after this, he changed his form into that of a dwarf, called Vamana. He appeared to be student priest, wearing a deerskin and a sacred thread and carrying a staff, umbrella and a water-pot

He made his way to the palace of Bali. Just at that moment, the king was preparing for a religious ceremony. Lord Vamana shone so brilliantly as he entered the arena that the priests thought that the sun-god himself had arrived.

King Bali became jubilant upon the sight of the beautiful boy. He welcomed him and offered him a seat. Having worshipped him by bathing his feet, he said, “It is customary that a king give charity to the brahmins. What may I give you? You can take anything you want. Food, cows, horses, elephants, chariots, houses, villages, gold – whatever your heart may desire.”

“O King of demons,” Vamana replied, “I ask only for three paces of your majesty’s land, measured by my own footsteps.”

King Bali was taken aback. “Is that all you want?”

“A brahmin should not ask more than what he needs,” replied Vamana. “I require only enough land upon which to sleep.”

The king shook his head in disbelief. “My dear Vamana, although you are very learned, you are only a boy. Therefore, you are not so intelligent and don’t know what’s best for you. Take this opportunity; I could easily give you an entire planet.”

“Thank you.” Lord Vamana replied. “However, only one who is not greedy, and is content with whatever God provides, is truly happy. If I were not happy with three paces of land, I’d also be dissatisfied with an entire planet. And if I did own a planet, then surely I’d want another, and another. A person unable to control his greed cannot be happy even if he owns the universe. Therefore, all I ask of you is three paces of land.”

“All right,” the king reluctantly agreed. “Take whatever you like. Go ahead, pace out your three steps of land.”

Lord Vamana, the dwarf, began to grow, and grow. With his first step he covered half the universe. As his second step crossed beyond the heavenly planets, his big toe pierced the covering at the edge of the universe. Not a square inch of land remained for his third step.

Returning to his original size, Vamana, said “ Oh King, you owned all land throughout the universe as far as the sun, moon and stars. With two paces I’ve taken it all from you. But remember, you promised me three steps of land.

Bali was perplexed. How could he keep his promise? He realised that it was Lord Vishnu Himself who had appeared as a dwarf simply to cheat him. The king replied, “Oh Lord, You are always good, whether You punish or reward. You appear to be my enemy, for You side with the demigods. But actually You are my true friend, helping me understand how this life and any possessions are temporary. Nothing in this world escapes the ravages of time. You have taken all my wealth, but I still have myself. Please place Your third step on my head.”

At that moment Bali’s wife stepped forward and addressed the Brahmin boy, “Lord Vamana, foolish men think they own something. But, in reality, everything belongs to you. Though my husband is offering you his body, he does not realise that it is on loan from you. Please forgive his foolishness.”

Lord Vamana was gently smiling and replied, “My dear queen, your husband has greatly pleased me. Determined to give me everything, he kept nothing for himself. By his full surrender he has proven to be my true devotee. For this you shall both live on the subterranean planet called Sitala; it is more opulent than even the celestial realms.”

After this incident, the demigods defeated the demons and recaptured their heavenly planets. Since that time King Bali has become famous as one who surrendered everything, including himself, to the service of the lord.

Incarnation Six

Parashuram – The Warrior

Long ago there lived in the forest a brahmin priest called, Jamadagni. He was very religious and had seven sons, headed by Parashuram. He also possessed a wish-fulfilling cow called Kamadhenu. This magical animal could give one whatever one desired. Still, as a true brahmin, Jamadagni lived very simply in his humble cottage.

One day Parashuram was away from home. King Arjuna, who was travelling through the forest with his army, came upon the hermitage. As is the custom in India, Jamadagni happily received the king and his army as his guests. With the help of Kamadhenu, he offered a huge feast to the king and his men.

Instead of being grateful, however, the greedy king stole the cow and left for his capital.

