

The 24 Avtaars (incarnations)
of
Lord Vishnu

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The 24 Avtaars (incarnations) of Lord Vishnu

Lord Vishnu is the Supreme Being, the Supreme Lord of creation. He is also known as the Viraat Purush, the all-encompassing and all-pervading macrocosmic form of the Lord. Vishnu is the one from whose navel a divine lotus had emerged, and from this lotus came into being Brahma, the creator of this visible world.

Lord *Vishnu* has many names such as Vasudeo, Narayan, Viraat Purush etc.

The word ‘Vishnu’ consists of two components—‘Vishwa’ meaning the world or the entire creation, and ‘Anu’ meaning an atom. Hence, this is made up of atoms called Vishnu, and therefore the latter pervades throughout this creation.

The *glories of Lord Vishnu* have been enumerated at a number of places in the Tripadvibhut Maha Narayan Upanishad of the Atharva Veda tradition which is totally dedicated to this Lord. The divine virtues of Vishnu as the *Viraat Purush* have been enumerated in Canto 2, paragraph no. 12, and Canto 6, paragraph no. 11; Canto 7, paragraph no. 18. Similarly, glorious virtues of *Vishnu* independently in its Canto 1, paragraph no. 1, 5-6; Canto 2, paragraph no. 11; Canto 6, paragraph no. 11; and Canto 8, paragraph no. 17. These together collectively present a combined picture of the grand form of the Viraat Purush as Lord Vishnu. The glories of Lord Vishnu as *Narayan* are enumerated in Canto 2, paragraph no. 12.

According to the *Sharav Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, verse no. 25, the whole creation is a manifestation of Vishnu, and therefore it represents Vishnu at the microcosmic level of creation. Vishnu is put on the same pedestal here as the Viraat Purush because the Upanishads say that the creation is created from the Viraat, and with Brahma the creator because this creation is created by him.

Lord Vishnu is the sustainer and the care-taker of the world. He is the most important of the Trinity Gods consisting of Brahma, the creator, and Shiva, the concluder. It’s easy to produce and destroy, but it is indeed a mammoth task to sustain and nourish what has been born.

The *Viraat Purush* is the macrocosmic gross body of Brahm, the Supreme Being, from whose body the rest of the creation, both the visible and the invisible, is said to have been formed; the Viraat embodies the whole creation in his own self. The word ‘Viraat’ itself means measureless, infinite, colossus and vast. The manifestation of Brahm as the Viraat includes Brahma the creator, Vishnu the sustainer, and Shiva the concluder.

Usually, Vishnu and Viraat Purush are regarded as the same Divinity having two names; they are synonymous with each other. But observed closely, the Viraat is the subtler form of Vishnu. When incarnations are being referred to, it is Vishnu who becomes relevant because he represents the slightly grosser aspect of Divinity (Brahm) as compared to the Viraat Purush. When the finer aspects of Brahm’s divine virtues and cosmic powers of Consciousness are being referred to, such as the Lord being omnipresent, all-pervading and all-encompassing, then the Viraat Purush is implied. The term ‘Viraat Purush’ literally means the Lord who has a colossus form that is as vast,

measureless and fathomless as this creation. This is the all-inclusive form of Brahm, the Supreme Being, as Vishnu. That is, Vishnu and the Viraat are synonymous with each other. The only probable difference between them is the level of subtlety of their existence—for while the Viraat is the subtler form of Brahm even before Brahma the creator came into existence, Vishnu is the less subtler form of Brahm as he is a contemporary of Brahma and one of the Trinity Gods. While the Viraat Purush is the cosmic form of Brahm from whom the entire creation came into being, Vishnu is that form of Brahm which is responsible for taking care of the creation once it came into being.

Since on the one hand all the creatures are said to be born from a tiny fraction of Vishnu's body (or the body of the Viraat Purush) and therefore represent Vishnu in a microcosmic form, and on the other hand it Brahma, the creator, who is regarded as the creator of all the world and its creatures, it follows that in fact it is the Supreme Being known as the Brahm, in his cosmic form as the Viraat or Vishnu, who has done both the jobs of creation and sustenance—i.e. he has subtly transformed himself as Brahma to create this world, and then assumed the role of Vishnu to become a sustainer and protector of what has been created by Brahma. [In other words, the Supreme Being known as the Viraat Purush or Vishnu plays two roles—as Brahma he creates, and as Vishnu he sustains and protects the creation.

Lord Vishnu, as the Viraat Purush, is the macrocosmic gross body of Brahm, and it is from this form of Brahm that the creator of the visible creation, i.e. Brahma the old patriarch of creation, had emerged atop a divine lotus that sprouted from the navel of Vishnu. Lord Vishnu is the sustainer and the care-taker of the world. He is the most important of the Trinity Gods consisting of Brahma, the creator, and Shiva, the concluder. It's easy to produce and destroy, but a mammoth task to sustain and nourish what has been born.

Vishnu is also known by the name of *Vasudeo* because he is the sustainer and protector of creation, signifying his undisputed lordship over all the essential elements in Nature, called the Vasus of which there are eight in number, and which were created at the beginning of creation to help sustain the upcoming creation. It ought to be noted here that Vishnu is also called Viraat Purush, the macrocosmic gross body of Brahm, and it is from this form of Brahm that the creator of the visible creation, i.e. Brahma the old patriarch of creation, had emerged atop a divine lotus that sprouted from the navel of Vishnu. In other words, everything has its origin in the supreme Brahm.

Lord *Narayan and Vishnu* are synonymously treated in the scriptures. The etymology of the word *Narayan* is—the primary one who has his abode in the primordial causal waters of the cosmos; one who is the abode of all living creatures; one who has his residence in the bosom of all living beings as their Atma or pure self or consciousness; one who is the final goal of all spiritual pursuits. When the transcendental Supreme Being decided to initiate creation, his first revelation was *Hiranyagarbha* which represented the macrocosmic subtle body of creation, and from it emerged the Viraat Purush who is the macrocosmic gross body of creation. This 'Viraat' is literally the vast, infinite, measureless, fathomless and colossal form of the supreme Brahm, a form which is all-pervasive, all-encompassing, all-inclusive, immanent and omnipresent in creation. The 'Purush' is literally an entity that lives inside a dwelling, here referring to as the pure consciousness that lives as the Atma of all the living beings. (*Brihad Aranyaka*

Upanishad, 2/5/18-19). This Viraat Purush is therefore the vast and all-inclusive cosmic Consciousness that entered the gross body of the creature and found a comfortable a ode in the heart as his Atma. This Viraat Purush at the macro level of creation is known as Vishnu, the one who lives immanently in this creation, inseparable from it and forming its integral part.

Since Narayan or Vishnu is the term used to imply the Viraat Purush who is Brahm personified at the macrocosmic level of creation, it follows that Narayan or Vishnu is the supreme Lord of creation. It is from him that the rest of the creation has emerged. All forces of creation, right from their origin till their conclusion, have this Narayan representing Brahm as their primary source. It is Narayan that is the eternal fountain from which they all the dynamic forces of creation derive their independent strengths, abilities, authorities, potentials and powers. The primary forces are represented by Brahma the creator, Vishnu the sustainer, protector and nourisher, and Shiva the concluder. The other elements of creation are the sky, air, fire, water and earth. Indra represents the chief force that controls all other unit forces of creation, and therefore he has been depicted as the 'king of Gods' because all the Gods are deemed to personify one or the other aspects of the divine forces of creation which are responsible for controlling the various facets of the multifarious and varied creation. For example, Aditya or the Sun gives light, heat and energy to the creation in their twelve forms, including the visible Sun in the sky. The Vasus represent the essential assets that are needed to sustain all forms of life on this earth. Rudras represent the dynamic and forceful nature of a creature that helps it be proactive and assertive in this world, to protect the assets generated by him and give protection to the society and his dependants by the use of force if necessary. And so on and so forth.

Lord Vishnu's name first appears in the Rig Veda, 1/154-156. The Lord represents all that is virtuous, noble, righteous, auspicious, high and glorious in this creation. He is all pervading, all encompassing and omnipresent.

He is a personification of Yagya, or the various religious sacrifices (Shatpath Brahman, 1/1/2/13). The Lord has taken numerous forms and revealed himself on different occasions to uphold good and righteous, and trounce bad and evil. Lord Vishnu is also depicted as a synonymous deity for Brahm; he is Brahm personified.

Lord Vishnu's divine abode is traditionally known as *Vaikunth*. The Tripadvibhut Maha Narayan Upanishad of the Atharva Veda tradition, Cantos 6 and 7, describes in detail the various Vaikunths. They are the following— Yog Laxmi Vaikunth/Maha Maya Vaikunth (Canto 6, paragraph no. 14); Paad Vibhuti Vaikunth (Canto 6, paragraph no. 15); Vishwaksen Vaikunth (Canto 6, paragraph no. 15-16); Brahm Vidya Vaikunth (Canto 6, paragraph no. 17, 19); Bodhaanand/Bodh Vaikunth (Canto 6, paragraph no. 17, 19-20); Tulsi Vaikunth/Tulsi Laxmi Vaikunth (Canto 6, paragraph no. 18); and Anand Vaikunth and Vidya Vaikunth (Canto 6, paragraph no. 19).

The next Canto 7 would describe the other two Vaikunths, viz. the Sudarshan Vaikunth (Canto 7, paragraph no. 2); and the Tripadvibhut Vaikunth (Canto 7, paragraph no. 17).

These are like different enclaves within the heavenly abode of Vishnu called by the general term 'Vaikunth'. These different Vaikunths are like so many districts, boroughs or counties of a huge state. The term 'Vaikunth' unifies them all into one single cosmic 'country', so to say, the country of Lord Vishnu, the Supreme Being himself.

Narayan or Vishnu has *dark blue hue* as his complexion, symbolizing the blue colour of the endless sky which implies that wherever there is sky Lord Narayan is invariably present at the place. Lord Vishnu has all the virtues of the sky element—viz. he is eternal, infinite, fathomless, detached, omnipresent, all-encompassing, all-pervading, neutral, detached, dispassionate, and the bearer of the entire creation. This colour of Vishnu stands for the sky element of creation.

He has *four arms* signifying the four quarters or quadrants of the compass, implying that the Lord controls and protects all the corners of the creation.

The Tripadvibhuti Maha Narayan Upanishad of the Atharva Veda describes the various *weapons* of Lord Vishnu as follows—“He looks glorious with his many weapons which always accompany him. They are the Sudarshan Chakra (the serrated discus that is designed like a circular saw), the Panchjanya Shankh (the conch with five stripes), the Padma (the lotus), the Kaumodki Gadaa (the mace), the Nandak Khang (the sword), the Shaarnag Dhanush (the bow), the Musal or the Gadaa (the mace, the pestle, the hammer, the rammer, the dumbbell), the Parigha (the spear or spike or lancet) and other such divine weapons.”

The *divine signs* that are regarded as trademarks of Lord Vishnu, and their *symbolism* are enumerated in the Atharva Veda’s *Gopal Uttar Tapini Upanishad*, verse nos. 30-31, 34-40 by Lord Narayan (Vishnu) for the benefit of Brahma, the creator. Now let us see what these verses say—

“verse no. 30 = The soles of the holy feet of the Lord (here meaning Lord Narayan) bear the mark of the signs that are closely associated with Lord Vishnu—viz. the sign of the divine conch called the *Shankha*, the sign of the flag of the Lord known as the *Dhwaj* (which is his emblem as the Supreme Lord of creation; it has the Garuda, the mount of Vishnu, embroidered on it), and the sign of the divine ceremonial umbrella known as the *Chhatra* that is over the head of the Lord as the Emperor of creation.

Besides these signs on his feet, the other signs are the following—the sign of the *Srivatsa* that adorns his chest, as well as the gem called *Kaustav Mani* that dazzles brilliantly and enchantingly on his chest (30).

“verse no. 31 = The Lord has *four hands* in which he holds a *conch*, a *discus*, a *lotus* and a *mace*. The *bow* known as *Shaaranga* is slung across his shoulders. His arms are adorned by magnificent *armlets*. The garland known as *Vanmala* that is placed around his neck enhances his bewitching beauty. The *tiara* shines magnificently on the crown on his head, while the *wrist band* or the bangle dazzles brilliantly on his wrists. The *earrings* dangling from his ears are carved (designed, shaped) like a crocodile or an alligator; they dazzle with a brilliant light when the Lord moves his head.

The Lord’s divine and auspicious body is adorned by the *Pitambar* which is a golden (yellow) coloured piece of seamless cloth that wraps around the body of Lord Vishnu.

The Lord’s divine, reassuring and lovable form instills confidence and fearlessness in his devotees (31).”

“verse no. 34 = The rays of the sun and the moon are like the fluttering flags of this divine city (of Mathura). The golden mountain known as Meru¹ is my (Vishnu’s) flag-staff (34).

[This Upanishad pertains to Lord Krishna, hence the ‘city’ being referred to here is the city of Mathura.

¹*Mt. Meru* is the celestial mountain said to be golden in colour and is regarded as the heavenly abode of the Gods. The Meru Mountain is also called ‘Sumeru’—the ‘golden one’. The word ‘Meru’ literally means one that reflects light like a mirror or crystal. It is described in the Purans as the fabulous mythological mountain that forms the axis of the whole world. It is much like mount Olumpus of Hindu mythology. All the planets revolve around it. It is compared to the cup or the seed-vessel of the lotus, the leaves of which symbolize the different Dvipas or continents and islands. The holy river Ganges from the heaven on its summit, and from there it divides into four streams and flows down to the rest of the world. The four Lokpals or the custodians of the four directions of the celestial compass occupy the corresponding face of this mountain which is said to be made of gold and glittering gems.

Its height is said to be one lakh Yojans which is equivalent to roughly 8 lakh miles. [1 lakh = 1,00,000 units; 1 Yojan = approx. 8 miles.]

Out of this huge size, 16,000 Yojans (8 x 16,000 miles) is under the ground, and 84,000 Yojans (8 x 84,000 miles) above the ground. On its top there is a flat plateau of approx. 32,000 Yojans (8 x 32,000 miles). It is here that Brahma the creator and his mind-born sons such as Daksha and the Saptarishis live. [refer Mahabharat, Vanaparva, 162; Bhagvata, 5/16.]

It is situated in the mystical Jambudvipa (the huge island by the name of ‘Jambu’), and Bharatvarsha (India) is said to be to its south. The abode of Lord Shiva known as Mt. Kailash, which is presently located in the northern reaches of the Himalayan mountain range, is said to be the same Mt. Meru.

The creator Brahma resides on its summit, and it is the meeting place of Gods, semi-Gods such as Gandharvas, and exalted sages and seers who have attained Brahmhood.

Other connotation of the word ‘Meru’ is the central and prominent bead of the prayer rosary from where the rosary is turned.]

“verse no. 35. Brahma-loka (the abode of Brahma; the heaven) is like the ceremonial umbrella or the parasol held over or stretched over this city (i.e. the Brahma-loka represents Krishna’s head), and the seven nether worlds known as the Patal-lokas etc.¹ are my feet.

The spot of the Srivatsa² (footprint of sage Bhrigu) on my (Vishnu’s) chest is a sort of my own footprint, because though it is a sort of a stigma it stills shows that Brahmins (here represented by sage Bhrigu) are my own forms (35).

[Note—¹The seven lower worlds according to the Padma Puran are the following—(i) Atal, (ii) Vital, (iii) Satal, (iv) Rasaatal, (v) Talaatal, (vi) Mahaatal, and (vii) Paataal.

²Srivasta—refer verse no. 30 above.]

“verse no. 36 = Those who are expert in the knowledge of Brahm, those who are Brahm-realised do not see this Srivasta as a stigma cast upon me but a sign of my love and benevolence towards all, even those who are angry at me.

The Kaustava Mani represents the eternal light that makes the sun, the moon and the fire to be illuminated and show light to the world. It also represents the power of the

faculty of speech to illuminate the world with the knowledge of the supreme transcendental Brahm.

Sata Guna, Raja Guna, Tama Guna and Ahankar (ego and pride) represent my four arms (because I, in my primary form as Lord Vishnu, rule over and control the all the qualities, attributes, characteristics and behavioral patterns in this world with the help of these four entities that help to define all the positive as well as the negative qualities of creation). (36).

“verse no. 37 = In my hand that symbolizes the Raja Guna are held the following things:-
-The first is the conch named *Paanch-janya*, so-called because it is from it that the five primary elements (earth, water, fire, air and sky) were created.

[The hands of Lord Vishnu represent the Raja Guna because it is with these hands that the Lord takes care of the world. The five elements are the fundamental building blocks of creation, and the Lord has used his hands to craft this world out of them.]

The *Chakra* (serrated weapon known as the discus) that is in my hand symbolizes the Mana (mind and heart) that is as fickle, restless, unsteady, easily disturbed, easily attracted and as easily distracted, and ever-changing like a child.

[And like a child it needs constant vigil and proper training lest it would be spoilt like a child who has not been properly reared, creating not only a huge problem for the parents when he grows up but becoming a nuisance for the rest of the society. In the present context it means that the Mana needs to be controlled. Like the Chakra of Vishnu which continues to revolve around the Lord’s fingers even if the Lord does not use it, the Mana too continues to be restless and fidgety; it continues to whirl and move from one object to another without any provocation or cause. The Mana is also like this potent weapon known as the Chakra which a creature can either use for his welfare or for his ruin.

So, while a wise and erudite man uses the powers of the Mana to overcome all spiritual hurdles and get over all moral obstacles, a foolish man would use the same Mana to gratify the urges of his sense organs, and to get entangled in the world voluntarily by allowing himself to be deluded by the temptations and charms of this material world.

The continuous rotation of the Chakra also signifies the continuous rotation of the wheel of this world. If the creature is not careful then the Mana also joins the whirling just like a leaf trapped in a whirlpool begins to rotate out of control.] (37).

“verse no. 38 = The bow in my hand known as *Shaarang* symbolizes Maya (the power of delusions which is so overwhelming that nothing escapes its battering).

[The twang of the bow is so loud and horrifying in the battle-field that it instills fear and threat of life in the heart of one’s enemies. The sound of the Lord’s bow is so awe-inspiring and formidable that it sort of leaves the world dazed and dumbfounded. This is exactly what Maya does when it wields its powers—it so stuns the creature so much that he is unable to decide what to do and what not to. Just like the strike of the bow, the stroke of Maya leaves one dazed and dumbstruck. The creature who has been hit by the blow of the Maya begins to hallucinate and have nightmares just like a man who has seen the havoc the bow plays in the battle-field.]

The *Padma* (lotus) in my hand symbolizes the whole creation that is under my control.

[It ought to be noted here that the visible creation has its origin in Brahma, the patriarch of creation, who himself was born atop a divine Lotus that emerged from the navel of the Viraat Purush which is the primary form of Vishnu. Hence, all creation can be traced back to a cosmic Lotus that emerged from the primordial gel of life symbolized by the celestial ocean of milk known as the Kshir-sagar.]

The *Gadaa* (mace) that I hold in my hands represents the Adi-Vidya or the primary form of basic knowledge.