Shortly afterwards Parashuram returned. Hearing of the theft, He became as angry as a trampled snake. Dressed in a black deerskin and with matted locks of hair, He took his axe and shield and was fearful to behold. He pursued the wicked king, apprehending the army as they approached the city's gates. There followed a terrible battle. Wherever Parashuram whirled His axe, severed arms, legs and heads tumbled to the ground. As he killed men, horses and elephants, the ground became muddy with their blood. Parashuram challenged the king. He chopped off His arms and, with a final swing of His axe, lopped off the king's head.

Happily returning home with Kamadhenu, Parashuram told his father everything. But Jamadagni was not pleased in the slightest. "My son," he said, "You have sinned by killing the Emperor, the protector of the citizens. The duty of a brahmin is to develop the qualities of forgiveness. The Supreme Lord is pleased with those who are forgiving."

Parashuram felt sorry and repented his foolishness. To atone for his sin he set off on a pilgrimage. After one year of visiting the holy places, he again returned home.

One day Parashuram and his brothers were in the woods near the hermitage. The sons of Arjuna, seeking revenge for their father's death, stealthily approached the cottage. Seeing Jamadagni seated alone in meditation, they crept up from behind and chopped off his head, carrying it away. Parashuram and his brothers, hearing their mother's screams, rushed back to their home. Overcome with grief and anger, they cried over their father's body. With eyes blazing Parashuram again took up his axe and pursued the murderers to their capital.

In the midst of that city he created a mountain of heads severed from the bodies of King Arjuna's sons. The ghastly river of their blood flowed throughout the entire land, bringing fear to the hearts of all kings who disrespected the brahmins.

Because the rulers remained sinful for over twenty-one generations, Parashuram killed them all. From their blood he created nine lakes, which later became filled with water. Today many Hindus go there on pilgrimage and bathe there, remembering how the government should always respect the brahmins.

Incarnation Seven

Rama – The Monarch

Millions of years ago in the land of India there lived a king called Dasharath. His capital was Ayodhya and from there he ruled his kingdom with his three queens.

At around the same time, all of these queens became pregnant. Two of them each delivered a male child, and the third gave birth to twin boys. Thus King Dasharath had four sons, headed by the eldest, called Rama.

The four princes grew into valiant and chivalrous warriors. They learned the military arts of fighting with bow and arrow and with sword and shield. They became expert in the science of government, treating the citizens as their very own family. In due course of time, Rama married a beautiful princess called Sita and they lived happily in the Ayodhya.

One day, as King Dasharath looked into the mirror, he noticed a grey hair on his head. “I am getting old,” he considered. After consulting his ministers, he announced to the citizens his intention to hand over the kingdom to Rama and to retire to the forest.

The citizens were overjoyed and jubilantly prepared for the coronation. They swept the roads till they were spotless and sprinkled them with scented water. They hung garlands on the gates and doorways and decorated every building with flags and festoons.

Not everyone, however, was celebrating. Within the palace, a wicked and hunch-backed maidservant was consulting with Kaikeyi, one of Dasharath’s wives. She convinced the queen that Rama’s coronation was actually a plot to do away with her own son, Bharat. Smouldering with anger, Kaikeyi hurried to the king’s chamber.

Seeing her anguished face, Dasharath enquired, “ My dear wife, what is the matter? Have I done something to upset you? How may I pacify you?”

“My husband, do you remember when you fell from your chariot on the battlefield?” Kaikeyi asked him.

“Yes and you saved my life.”

“At that time,” Kaikeyi continued, “you granted me two boons, to ask of you at any time. I want you now to fulfil my wishes. Firstly, I want my own son Bharat and not Rama to be crowned as king. And secondly, I want you to banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years.”

Dasharath fainted in shock. Coming to his senses he cried out, “Kaikeyi! Your evil words are sharper than any sword. As king, I must keep my word, through fulfilling it is worse than death.”

Bound by his promise, Dasharath had no choice but to comply with Kaikeyi wishes. He called for Rama and broke the news. Rama was not disturbed in the least and tried to console His grieving father. Both Sita and Rama’s younger brother Lakshman, refused to live without Rama. They decided to join Him during His exile. All three gave up their royal garments of silks, jewellery and crowns, donning coarse cloth made of tree bark. Amidst wails of grief from their family and citizens, they passed through the city gates. Without looking back, they entered the forest.