[The mace is used by the Lord to crush and pound those who have deviated from the path of righteousness and auspiciousness. It is much like the ceremonial gavel that a high court judge uses to restore order in a court of law. Just like a human being need not know the huge tomes of legal documents to lead a civilized life which is based on pure common sense and basic intelligence, the codes of basic behaviour that the Lord expects his subjects to follow, and be punished if not followed, are represented by the mace. The mace is primarily intended to enforce law and order in this creation.

It is like the gavel a judge uses in a court to restore order, a stick a teacher uses to discipline the class, and the baton a policeman employs to control a rowdy crowd.] (38).

“verse no. 39 = The four fruits of all auspicious and righteous efforts, i.e. Artha (material well-being and financial prosperity), Dharma (the virtues of auspiciousness, righteousness, probity and propriety), Kaam (fulfillment of desires and aspirations), and Moksha (liberation and deliverance; emancipation and salvation), are represented by the ornamental and beautiful *arm-bands* that adorn my forearms.

My *throat* represents the virtue that is known as ‘Nirgun’—i.e. an entity that is without attributes, qualifications, characteristics and features. It is like a garland that surrounds everything in creation. This entity that is known as Nirgun has no beginning and end, i.e. it is infinite and eternal.

[It refers to that form of the Brahm, the Supreme Being, which existed prior to the emergence of this visible world. It had no attributes like the world which subsequently came into being. The word ‘Nirgun’ means without attributes and qualifications, while the word ‘Saguna’ means one having attributes and qualifications. So while Brahm is Nirgun, its revelations as the Trinity Gods is Sagun, though of course this ‘Sagun’ is also very close to being a ‘Nirgun’ because these Trinity Gods are invisible and subtle as compared to the rest of the world which has a visible form and is gross. The terms ‘Nirgun’ and ‘Sagun’ therefore acquire a relative meaning. They represent the three basic steps in creation—the first being emergence of creation which is represented by Brahma the creator, the second being the development and growth as well as the care of the creation that has come into being which is represented by Vishnu the protector of creation, and the conclusion of creation which is represented by Shiva in his angry form of Rudra.

That aspect of creation which cannot be described or defined or qualified is termed as ‘Nirgun’, while that aspect which can be known and described, and to which attributes can be assigned, is called ‘Sagun’. Since sound has no specific form and definitions, it is ‘Nirgun’. On the other hand, words that can be understood come under the category of ‘Sagun’.

Primarily these three forms are all Nirgun because they simply represent Brahm playing these three roles himself in a subtle form. But as this creation evolved, the need

was felt to visualize things, and this need was made by the Purans which gave some specific forms to these Trinity Gods. But still they remained subtle and invisible to the eyes of the man, so later on came the concept of incarnations such as that of Krishna as detailed in the present Upanishad.

The throat is cited here to represent the Nirgun aspect of Brahm because it is in the throat that sound is produced if one wishes to speak. Brahm has been conceived as the cosmic Consciousness that makes its presence felt in the form of the cosmic sound known as Naad. This sound is generated in the ether by the virtue of the energy generated by this cosmic Consciousness. The same 'Consciousness' resides in the body of the living being as the Atma that speaks through the sound made in the throat. No one has seen Brahm like no one has seen the Atma, but their incontrovertible presence is known when they produce sound.

Besides this, the 'sound' has no form like the alphabets of any given language. The alphabets have some or the other geometrical shapes, but sound cannot be drawn into specific sketches or diagrams. This also proves that pristine and primary form of sound is 'Nirgun' while its more developed form as the alphabet and the written language are its 'Sagun' form. This is why the throat is regarded to represent the 'Nirgun' aspect of the Supreme Being in this verse.

As long as one does not speak clearly and only makes guttural or humming sounds in the throat, no one can know what he means. That is, his intentions and knowledge remain hidden from the world. This is a Nirgun aspect of the knowledge that he wishes to communicate. On the other hand, if he speaks clearly and coherently everyone would know what he wishes to say. This would therefore be equivalent to the Sagun aspect of the same knowledge.

There is another interpretation of this phenomenon. The throat of Vishnu is regarded as the cosmic conch in a symbolic way because it produces the cosmic sound that has been called the Naad in the context of Brahm. Lord Krishna who is preaching this Upanishad is an incarnation of the same Lord Vishnu. Therefore, the throat of Vishnu stands for the Nirgun aspect of creation and the throat of Krishna stands for the Sagun aspect of Krishna. No one has ever heard what Lord Vishnu has ever said to any God, but what Lord Krishna said is well known.] (39).

“verse no. 40 = The *Vanmala* (the garland around the Lord's neck) is a symbolic representation of the primary Maya (delusion creating powers of Brahm) which itself has no birth (because it is an integral part of Brahm which has no birth or beginning). This is why your (Brahma's) mental-born sons (such as Sankaadi) call 'Avidya' (ignorance having its genesis in Maya or delusions) a form of garland around my neck.

[This world is revealed from the Viraat Purush, the primary and primordial form of Vishnu. This world is characterized by a the dominance of ignorance that prevents the creature from being aware of the actual 'truth' of creation and his own 'self', thereby forcing him to remain trapped in this cycle of birth and death, and suffering from their accompanying horrors and agonies. This is due to the influence of Maya which acts like a millstone around the neck of the creature. Hence, the metaphor of the garland symbolizing Maya and Avidya around the neck of Vishnu is cited here because of the simple reason that the Viraat Purush has revealed himself as the creature, and Maya acts like a millstone that is worn like a garland around the neck of this creature.

The garland is also a metaphor for the stupendous responsibility that Lord Vishnu has as the care-taker, sustainer and protector of this creation created by Maya. This world is like a mill-stone around the Lord's neck, a bridle or a throat-latch which he carries with pleasure and without complaining at all.

Since the world is such a beautiful and enchanting place for the reason that it is created by Maya, this garland is also depicted as being bewitchingly beautiful just like the fascinating world it has managed to create.

This world is created by Maya, the power of the Lord to conjure up an extremely fascinating world from nothing, something which is not the reality, and is therefore deluding for those who think it to be real. The magic is that the Lord manages to maintain a fine balance between the two—he helps the Maya to perpetrate this creation, and at the same time keeps tight leash on its vagaries.

The garland is like an honour bestowed upon the Lord to mark the fact that the Lord has most expertly, avidly, diligently and wisely taken good care of the world with all its diversities and incongruities created by Maya, without ever complaining or failing in his duties, but miraculously remaining free from the effects of delusions that this Maya creates in this world.

From the perspective of the creature, if he falls in the trap of the attractions of the fascinating world around him, a world created by Maya, he wears this symbolic garland of Maya around his own neck that would act as a heavy burden on his chest. On the other hand, if he is wise and erudite to remain detached from the world inspite of doing his assigned duties diligently, he would be like Lord Vishnu himself. The former type of creature is trapped in this world of delusions, while the latter type is said to be spiritually liberated and delivered.]

My truthful form that is known as *Kutastha* (i.e. an entity that occupies a high position, is unalterable, unchanging, steady, immovable and constant, and is most secret, enigmatic, hidden and esoteric) is symbolized by the glorious tiara on my head. This form of mine is like the crown-jewel or the *tiara* on my crown; it represents my most exalted and supreme form as the Lord of creation and the Supreme Being (or 'Brahm') (40)."

Now, let us examine the symbolism and the significance of the different objects that Vishnu holds in hands—

His *Shankha* (conch) stands for the sky as well as the wind element because the conch is hollow and it makes a resounding sound when air is blown into it. This sound represents the cosmic Naad, the background sound in ether from which, it is visualized by ancient sages and seers, that the entire creation emerged and derived its primary energy and dynamism. It is this Naad from which all forms of the languages are created, and the sound of the conch is so loud that it is heard for long distances. Hence, the sound of the conch stands for the generation and the propagation of life as well as of knowledge.

It is known as the *Panchjanya Shankha*. There is a legend associated with this Panchjanya Shankha (conch). There was a demon named Panchjanya. He lived in a miniscule form inside a conch at the bottom of the ocean. Once he ate the son of sage Saandipani. Lord Krishna had killed this demon, and retrieved the sage's son from the Yamloka, the abode of the God of death known as Yama. Krishna had taken this Shankha then, and it is called 'Panchjanya' after the demon who lived in it.

The Shankha has a great symbolism when used by Lord Vishnu. It proclaims the presence of the Lord when he blows it. The sound of the conch is heard far and wide. According to some accounts, the conch alone stands for all the five elements of creation—viz. the sky, the air, the water, the fire and the earth. Now, let us analyse how the Shankha or conch stands for the five elements as observed here. The conch is hollow from the inside, indicating the sky or space element. It produces sound when air is blown into it, indicating the presence of the air element. The snail had this as its dwelling, and this snail lives in water. Thus, the conch indicates the fire element because it is this fire that helps a creature to survive even in water. The conch is formed in water and not on dry land like trees and terrestrial animals—indicating its origin in the water element. The body of the conch is hard calcium like the rocks and solid surface of the earth, indicating the presence of earth element as its integral part.

According to the *Krishna Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, verse no. 16-17, the Shankha was born alongside Goddess Laxmi from the Kshir Sagar during the churning of the ocean, and therefore is regarded as the brother of the Goddess.

His *Padma* (the Lotus flower) stands for the water element as this flower grows in water and cannot survive without it.

The Padma or Lotus is a symbol of purity and cleanliness amongst the surrounding filth because the dirty water of the pond where the lotus grows does not stick to the petals of the lotus flower. It also signifies the fact that the Lord accepts only the best and the auspicious from amongst all in this creation because the lotus flower grows in dirty water of the pond but is untouched by its filth. So these divine virtues of purity and cleanliness are one of the many glorious virtues of Lord Vishnu.

In the Atharva Veda's *Krishna Upanishad*, verse no. 24 it is clearly states that the Padma (the louts) represents the seed from which the entire mortal world emerged. It symbolizes the origin of creation because the creator Brahma was born atop the lotus that emerged from the navel of the Viraat Purush at the time of creation, as well as the fact that the opening of the bud of the flower is an imaginative way of depicting the unfolding or the emergence of creation from the primeval water. It symbolizes the continuously evolving world because lotus springs forth from water, and this world also springs forth from the causal waters of the cosmos and then grows in the vast ethereal space of the sky. It also regarded as being closely related to the Sun and that is why it opens up when the Sun rises, and closes at sunset. Since the light of the Sun is a metaphor for wisdom, knowledge, enlightenment and purity of thoughts and actions, the Lotus in the hands of Vishnu indicates the presence of these eclectic virtues in the Lord, or that the Lord symbolizes these auspicious and divine virtues and qualities of creation.

The Padma is also a symbol of Goddess Laxmi, the patron deity of good fortunes and wealth. Laxmi is depicted in iconography as being seated on a divine lotus in full bloom.

The *Chakra* (discus) is a weapon of Vishnu that is designed like a serrated wheel and is depicted as being brilliantly illuminated and glowing hot like the fire. It is also ruthless like the fire and destroys everything falling in its path. Hence, it stands for the fire element as well as the power of the Lord to destroy all obstacles. It also signifies that Vishnu is able to reduce to ashes all the corruptions and evil forces of creation. The

Chakra also stands for the cosmic mind, because like the restlessness and the tendency of the mind to continuously fly from one subject to another without pause, the Chakra too keeps on revolving and flying off to pursue its targets relentlessly on the instructions of Vishnu. Further, the Chakra also is used as a metaphor for this creation which has been visualized in the form of a cosmic wheel.

This Chakra is called *Sudarshan Chakra*. The word ‘Sudarshan’ means ‘one that is auspicious, pleasing and comforting in appearance or to behold’. The ‘Chakra’ means ‘a circle or ring’ and it refers to a circular weapon which is like a round iron saw with hardened and sharp teeth. It is this invincible weapon that Vishnu uses more often than the rest to overcome the evil forces of creation.

According to legend, it was gifted to Vishnu by Lord Shiva when the latter was pleased by the former’s offering of worship to him at Kashi (Varanasi).

According to the *Krishna Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, verse no. 19, the Charka was the personification of the Maha-Kaal, the Great God of Death, as well as of Shiva because the latter is regarded as the God of Trinity who is responsible for the conclusion of this creation, or cause death.

A great chunk of the first half of Canto 7 of the Tripadvibhut Maha Narayan Upanishad of the Atharva Veda is dedicated to this discus.

His *Musal* or *Gadaa* (mace, rammer, hammer, battle-ram, dumbbell) stands for the earth element because it is as heavy and gross as the latter. This Gadaa also stands for the cosmic intellect because the intellect is used to keep a strict control over one’s wayward mind and its inherent fickleness, over one’s sense organs and their inherent restlessness etc. This signifies the ability of the Lord to be able to exercise infallible control over all aspects of creation. Being a metaphor for the intellect, the Gadaa also symbolizes the Lord’s ability to separate the auspicious and the righteous from the evil and the pervert, or to forcefully subdue the evil, pervert and corrupting forces of creation symbolized by the wayward and restless mind as well as the indulgent organs of the body.

According to *Krishna Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, verse no. 23, the Gadaa in the hand of the Lord is the destroyer of all enemies and is a personified form of Kaalika, the goddess of war and of destruction of enemies.

The Gadaa is known as the *Kaumodki Gadaa*. It has the following connotation. The word ‘Kaumodki’ consists of two parts—viz. ‘Ku’ meaning ‘earth’, and ‘moda’ meaning ‘happiness. Hence, the mace of Lord Vishnu gives happiness to all the righteous creatures on earth by protecting them against the evil forces represented by demons.

It is called a ‘Gadaa’ because it was moulded from the strong bones of a demon named ‘Gadaa’, and hence bears his name. The demon gave up his bones to respect the wishes of the creator Brahma, who then got a mace crafted out of it at the hand of Vishwakarma, the God’s engineer, and kept it with Varun, the Water God. It was given to Lord Krishna at the request of Agni, the Fire God, when the former had got the Khaandava forest consumed by fire.

There is only a slight difference between the Gadaa and the Musal, perhaps in their shape and size, but primarily their usage in practical terms is the same.

The *Nandak Khanga* (sword)—The word ‘Nandak’ means ‘one which gives joy and happiness to the Gods’. The Agnipuran, Chapter 245, describes an interesting episode regarding this Nandak sword. Once, the creator Brahma was performing a fire sacrifice on the banks of river Ganges. A demon named Lohaasur (the demon with a body of iron) came to disturb it. Suddenly, a male warrior-like figure emerged from Brahma’s body. He got transformed into a sword which was given by the assembled Gods to Lord Maha Vishnu who used it to kill the demon and chop his body into pieces. The Lord then accepted the sword as one of his permanent companions, and named it ‘Nandak’—the one that gave happiness and joys to the Gods because it helped to kill the demon who was the cause of their troubles.

The sword called Nandak symbolizes the grand virtues of erudition, sagacity, enlightenment and wisdom. It is the powerful intellect that is able to discriminate between the right and the wrong, and cut through all obstacles in the path of righteousness, auspiciousness, nobility and virtuousness, i.e. the path of Dharma.

According to *Krishna Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, verse no. 20, the Khanga (sword), which is as radiant and dazzling as a fiercely burning fire, was created by Maheshwar (Lord Shiva).

The bow called *Shaarang*—This symbolizes the cosmic senses of the Viraat Purush. This bow of Lord Vishnu is also known as the *Shaankhya Dhanush* (bow). It was made from the bones of demon named Shaankhya-chuda after he was killed by Lord Shiva.

According to *Krishna Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, verse no. 23, the Shaarang bow of Lord Vishnu stands for the Vaishnavi Maya which is the primary form of Maya closely associated with Vishnu.

The Atharva Veda’s *Gopal Uttar Tapini Upanishad*, verse no. 38 says that this Shaarang bow represents the Maya of the Supreme Being.

The Tripadvibhut Maha Narayan Upanishad, Canto 7, paragraph no. 68, and Gopal Uttar Tapini Upanishad, verse no. 30-31 says that the Lord’s *chest is adorned by the Srivatsa, the Kaustav and the Vanmaalaa*. Now, let us see what they are.

The *Srivatsa*—This is the mark of the foot of sage Bhrigu which he had cast on the chest of Vishnu once when he got annoyed upon the Lord. The Lord is so enamoured of his devotees that instead of taking umbrage at this disrespect shown by the sage and punishing him for his misdemeanor, he had blessed the sage that his footprint would always remain on his chest as one of the jewels worn by Lord Vishnu. However, Laxmi was so angry at the temerity of sage Brighu that she cursed that henceforth she, in the form of wealth and material abundance, would always shun a Brahmin; it is believed that this is the reason why Brahmins, who are otherwise of a high birth, are always serving others in the society who are junior to them by birth for their monetary needs.

The *Kaustav Mani*—This is a glittering gem worn by Lord Vishnu, and it covers the sign of the Srivatsa. It was obtained at the time of the legendary churning of the ocean and automatically got lodged on the Lord’s chest. {Mahabharat, Adiparva, 18.}

The *Vanmaalaa/Vanmala*—This is a garland (mala) worn by Vishnu and is made of flowers of the wild forest (Van). The flowers are of a wide variety with those of the Kadamba tree (*Nauclea cadamba*) being in the center or the dominant ones. Sometimes, marigold, daisy or xanthium flowers are shown as being used in this garland.

The *mount* or the *vehicle* of Lord Narayan or Vishnu is the bird called *Garud* (eagle or heron). He is in the form of the legendary bird in the form of an eagle or heron. Garud stands for many things—such as speed and agility of the mind to move from one subject to another. Garud also symbolizes the spoken word. This is because spoken words are transmitted from one point to another by the medium of the sky just like the bird flying from one tree to another. Words and ideas are transmitted from one person to the other like the bird flying off from one tree and perching on another. That is why speech is likened to a bird. Garud is regarded as a personification of the knowledge contained in the Vedas because this knowledge is transmitted through the means of speech. Besides this point, there is another way of looking at this aspect. The knowledge contained in the Vedas help a wise man to reach his spiritual destination much like Lord Vishnu employing the services of Garud if he wants to go any place. The eagle is known to have a long range of vision and flies high up in the sky. The Garud is able to have a broad perspective of the sight seen below because from its high perch in the sky. This indicates the virtues of Vishnu in having wider knowledge and broad vision of life as well as to remain aloof from the humdrum affairs of the deluding world below. The Garud is extremely fast and reaches its destination in a fraction of a second—indicating the almost instantaneous reach of the Lord in all the directions of the creation. Since the Gurud is able to fly it also stands for the imaginative abilities of the mind, and since it has a penetrating vision that sees long distances he stands for the sharp and wise intellect that has foresight and deep insight.

According to *Krishna Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, verse no. 24, Garud took up the form of the Indian Fig tree (known as Bhandir) during Lord Vishnu's incarnation as Krishna.

There is an Upanishad of the Atharva Veda that is dedicated to Lord Garud. It is called the *Garud Upanishad* and it is 31st Upanishad of this Veda. It has the Mantras of Garud which are said to possess great powers to overcome the killer effects of any kind of poison, especially those of snake bite.