Life there was simple. Rama and Lakshman build a cottage. Sita collected fruits, vegetables and herbs for their meals. They enjoyed the peaceful atmosphere and the company of saints and sages. They lived happily – until the fourteenth and final year.

One day a hideous, grey-skinned, man-eating Rakshasa named Shurpanakha chanced upon the hermitage. Ram's elegant and divine features captivated her heart and she longed to marry him. Rama, however, refused her repeated requests saying, "I am content with one wife."

The ugly ogress flew into a jealous rage and rushed at the beautiful Sita. Lakshman stepped forward and with his sword deftly sliced off her nose and ears. Howling she fled into the jungle, screaming of revenge.

A few days later, Rama and Sita were enjoying the splendour of their garden. The princess suddenly sighted a beautifully golden deer with silver spots. "Oh Rama," she cried out, "what an extraordinary creature. I'd love to have it as my pet. Please get it for me."

Rama, however, was suspicious. "It is certainly no ordinary deer," he agreed. "But it may be an illusion created by a magician. Lakshman, stay here and guard Sita. Under no circumstances must you leave her alone!" Thus ordering his brother, he set out to follow the delicate creature. Finally convinced that it was indeed a fake, he released his arrow. The creature fell and resumed its original form as a frightful demon. Just before breathing its last, it cried out in a voice like Rama's, "Lakshman! Help Me! Help Me!"

Lakshman was unmoved when he heard these cries. He knew that no one could defeat his brother. Sita, however, could not contain her grief. "Lakshman! Did you not hear? Rama is in trouble. Why do you stand there? Please go and help him?" Sita could not convince him. "Now I understand," she declared, "you want Rama out of the way so you can marry me!"

Sita's cruel words pierced the pure heart of Lakshman. Determined to prove her wrong, he strode out of the hermitage, leaving Sita alone.

Ravana, King of the Rakshasas, was waiting. Now was the time to avenge his mutilated sister and see for himself the beauty of Rama's wife! Springing forward, he grasped Sita by the wrist and bundled her, screaming for help, into his chariot. Drawn by donkeys, the magical vehicle soared through the skies towards Ravana's capital of Lanka.

Lakshman could not console Rama over the loss of His beloved wife. The two brothers wandered the forests, plains, valleys and mountains searching for any clue of Sita's whereabouts. After several months they enlisted the help of an army of monkey warriors. Their commander Sugriva sent search parties throughout the land in all the four directions of the north, south, east and west. They were almost ready to give up when a vulture brought news that Sita was captive on the isle of Lanka.

From their ranks, the monkey generals chose Hanuman for a dangerous mission: to go to Lanka, find Sita and determine the enemy's military strength. With a single bound, Hanuman crossed the ocean and after many adventures found Sita sitting in a wooded grove. She had grown thin, and was constantly shedding tears for her husband. She told Hanuman how she had refused to be Ravana's queen and how the demon king threatened her that, "If by the end of the year you do

not agree, my cooks will serve you for my supper!” Hanuman pacified Sita and assured her that he would return with Rama. Bidding farewell, he again leapt into the skies and returned to the army, poised on the shores of the ocean.

Lord Rama ordered the monkey soldiers to pick up rocks and boulders and hurl them into the sea. By the Lord’s inconceivable power, they floated on the water and very soon formed a bridge stretching all the way to Lanka. With loud cheers, the army marched on Ravana’s capital and the battalions of demons waiting for battle.

As the two armies met, the ground appeared to tilt and tremble and the clash of weapons was deafening. The Rakshasas released volleys of spears, arrows and tridents. Against them the monkey warrior hurled trees, rocks and mountain peaks. Gradually Rama’s army began to push back the enemy. Vultures circled in the sky, waiting to feed on the carcasses of the dead.

Ravana’s army was highly organised and almost invincible. When he heard of the defeat of his best generals and the death of his two sons, he became enraged. Mounting his personal aeroplane, he showered missiles on the monkey troops.

Rama confronted him and challenged, “Oh, worst of the man-eaters, you resemble a dog! A hound steals food from the kitchen when the owner is out. Similarly, you stole My wife Sita when I was away. Therefore, on this day I will send you to the kingdom of death!”

Rama invoked a celestial weapon. Fixing the arrow to His bow, He released it towards the demon’s chest. It hissed through the air like a serpent spitting poison and pierced the demon’s heart. Vomiting blood, Ravana fell from his plane and his lifeless body thudded to the ground. The monkeys cheered and waved their tails in jubilation.

When Sita saw her husband once again, her lotus-like face blossomed with joy. Together they mounted a flower aeroplane and with Lakshman and Hanuman, returned to Ayodhya.

It was the night of the new moon and pitch black. Millions of oil lamps lit up the capital and the roads along the way. Seeing their king returning after so long, the citizens of Ayodhya offered flower garlands, waved their shawls and danced in great jubilation. Bharat, his eyes full of tears, embraced his elder brother and welcomed him home.

Whilst Lord Rama was King, all mental and bodily miseries disappeared. Disease, old age bereavement, fear and fatigue were completely absent. Death itself did not come for those who did not want it to. Today, people recall it Rama-Rajya, the reign of Lord Rama, and remember His example as an ideal king.

Incarnation Eight

Balaram – The Cowherd

Five thousand years ago Lord Krishna appeared in India. He and His elder brother Balaram, live in the rural village of Vrindavan on the river Yamuna.

Both brothers were exquisitely beautiful, with black hair like the clusters of crows' feathers and eyes like lotus petals. The only difference between them was in colour. Krishna was bluish black like a thundercloud and Balaram was white like a cloud in autumn. Krishna dressed in yellow and sported a flute, and Balaram wore blue and carried a plough.

Krishna and Balaram's father Nanda was in charge of the farming community. He and his wife, Yashoda, owned thousands of dairy cows, which provided milk, yogurt, cream butter and ghee. The oxen were used for ploughing, milling and transport, helping to provide grains, fruits and vegetables. Any excess produce the villagers traded locally in exchange for clothes, jewellery and other gifts of nature. In this way, life in Vrindavan was simple; everyone was healthy, prosperous and fully satisfied.

More than anything, the residents of Vrindavan loved Krishna. He was the centre of their lives. At the age of six, He and Balaram were given charge of the cows. Along with Their friends, They daily left for the pasturing grounds. As the cows grazed peacefully, Krishna and Balaram, surrounded by Their friends, enjoyed the forest atmosphere. There were blossoming flowers, chirping birds and lakes of crystal clear water. Cool breezes carried the aroma of lotuses and the refreshing spray of waterfalls. The trees, over-laden with fruits, bent to the ground as if to offer respects to the two brothers. The boys danced, played and wrestled. Sometimes they imitated the sounds and movements of animals such as frogs, monkeys and peacocks, or they chased shadows of birds along the ground. They played hide-and-seek and football with ball-shaped fruits.

While Krishna, Balaram and Their friends enjoyed their day in the forest, the other residents of Vrindavan eagerly awaited Their return. More than anyone it was the milkmaids of Vrindavan, the gopis, who would wait for Krishna, hoping to catch His loving glance. The gopis were Krishna's girlfriends and all loved Him dearly. On the warm evenings, when the moon was full, Krishna and the gopis would playfully dance in the groves along the Yamuna River. His sweet smiles and joking words captivated their hearts. Like everyone in Vrindavan, they were happily absorbed in thoughts of Him only.

One day, Krishna and Balaram left for Mathura, the city nearby. They promised to return, but never did. Nanda and Yashoda, the cowherd boys, and especially the gopis were all plunged into an ocean of grief.

Over the years, Krishna and Balaram became famous as royal princes ruling the kingdom of Dwarka. Long gone was the simple village life; they lived in great opulence in huge marble palaces bedecked with jewels. They had Their queens, Their children, Their ministers and Their vast armies.