Lord Narayan or Vishnu is said to recline on the bedstead of *Sheshnath* or the legendary serpent of thousand hoods who floats on the calm waters of the *Kshirsagar*. Now, let us examine their symbolisms.

The word 'Shesh' means 'leftover or remainder', and 'Naath' means the Lord. At the time of conclusion of creation, 'something' remains from which the new creation would come into being. It is this 'cosmic entity' into which the previous creation collapses and dissolves at the time of its conclusion. It is from this 'cosmic entity', the 'remainder' of the last creation, that the first signs of the new creation would emerge. Hence, the Seshnath represents the cosmic entity that remains after the creation ends. He is the 'Lord' (Naath) of what remains of this creation. Since Lord Vishnu is the unquestioned 'Lord and the Supreme Being' of this creation who remains even after everything comes to an end, and it is from him that the next phase of creation emerges, he

is depicted in the Purans and in iconography as being reclining on the Sheshnath. Sheshnath also represents the sum total of all the souls in their subtle forms which have been leftovers from the previous generation or cycle of creation, hibernating and waiting for the opportune time to remerge as a new creation.

It is believed that the world (earth) is supported on the hoods of Sheshnath.

In this context, the *Kshirsagar*, or the ocean of celestial milk called Amrit upon which this Sheshnath floats, is like the preservative ambrosial fluid which sustains life and gives it nourishment during the time it is in hibernating phase before the commencement of new creation or springing forth of a new generation of living organisms. The Kshirsagar also represents the cosmic primordial gel from which the creation was moulded by the Viraat Purush at the time of creation.

The Kshirsagar, which is the celestial ocean of milk indicating Amrit or the ambrosial fluid of eternity and bliss, also signifies that Lord Vishnu is perpetually in a state of blissfulness, beatitude and felicity as he is constantly surrounded by its waters. That is why he is depicted as reclining blissfully and peacefully on the back of the Sheshnath while the latter floats on this ambrosia of blissfulness and immortality.

Again, since Amrit is a bestower of eternity and immortality, Lord Vishnu too is immortal and eternal because he is drenched by the spray of the waters of the Kshirsagar as it heaves and splashes against the body of the Sheshnath.

This ocean known as Kshirsagar indicates the primordial fluid from which the rest of the creation is formed, and hence it is the ‘causal water’ or the causative factor which is at the foundation of all living creation coming into being; it is the wellspring of life in all its varied forms. The scriptures describe that earlier there was water everywhere, and from this primordial fluid emerged the earth and the fire element that kept this earth warm, making it habitable and enabling it to harbour life forms. This fact has been affirmed in Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, Canto 1, Brahman 2, verse no. 2, and the Old Testament of the Holy Bible, the Book of Genesis, verse nos. 9-11.

The scriptures describes the various *twenty-four incarnations* of Vishnu which are called his ‘Vyuhas’ of Vishnu. [Refer Tripadvibhut Maha Narayan Upanishad, Canto 7, paragraph no. 18.]

However, the Atharva Veda’s Gopal Uttar Tapini Upanishad, verse nos. 13 and 20 mention *four divine forms of Vishnu* as follows— Balraam, Pradumna, Aniruddha and Krishna.

The Ram Purva Tapini Upanishad of the Atharva Veda tradition, in its Canto 1, verse no. 1 clearly says that it is Lord Vishnu who had incarnated himself as Lord Ram. In its Canto 5, verse no. 9 it is said that at the time of Lord Ram’s departure from earth, all the four divine arms of Lord Vishnu (Shankha or conch, Gadaa or mace, Chakra or discus, and Padma or lotus) that had accompanied the Lord during his incarnation as Ram too went to heaven with the Lord.

The Ram Uttar Tapini Upanishad, Canto 3, verse nos. 1-4 describe how the various aspects of Lord Vishnu known by different names had accompanied the Lord in his incarnation as Lord Ram. These aspects are called the ‘Chatur-vyuha’ meaning ‘four aspects or facets’. In other words, they represent the same divine Lord existing in the celestial world as four divine Beings. These four forms are (i) Sankarshan, (ii) Praduman,

(iii) Aniruddha, and (iv) Vishnu. They are the different forms in which the Viraat Purush, the all-encompassing macrocosmic gross body of the Supreme Being, exists in the celestial world. So, during the incarnation as of the Viraat Purush known as Vasudeo or Vishnu as Lord Ram, Sankarshan incarnated as Laxman, Pradumna as Shatrughan, and Aniruddha as Bharat. These three divine celestial forms of Vishnu became the three brothers of Lord Ram who himself was none other than the Viraat Purush in his complete form as Lord Vishnu or Vasudeo. The fact that Lord Ram was the great Lord Vishnu himself is again reiterated in this Upanishad, Canto 5, verse no. 3, 4/5, 4/10, 4/41, 4/45. The same idea is expressed in saint Surdas' 'Sur-sarawali', verse no. 2.

The Atharva Veda's Gopal Uttar Tapini Upanishad, verse nos. 13 says that there are *twelve images* or symbolic grosser forms of the Lord in the form of idols that are worshipped, and verse no. 45 describes the symbolism of the *twelve subtle forms* of Lord Vishnu or Lord Narayan who is the Supreme Being in this creation. Now, let us see what these two verses say—

“verse no. 13 = In the twelve divine forests (gardens/groves) of Mathura (where Lord Krishna, who was an incarnation of Vishnu, lived) are established twelve consecrated images of the Lord.

The first image is worshipped by the Rudras. The second image is worshipped by Brahma, the creator. The third image is worshipped by the sages known as Sankaadi who are sons of Brahma. The fourth image is worshipped by the Maruts (the various forms of the Wind God). The fifth image is worshipped by Vinayak (Lord Ganesh and his attendants). The sixth image is worshipped by the eight Vasus. The seventh image is worshipped by the various sages and seers. The eighth image is worshipped by the Gandharvas (celestial musicians). The ninth image is worshipped by the Apsaras (celestial female dancers). The tenth image is secretly established in the sky and worshipped by the holy Spirits and those who live in the sky (such as the winged creatures like the birds). The eleventh image is secretly established in the Antariksha (the outer space or deep recesses of the sky beyond the atmosphere of the earth). And the twelfth image is established in the Bhugarvha (the deep bosom of the earth; the nether world).

Those who duly worship these images in a proper way find freedom from death (i.e. they do not have to suffer the horrors of death); they obtain Mukti (or liberation and deliverance from this world); they cross over or overcome the miseries and torments associated with having to live in a mother's womb, taking birth, attaining old age and finally facing death, as well as the horrors of the three legendary torments known as the 'Trai-taaps'¹ that are associated with life in this world (13).

[Note—¹The three *Trai-Taaps* are the following—(i) Adhyaatmik—the problems associated with one's spiritual welfare, (ii) Adhibhautik—problems associated with the physical body such as old age infirmity, disease etc. as well as from other creatures such as wild animals, enemies and rulers of the earth who are repressive and cruel; and (iii) Adhidaivaik—problems related to unfavourable Gods and malignant stars.]

“Verse no. 45 = Lord Narayan replied, 'My primary universal non-dual form however has twelve subtle forms'¹ that act as the primary sources of origin of everything else in this creation. These twelve forms are the twelve basic virtues or characteristics that are present in this creation, and have been personified as different Gods and semi-Gods, as

well as human beings. [These subtle forms represent the basic characters and the defining qualities that are characteristic of each unit of creation. This is explained below.]

One of my aforesaid forms is known as Shiva, and the other is Rudra. Though Shiva is a personified form of the virtues of calmness, tranquility, blissfulness, wisdom, enlightenment, meditation and contemplation, Rudra exemplifies anger, wrath and vehemence.

[That is, I change my form from one of being ‘Shiva’, the calm One, to one of ‘Rudra’, the angry One, depending upon the needs of the time and exigencies of circumstances. For instance, as long as the creation does not go out of control, I remain submerged in meditation and contemplation, letting the wheel of creation, which I have myself created and set in motion, take its own course; I give it a lot of freedom and flexibility. But when things begin to go out of hand, I assume the angry form of Rudra to clean-up the slate to start the process afresh and to punish the guilty. In other words, both Shiva and Rudra are none else but my form, albeit two diametrically opposite ones.]

This principle applies to all the other entities as well. That is, I am present in a subtle form as the Brahmi principle in Brahma the creator.

[The characteristic quality and the ability that is present in Brahma, the creator, that entitles and enables him to create this visible world of an ever-changing variety and an astounding diversity, as well as the Vedas which are repository of all knowledge in this creation, is actually a manifestation of the Supreme Being who lives in Brahma in a subtle form as the quality or virtue known as ‘Brahmi’ that enables Brahma to do what he is best suited to do and for which he is best known—that is to ‘create’. Thus, creativity is one of the forms of Brahm, the Supreme Being.]

Similarly, I am present as the principle of holiness and godliness in the Gods, as the principle of humanity in humans, as the divine power that eliminates all hurdles and overcomes all obstructions in the path of auspiciousness and righteousness that is possessed by Lord Vinaayak (Ganesh), as the principal factor that illuminates and gives light and energy to the rest of creation that is the hallmark of the twelve Adityas (Suns), as the ability and skill needed to create and master the art and craft of music that is inherently present in the Gandharvas (celestial musicians), as the ability and skills needed to dance and sing that is inherently possessed by the Apsaraas (celestial female dancers and singers), as the ability to fulfill all needs of the creation that are the characteristic attribute of all the Vasus and is represented by the cow known as Kamyā (because it is said to be holy and the all wish-fulfilling cow of the Gods), and as the invisible and subtle form known as the ‘Avyakta’ which refers to the cosmic omnipresent Supreme Authority and Power that pervades throughout the creation in an invisible and subtle form, and which is the subject matter of all research into the unknown, the esoteric and the mystical.