Once, anxious to see His father and mother again, Balaram left Dwarka by chariot. Upon reaching Vrindavan He was enthusiastically greeted by all the residents. All the cowherd boys

and the gopis had now grown up. They embraced Him with tears and laughter. Nanda and Yashoda asked about the welfare of the two brothers and Their relatives.

The gopis had been heartbroken by Krishna's absence. Now they began to ask questions about Him. "Does He still remember His parents and His friends who loved Him dearly? Has He any plans to come to see us? There are so many sophisticated women in Dwarka and He must be happy in their company; does He still remember us simple village girls?"

As the gopis talked in this way, their feelings for Krishna became intense. Recalling his attractive features and sweet words, they could not check their feelings, and began to cry.

To pacify them, Lord Balaram stayed there for two months, relating the many stories of Krishna. And once again they enjoyed themselves on the banks of the river Yamuna. One evening Balaram had been drinking a beverage made of wild honey and in the silver light of the full moon, was smiling resplendently. He desired to bathe in the waters of the Yamuna, and called the river to come nearby. Yamuna, however, refused thinking Him to be drunk.

Balaram's eyes turned red in anger. Picking up His plough, He threatened to scratch the Yamuna into hundreds of scattered streams. Yamuna, afraid and trembling, appeared in person before Him. With folded hands she bowed before Him and begged His forgiveness. Balaram was pleased with Her and enjoyed bathing with the gopis in Her waters.

The River Yamuna still has many branches due to being scratched by the ploughshare of Balaram.

The two months passed as if they were no more than a day, Balaram and the Gopis so enjoyed themselves. In the company of Lord Balaram, the Gopis and other residents of Vrindavan became as cheerful as they had been before in the presence of both brothers.

Incarnation Nine

Buddha – The Teacher

Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, there lived in India a king called Suddhodana. He ruled over the province called Gaya. One night his wife, Queen Maya, had a vivid dream. She dreamt that angels whisked her away to a golden house high in the Himalayan Mountains. They bathed her and laid her on a silken bed. Then a white elephant carrying a lotus flower in its trunk approached her, touched her right side with the lotus, and a baby entered her womb.

Upon waking, the queen excitedly told her husband everything. The King summoned his adviser. His adviser could see past, present and future and foretold that the queen would soon give birth to a son who would become either a saintly king or a famous religious teacher.

Nine months later the queen gave birth to a son. On His body were all the signs of a great person. He had long ear lobes and the soles of His feet bore the marks of chariot wheels. His parents gave Him the name Siddhartha Gautama. Sadly, just eight days after His birth, the queen died.

As the child grew, King Suddhodana constantly remembered the wise man's words. He was hopeful that Siddhartha might become a powerful king, but he was afraid also. "Perhaps my son, he thought, "will be happy to renounce the kingdom and become a wandering saint." He therefore ordered his servants that the Prince should never, under any circumstances, leave the palace grounds. He gave Siddhartha everything. The Prince wore costly silks and jewels, and ate the finest foods. The country's finest musicians, dancers and actors entertained Him. He married a girl more captivating than the celestial beauties of heaven.

Still, Prince Siddhartha was not entirely happy. There rose within His heart a longing to know what lay beyond the palace walls.

One day, when He was twenty-nine years old, Siddhartha managed to escape the vigilance of His father's guards and left the palace grounds for the first time in His life. Seated on a chariot, He passed a wrinkled, grey-haired man hobbling by with a walking stick. He then saw a man lying beside the road, wheezing and coughing blood. Almost immediately there passed a procession of people, weeping and carrying a lifeless body. Siddhartha didn't know what to make of it. He stopped a passing monk and enquired, "Who are these people and what are they doing?"

The sage replied, "Young man, no one who takes birth in this world can avoid the three types of suffering: Old age, disease and death."