I am eternally established in my exalted position as the Supreme Being who is immune to the fluctuations characteristic of this mortal world which takes a birth and dies, the creation that has a beginning and an end. I remain constant, steady and ever-present even while the rest of the creation oscillates between birth and death, the world that comes into existence and ends, the world that waxes and wanes, the world that swings between falsehood and truthfulness (45).

[Note—¹Upon close examination of this verse, we find the twelve subtle forms of the Supreme Being as follows—Shiva, Rudra, Brahma, Gods, humans, Vinaayak, Adityas, Gandharvas, Apsaraas, Vasus, Kamyā (cow), and Avyakta.]

Lord Vishnu has *twelve close attendants*, and their names have been given in the Tripadvibhut Maha Narayan Upanishad of the Atharva Veda tradition, Canto 7, paragraph 49 in the context of worshipping them while offering oblations to the worship instrument, called the Yantra. These attendants are headed by Vishwaksen. The list of the twelve attendants is as follows—Vishwaksen, Aachkraaye, Vichkraaye, Suchkraaye, Dhi-chakraaye, Sanchakraaye, Jawalchakraaye, Krudholakaaye, Maholkaaye, Viryolkaaye, Vidyolkaaye, and Sastrolkaaye.

The divine *glories of Lord Vishnu* have been extolled in the Tripadvibhut Maha Narayan Upanishad of the Atharva Veda tradition which is entirely dedicated to him, but especially in its Canto 1, paragraph 5-6, Canto 2, paragraph nos. 11-12, Canto 7, paragraph nos. 67-68, and Canto 8, paragraph nos. 17, as well as in *Vishnu Puran*, Chapter 1, Canto 2, verse nos. 1-32, 55-70.

Vishnu is a revered deity honoured by all the Vedas. He appears in all of them, for instance—Rig Veda—1/154-156; 5/3/3; 7/99/1-3; 7/100; Sam Veda—222; 1625-27; Yajur Veda—5/15; 6/4; Atharva Veda—3/27/5.

The Subalo-panishad of Shukla Yajur Veda, in its Canto 6 also describes the omnipresent and all pervading form of Narayan.

The *Narayan Sukta* has six verses and it appears in the Shukla Yajur Veda. It reveals the genesis of creation in a very succinct way besides extolling and glorifying the primary Lord of creation known as Narayan. The Rishi of this Sukta is Narayan, the Devta is Aditya (Sun God), and Chanda is Trishtup.

Lord Vishnu is the sustainer, nourisher and the caretaker of the world. Therefore, he is regarded as one of the eight mighty Diggals/Digpaals (the main caretakers and superior custodian Gods) of creation. He is the most important of the Trinity Gods consisting of Brahma, the creator, and Shiva, the concluder. It's easy to produce and destroy, but a mammoth task to sustain and nourish what has been born.

According to Purans, even Brahma and Shiva have been created from Vishnu. Brahma emerged sitting atop a divine Lotus that sprouted from the Vishnu' navel in his subtler form as the Viraat Purush, a form that existed before the creation began to take shape in its grosser forms, as he lay reclined in the celestial ocean of milk, known as the Kshir-Sagar, on the bedstead of Sheshnath, the legendary serpent that floated on the surface of this ocean. On the other hand, Shiva is said to be born from his forehead when the Viraat Purush deeply meditated and a few drops of sweat emerged due to intense concentration and effort he was making.

The Devi Upanishad of the Atharva Veda tradition which extols the divinity of the Mother Goddess and espouses the philosophy that avers that every unit of creation owes its origin and existence to the divine Goddess, says in its verse no. 5 that *Lord Vishnu is borne by the Mother Goddess, and is also her manifestation*. The 'Mother Goddess' is actually a revelation of the dynamic powers, authority, strength and potentials of the supreme transcendental Brahm, the Supreme Being. The Goddess represents the dynamism of Brahm that is employed by the latter to create, develop, sustain, nourish, control and protect this creation, both at the macrocosmic level as well as the microcosmic level. Since Vishnu is the God who carries out these functions it is absolutely apt to call him a personification of Mother Goddess, or the revelation of dynamism of Brahm. This Upanishad effectively says that Vishnu is actually a

manifestation of the Shakti, which is the cosmic dynamic powers and energy of Brahm, the Supreme Being, employed by the Lord to take care of this creation which the same Lord has created in his manifestation as Brahma the creator. It also goes on to say that the terrestrial world is the foot of Vishnu.

The Yogtattva Upanishad of Krishna Yajur Veda, in its verse no. 2 describes Vishnu as a *Maha-Yogi, Maha-Bhut and Maha-Tapa*. To quote this Upanishad—“Lord Vishnu is known as the primary and most ancient ‘Maha-Yogi’ (the great patriarch of ascetics who followed the tenets of Yoga diligently himself and is deemed to be the prime and most ancient exponent of this philosophy).

He is also known as the ‘Maha-Bhut’ because he is the primary and most ancient cause of all the Bhuts, i.e. all the primary elements (earth, water, fire, air and sky) that exist in this creation and from which the rest of the creation has come into being (or moulded from); he is the greatest of all the Bhuts; he is the progenitor of the Bhuts.

He is also known as ‘Maha-Tapa’, i.e. the one who does severe penances for the welfare of others and to keep himself pure by observing the strictest and harshest laws of austerity, probity, propriety nobility, auspiciousness and righteousness which entail a lot of sufferance in their wake.

In the path of essential Truth and reality, in the path that is true and holy, the path that is free from all deceit and delusions, he is like a lighted lamp. [In other words, he is like a light that shows the correct spiritual path to all the followers just as a lamp shows the path to others by its light by removing the darkness.] (2).”

There is a full Upanishad of the Krishna Yajur Veda tradition dedicated to the theme of Vishnu or Narayan. It is called Narayano-panishad.

The Paingalo-panishad of the Shukla Yajur Veda, in its Canto 1, verse nos. 6 and 10 describes Vishnu in the context of the genesis of creation.

Now, let us see what *Paingalo-panishad* has to say of Vishnu. Canto 1, verse no. 6 says—“From the quality of ‘Vikshep Shakti’ (i.e. the power to create delusions and confusions), which was subtly present in Hiranyagarbha (as described in verse no. 5), there emerged the third quality of ‘Ahankar’, or ego and pride, which in its wake led to the creation of such traits as arrogance, haughtiness and hypocrisy. This is the grossest form of ‘Shakti’, or the powers and potentials that were depicted by the supreme entity that was veiled by Prakriti. In other words, the supreme consciousness, when seen through the veil of delusions, appeared to have the notion of Ahankar in it. This entity that had this trait of Ahankar in it was called ‘Viraat Purush’, or the gross form of Hiranyagarbha. That is, this Viraat was the personification of the supreme Brahm’s potentials to show off its abilities that it can do and achieve success in doing even the unimaginable and most formidable of tasks, such as creating this vast universe from literally nothing, a creation that is visible as well as invisible, a creation that is immobile as well as mobile, a creation that is mortal as well as immortal, a creation that is so true-looking but essentially hollow and false, and which is a metaphor for the greatest of paradoxes and delusions.

This Viraat form, or the vast and colossus form of the supreme consciousness marked by the virtue of Ahankar, was called Vishnu. He is the sustainer and nourisher of the entire gross world; he is the chief Purush or the Lord of this creation. [In other words, Brahm’s potentials and powers to sustain and nourish what was created is exhibited by Vishnu; he is the personification of these virtues of Brahm. Since this world was gross

and needed an entity that could fit into its mould, this Vishnu is also deemed to be the gross form of the invisible and subtle, the un-manifested and attributeless supreme transcendental Being called Ishwar.

[Vishnu had the characteristic quality of Ahankar because of the fact that Brahm was now proud of his creation as well as of the fact that he can maintain and develop it in his form as Vishnu. He was also proud of the fact that he has the potentials, powers and authority to create the patriarch Brahma, and the concluder Shiva. The very fact that Brahm's neutrality was lost due to the dominance of one or the other Gunas (qualities), there is no wonder in his having got tainted by Ahankar which is in itself a negative trait. This observation that 'Ahankar' is so powerful a negative trait that it was even able to subdue the supreme Lord of creation known as Brahm and entangle the otherwise immaculate divine entity in the web of delusion and self-grandeur leads one to be ware of this dangerous pitfall in one's own life lest it would also lead to one's own downfall. It ought to be noted here that more than the actual words of the texts of the Upanishads, it is the hidden meaning and subtle message that they contain that is of greater importance for the general mental, ethical and spiritual welfare and good of mankind. So it is of utmost importance that the texts should be interpreted correctly to bring out the essence in them.]

Even as all entities in this creation have an Atma, this Vishnu also was no exception¹. From his Atma was produced the 'Akash' or sky or space element. From the former was produced the 'Vayu' or air or wind element; from this was created the 'Agni' or fire or energy element; from it was produced the 'Apaha' or the water element; and from it emerged the 'Prithivi' or earth element². From them emerged the five 'Tanmatras'³ or the different senses of perceptions, and the three inherent 'Gunas'⁴ or qualities that are invariably present in all the units of the creation, i.e. in all the creatures (6).