Shocked at his news, Siddhartha returned undetected to the palace. "Why must there be suffering?" He asked Himself repeatedly. He vowed to Himself to solve these problems. One night, whilst everyone was sound asleep, He crept from the palace, and entered the forest, never to return. He lived the life of an ascetic, accepting great discomfort. He did not care for the clothes He wore, nor the food He ate. Sometimes He fasted for weeks and bathed in freezing mountain streams.

Still, Siddhartha was not happy. Previously life's luxuries had not brought contentment; but neither had His present life of deliberate discomfort. Finally, He broke His fast and took to what

His followers call today “The Middle Path”. He was moderate in everything. He neither ate too much, nor too little; neither slept too long, nor too short.

One day sitting in meditation under a giant Bo tree, He fixed His gaze on the northern star. His attention became unwavering and He attained peace of mind. He was free from all worldly desires, from lust, greed and anger. From that day on people called him Buddha. It is only the body that gets sick, becomes old and dies - knowing this, He achieved His ambition to become free from all miseries.

As was foretold, Lord Buddha became famous as a religious teacher and gathered thousands of disciples. He taught the principles of compassion and non-violence. The people of the time were largely atheistic and misusing the Vedas for their own selfish purposes. In the name of the scriptures they were opening huge slaughterhouses and killing daily thousands of innocent animals. Therefore, Lord Buddha outwardly rejected the Vedas and stressed a strictly vegetarian diet. In this way He saved the poor animals and, at the same time, tricked the atheists into following Him, an incarnation of God.

Incarnation Ten Kalki – The Slayer

According to the Vedic, or Hindu, scriptures, time moves in cycles. If we study our clocks we can observe this. One full circle of the second hand takes one minute; one complete rotation of the minute hand takes an hour; one full sweep of the hour hand represents daytime, another sweep represents night. The solar system itself is like a gigantic clock where time is measured according to the positions of the planets. By the movements of the earth, moon and sun, we can understand days, months and years. The Vedas also say that one planet controls each day of the week. They also mention very long periods of time. For example, there is a cycle lasting over four million years! In each of these cycles, all of the ten incarnations appear on schedule. Each of these periods consists of four ages. Sanskrit, the language of ancient India, calls these yugas. There are four yugas, which rotate endlessly, just like the four seasons of the year. The first Yuga is the golden age, the second is the silver age, the next the copper age and finally the iron age. They are called Satya-yuga, Treta-yuga, Dwarapa-yuga and Kali-yuga respectively.

At the moment we live in Kali-Yuga, also called the Age of Quarrel. It began five thousand years ago. At that time, a great sage called Vyas wrote down the Vedas. He was a very wise man, able to see into the future, and he predicted what would happen in this Kali-Yuga. Here are some examples of what he wrote:

- Oh King, religion, truthfulness, cleanliness, tolerance, mercifulness, bodily strength, memory and the duration of life will diminish day-by-day
- To be successful in business, one will be forced to cheat.
- Men and women will marry simply by verbal agreement.
- Just by being rich a person will be considered respectable (even if his habits are beastly).
- People will think that simply by wearing the clothes of a priest one becomes religious.
- If a speaker is expert in juggling words, people will consider them very intelligent (even if no one understands what they are saying).
- The leaders of the country will be little better than thieves.
- The main goal of life will be to fill the belly.
- People will think that beauty depends on one's hairstyle.
- People will often go to a church, temple or mosque merely for the sake of their reputation.

The Vedas also predict natural disasters such as drought, famine, earthquakes and epidemics.

Despite all this, the Vedas mention one distinct advantage to living in Kali-Yuga. It is this: if people simply meet together and glorify God they can become freed from all miseries. It is very easy, and it is for everyone – the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the black and the white. We are all equal in the eyes of God.

There are 427,000 years left in Kali-Yuga. By the end of the age people will be three foot tall and grey in complexion. Twenty years will be considered a ripe old age, and human flesh a delicacy. Religion will be as good as dead.

At that time, the Vedas predict, the Lord will appear in India as Kalki. His skin will be bluish-black, like rain clouds and he will dress in yellow garments. Riding a white horse and wielding a sword, he will kill all the atheists. Then he will usher in the Golden Age, as the cycle begins once more.