[Note—¹According to the concepts of Vedanta, this Viraat Purush known as *Vishnu* represents the sum total of all the gross bodies of creation. That is, he stands as the tree of which the rest of the creation is one or the other part; or the creation is the visible aspect of the Viraat. As the word itself implies, Viraat is vast and colossus, with infinite dimensions. Now, each gross body has a subtle body, and that is Hiranyagarbha as far as the creation at the macro level is concerned. This body must have a third body—and this is the causal body which is called Ishwar. This Ishwar is therefore that causal body which is the 'cause' for the entire creation. The causal body harbours an Atma which is covered in the veil of Vasanas and Vrittis, or the various worldly passions, desires, attachments and delusions that are the inherent tendencies and inclinations that are characteristic features of a worldly creature. This is the 'veil' that surrounds the Atma. At the macro level, these are exhibited by Atma of the creation also. This Atma of creation is the Brahm at the cosmic and macro level, and the virtues mentioned in verse nos. 4-6 are the various qualities that are exhibited by it. Thus, Brahm is the Atma of Vishnu, and what was created by Vishnu was actually done by that cosmic Atma or supreme transcendental Brahm present imperceptibly inside the bosom of Vishnu as the latter's consciousness and his true identity.

²The *five elements*—these are the basic building blocks of life in this creation. They are sky, air, fire, water and earth. The gross body of the creature is made up of these five elements in varying proportions. According to Trishiki Brahmin Upanishad, the ratio of these elements in this creation is the following—earth is one half, and the rest half consists of water, fire, sky and air elements in the ratio of one-eighth each.

According to the Jabal-darshan Upanishad, the body has all these five elements present in it, but some parts have some element in predominance or greater ratio than the other—e.g. the part from the foot up to the knees has the ‘earth’ element in greater ratio; from the knees to the anus has the ‘water’ element in a greater ratio; the part from the anus to the heart has the ‘fire’ element in a predominant ratio; from the heart up to the eyebrows the ‘wind’ element dominates; from the eyebrows right up to the top of the head the ‘sky’ element is the dominant element.

The various Gods thought to be established in these elements and preside over their functions (or who are regarded as their patron Gods) are the following—Brahma the creator in the earth element; Vishnu the sustainer in the water element; Shiva the concluder in the fire element; Ishwar the macrocosmic causal body in the wind or air element; and the all-pervading and all-encompassing supreme truthful and universal entity known as Brahm in the sky element. It would be obvious to even a lay person the significance of these Gods vis-à-vis the different elements. Brahma is the creator, and earth is also the place where all forms of life take birth. Water is called the elixir of life, and hence Vishnu rightly represents it. Fire is famous for its ruthless and destructive nature and Shiva is also reflective of these properties. The Lord Ishwar is like wind because without the air no life is possible anywhere; the wind is literally the lord of life. The sky is fathomless, infinite, pure and incorruptible like the Brahm; it is in the space of the sky that whatever that exists has its presence, for there is nothing outside the sky. So these Gods symbolically represent the primary forces of creation. [Jabal-darshan Upanishad, 8/5-6.]

³The *five Tanmatras*—these are the five perceptions of sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch that are invariably present in all living creatures. Even trees and worms and insects exhibit them in one form or the other.

⁴The *three Gunas*—these are Sata, Raja and Tama.]

Again, Canto 1, verse no. 10 of *Paingalo-panishad* has this to say—“From the totality of all the qualities present in creation he created the different Gods who would be the patron deities of the respective five organs of the body created earlier and responsible for their proper functioning. These Gods were symbolically established in the different worlds to look after their respective realms. [For example, the patron God of sight was Sun and he provided the light to the realm so that the creature can see no matter where it lives. He enabled the faculty of sight to function properly. He symbolically took up residence in the eye of the individual creature as well as in the heaven as Aditya. The eye, in this instance, is the subtle abode of Aditya, while the heaven (sky) is his gross and visible abode. This applies to all other the other Gods.]

Therefore, all the Gods took up residence in the various worlds or ‘Brahamands’ on the orders of Vishnu (the Viraat Purush who represented Brahm and was Brahm personified). [In other words, these Gods are universally present everywhere where there is a living creature. For example, the Sun God is present everywhere where there is a creature who has eyes and who sees. Or, the Sun can be worshipped symbolically in the faculty of sight where he has his permanent residence in a subtle and invisible form even as he is present in the sky in a visible form.]

Upon the instructions of the supreme transcendental Brahm, the Viraat Purush (Vishnu) began to take care of the entire gross form of creation. Since this Viraat was empowered with the authority to assign the Gods their respective places and took up the mantle of taking care of the world created by Brahm as Ishwar, he was obviously proud of it. This factor of ‘pride’, called Ahankar, became an integral part of character; it was

his attribute. While Viraat (Vishnu) started looking after the gross form of creation, the Hiranyagarbha started taking care of the subtle form this world upon the instructions of the supreme Lord (10).

[Note— Refer Aitereiyo Upanishad of the Rig Veda tradition which describes the genesis of creation in almost similar detail. According to it, the fire element became the patron God of speech, wind/air of smell, the sun of sight, the directions of hearing, the moon of heart and mind, death of the vital wind called Apaana which passes down the intestines and out through the anus, and water of semen (Aitereiyo Upanishad, 1/2/4).

According to the philosophy of Vedanta, this Viraat Purush represents the sum total of all the gross bodies of all creatures in the creation, while Hiranyagarbha represents their subtle bodies. In other words, the gross body of the creature consisting of the five organs of perception and five organs of actions are the responsibilities of Vishnu. A man does everything in this gross world with his gross body—great successes and achievements are accomplished by him with this body; he is ‘proud’ of his bodily strength and its beauty and handsomeness. Mere thinking of great successes by the mind and intellect would never materialize if no action is taken by the body to implement the ideas of the mind-intellect. If the body decides so, it can even defy the advice given by the mind-intellect. That is why the gross body is considered haughty and arrogant, i.e. have Ahankar. So there is no wonder that Vishnu, who is this gross body of the world personified, is marked by the attribute of Ahankar or ego and pride.

On the other hand, Hiranyagarbha represents the subtle body—which is the mind and intellect complex. But as is obvious, the subtle body is effective only when the gross body plays along with it as described in the above paragraph. But it must be remembered here that in the process of creation, the Viraat Purush or Vishnu was created from Hiranyagarbha, and not vice-versa. This implies that this Ahankar has its genesis in the subtle body, i.e. in the mind. In other words, if the mind decides so, there would be no Ahankar, and in such a situation the gross body would be endowed with the majesty and noble virtues represented by the mind-intellect complex, i.e. the creature would be humble and pious, kind and considerate, temperate and accommodating, gracious and merciful instead of recklessly bulldozing his way through the world even at the inconvenience of other creatures.]”

The *Sharav Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition contains hymns in praise of Lord Vishnu. They appear in verse nos. 25, 27-28, 30. Now let us see what they have to say— “verse no. 25 = It is Lord Vishnu who has created this entire creation. [This puts Vishnu on the same exalted pedestal as Brahm, the Supreme Being. In fact, this refers to the Viraat Purush, the all-encompassing, all-pervading and almighty macrocosmic invisible gross body of Brahm from which the rest of the visible and the invisible creation emerged, including Brahma the creator and Shiva the concluder. Vishnu and Viraat Purush are regarded as the same Divinity having two names; they are synonymous with each other. But observed closely, the Viraat is the subtler form of Vishnu. When incarnations are being referred to, it is Vishnu who becomes relevant because he represents the slightly grosser aspect of Divinity (Brahm) as compared to the Viraat Purush. When the finer aspects of Brahm’s divine virtues and cosmic powers of Consciousness are being referred to, such as the Lord being omnipresent, all-pervading and all-encompassing, then the Viraat Purush is implied. The term ‘Viraat Purush’ literally means the Lord who has a colossus form that is as vast, measureless and fathomless as this creation. This is the all-inclusive form of Brahm, the Supreme Being, as Vishnu. That is, Vishnu and the Viraat are synonymous with each other. The only

probable difference between them is the level of subtlety of their existence—for while the Viraat is the subtler form of Brahm even before Brahma the creator came into existence, Vishnu is the less subtler form of Brahm as he is a contemporary of Brahma and one of the Trinity Gods. While the Viraat Purush is the cosmic form of Brahm from whom the entire creation came into being, Vishnu is that form of Brahm which is responsible for taking care of the creation once it came into being.]

Since on the one hand all the creatures are said to be born from a tiny fraction of Vishnu's body (or the body of the Viraat Purush) and therefore represent Vishnu in a microcosmic form, and on the other hand it is me, Brahma the creator, who is regarded as the creator of all the world and its creatures, it follows that in fact it is the Supreme Being known as the Viraat Purush or Brahm who has done both in as much as he has played the roles of a creator as well as that of a sustainer of the creation—i.e. he has subtly transformed himself as Brahma to create this world, and then assumed the role of Vishnu to become a sustainer and protector of what has been created by Brahma. [In other words, the Supreme Being known as the Viraat Purush plays two roles—as Brahma he creates, and as Vishnu he sustains and protects the creation.] (25).

“verse no. 27 = It is only Lord Vishnu who is the supreme, unique, most exalted, most mystical and most enigmatic divine Authority in creation.

Though Vishnu is the Lord who enjoys everything in this world in his gross worldly form as all living beings in whose body the Lord lives as the universal Consciousness (known as the Atma) that lends their bodies life and vitality to enjoy the material things of the world, the Lord himself is absolutely neutral, constant, steady and un-involved (27).

[Note—That is, though the Lord plays a dual role of being the consumer of everything as the creature on the one hand, and as the consumed thing on the other hand—a paradoxical situation because of the fact that each unit and aspect of creation is one or the other manifestation of the same Brahm—he himself remains constant and steady, neither being the consumer nor the consumed. To understand this phenomenon we can take a simple example from material science which says that energy only changes its form and is never consumed or depleted.

For instance, energy may change its form from, say, heat to light as in the electric bulb, from electrical to kinetic and heat as in the dynamo and the motor, and so on and so forth. But the basic entity known as ‘energy’ is the same in all its variations. Similarly, Brahm is the consumer as well as the consumed—meaning one thing is transferred from, say, pocket ‘A’ and placed in pocket ‘B’. In both the cases, it does not mean that the principal thing itself is either depleted or destroyed or changed in any manner whatsoever. It only undergoes transformation but retains its intrinsic quality, virtue and identity.

Let us take another instance. If water is placed in two containers of different shapes and sizes—one, say, tubular and the other conical—it would still remain the same thing, it would still remain water, though its external form and shape are different.

Therefore we conclude that energy in any form would always be ‘energy’, and water in any form or container would still be ‘water’.

Refer verse no. 29 below which explicitly explains this concept.]

“verse no. 28 = ‘That Lord (Vishnu) to whom four, two and five oblations are offered during fire sacrifices, let that Lord (Vishnu) be pleased with me.’ (28).

“verse no. 29 = The offering that is made to Brahm is in its self Brahm personified. This offering is offered to the sacred fire which is also Brahm personified, and the person making such an offering is also Brahm personified. Even the process of making the offerings is also Brahm from start to finish. [This is unique instance of the philosophy of Advaitya or non-duality which espouses that ‘everything is Brahm’. The person who does the fire sacrifice, the things that are used for making offerings, and the sacred fire to which this offering is made, besides the actual deed of doing the fire sacrifice—all are nothing but Brahm in these apparently separate and distinct forms. In other words, even though the various units of creation might appear to be separated from one another and apparently have no relation with each other, but when analysed intelligently at the fundamental level of existence they all turn out to be one single unit known as ‘creation’, and since ‘creation’ is uniformly pervaded by Brahm, the cosmic Consciousness, it follows that basically they are all Brahm in their individual forms.]

This is why those ascetics who have attained Samadhi or those who have reached the eclectic state of transcendental existence, there is only one non-dual Brahm to be attained. [This is because no matter which deity they worship and pay their respects to, they are actually worshipping and respecting Brahm in that form.] (29).

“verse no. 30 = The Lord known as Hari (which is one of the names of Vishnu) shines or reveals himself in the form of omnipresent Consciousness or the various life-factors known as ‘Pran’ that are constantly and invariably present in all the organs of a creature’s body. Such a living creature who embodies Hari or Vishnu in this visible form is known as ‘Shar’.

The eclectic and mystical divine entity that entitles the creature to be known as Shar (i.e. a creature having life and conscious pulsating throughout his body which would have been dead and lifeless had it not been for this ‘consciousness’ that is present inside it) is called ‘Sharav’. Indeed, this Sharav is Brahm who bestows Moksha to the creature (i.e. Brahm provides emancipation and salvation, or liberation and deliverance to the creature’s soul, which is the latter’s ‘true self’). [The universal source of life known as ‘Consciousness’ that lends life to the otherwise lifeless gross body of a creature is known as Sharav. And since ‘Consciousness’ is another name for Brahm it follows that Sharav is no one else but the supreme transcendental Divinity known as Brahm. The creature who is empowered by Brahm, the creature having ‘Consciousness’ in his body, is known as ‘Shar’.] (30).”

The *Mantra of Lord Vishnu* is given in the Atharva Veda’s *Tripura Tapini Upanishad*, Canto 4, verse no. 10 as follows—“‘OM Namo’ has three letters. [OM + Na + Mo = 3. It means ‘I bow before the Lord represented by the word OM’. Or, ‘OM Salutations! I bow before the Lord.]

The next word ‘Bhagwate’ has four letters. [Bha + Ga + Wa + Te = 4. It refers to the Lord.]

The final word is ‘Vasudevaye’ which has five letters. [Va + Su + De + Va + Ye = 5. It means ‘who is the Lord of the Vasus’.]

This is the twelve-letter Mantra of Lord Vasudeo (Vishnu). He who knows it is able to cross over and overcome all debacles, obstacles and hindrances. He gets a full life (i.e. he lives long and does not die prematurely). He gets lordship over all other creatures.

He acquires abundant livestock, especially cows, as well as immense wealth and prosperity.

The Lord is eternally blissful, the supreme Purush (the Viraat Purush), the supreme transcendental Brahm, and is in the form of Pranav (the cosmic sound element) that is represented by the three letters ‘A’, ‘U’ and ‘M’ of the ethereal word OM. [10].

[Note—The full Mantra is ‘OM Namō Bhagvate Vasudevāye’.]”

The **ten main Avatars/incarnations of Vishnu**—

(i) *Matsya* or Fish incarnation of Vishnu—In this incarnation as a Fish or Matsya, which is the first of ten divine incarnations of Vishnu, the Lord is said to have saved Manu, the progenitor of mankind, and the Saptarishis (the seven mental sons of the creator Brahma) along with their wives during the dooms-day deluge. They were made to board a boat which was pulled by this Fish and saved from being drowned. They re-populated the world later on. It is a story identical to the Biblical story of the Noah’s Arc.

(ii) *Kurma* or Tortoise incarnation of Vishnu—It is the second incarnation of Vishnu. The Lord had supported the legendary Mountain called Mandara which had started sinking during the churning of the ocean by the Gods and the Demons in search of Amrit, the elixir of eternal and life.

(iii) *Varaaha* or Boar incarnation of Vishnu—It is the third incarnation of Vishnu in which he killed the demon Hiranyaaksha and lifted the earth from the flood water where it had vanished. According to some versions, this demon had hidden the earth in the bowls of the ocean. This extrication and resurrection of the earth is a symbolic way of saying that the Lord saves the creation from being submerged in the vast ocean of sins and evil. An Upanishad preached by Lord Varaaha appears in the Krishna Yajur Veda tradition as its 30th Upanishad. The female aspect of Varaaha is known as Goddess Vaaraahi.

(iv) *Nrisingh* or half man and half lion incarnation of Vishnu—Lord *Nrisingh or Narsingh* is the half lion and half man incarnation of Lord Vishnu to slay the demon Hiranyakashipu who had been tormenting Prahalad, his son, because the latter worshipped Vishnu. Lord Vishnu had incarnated as Nrisingh to kill the demon Hiranyakashipu who had been tormenting his own son Prahalad because the child was a devout follower of Vishnu. After having killed the demon, Nrisingh started roaming in the forests, striking terror in the hearts of all the creatures. It was then that Shiva, the universal Lord who has been honoured with the epithet of ‘Mahadev’ as he is the greatest and supreme God, had assumed the form of Sharav, the killer, and liberated Vishnu from the body of Nrisingh. [Refer *Sharav Upanishad* of Atharva Veda, verse no. 8.] Thus liberated, Vishnu had thanked him a lot (refer *Sharav Upanishad* of Atharva Veda, verse no. 19) and went to his divine abode called Vaikunth. So this ferocious form of Shiva known as Sharav was also called ‘Rudra’, the angry and ferocious form of the Lord. One can imagine the fight that might have raged between Nrisingh and Rudra, and obviously Rudra must have been more ferocious than Nrisingh in order to subdue the latter.

This ‘half lion and half man’ form of the Lord is a visible image that has a cosmic counterpart as the ‘half man and half female’ manifestation of the Lord that is known as ‘Ardha-Narishwar’. This cosmic form of Brahm as Ardha-Narishwar has two

components—the right half is depicted in iconography as being a male representing Shiva, the great God, the other half is female representing his divine Shakti known as Parvati or Uma. This Shakti represents the dynamic energy of Shiva. When this applies to Brahm, the male aspect refers to the Supreme Being himself while the female aspect applies to Maya which is the dynamic power that Brahm employed to initiate this magical creation. This depiction is basically envisioned to drive home the point that Brahm and Shakti are inseparable in the context of the creation of the world. This elementary method of reproduction is known as ‘asexual reproduction’ and is depicted by many asexual plants and animals even today. For instance, the one-celled amoeba reproduces itself by cleavage. On the other hand, if we were to regard Brahm in its purest form as the cosmic Consciousness, then Brahm would not need the other half of the Maya, and would only be one and universal entity which has no definite and describable form and shape, it has no characteristic features, attributes and qualities. This form of the sublime and most subtle Brahm is known as either the Hiranyagarbha or the Viraat Purush depending upon the level of subtlety and grossness which is assigned to it, the former being more subtle than the latter.

The ‘lion’ part is a metaphor for the grand qualities of unmatched authority, stupendous strength, physical prowess and complete and unchallenged sway over the entire domain of creation just like a lion has over the forest and its inhabitant wild animals. This term is symbolic of the inherent stupendous might of the supreme Brahm as the unquestioned and powerful Lord of this forest-like world inhabited by myriad varieties of living beings, called the Jivas, just like a dense forest infested by wild animals. Similarly, the ‘man’ part symbolizes the fact that Brahm is the most highly placed Lord much like a human being who represents the highest level in the ladder of evolution.

In other words, even as the lion is the unquestioned lord of the wilds and the man is of all the living beings, the supreme transcendental Brahm is the unquestioned Lord of all that exists with all its variations in this creation, whether in its primary form represented by the wild and primitive animals of the jungle or in its more evolved and developed form represented by the man, with all the other stages of creation included in between these two.

Lord Nrisingh is the fourth incarnation of the Supreme Being who had taken various forms to ward off and overcome evil forces in creation when they become ascendant and overcame the good and the righteous. The Lord did this to maintain order in the creation which is like his offspring.

So when one of his great devotees known as Prahalad was being extremely tormented by his own father, the demon Hiranyakashipu, the Lord appeared as Nrisingh—or as a half lion and half man form—from the pillar to which the innocent lad was tied by the demon to prove to him the omnipresence and all-pervading form of the Supreme Being. Nrisingh is a personification of the grand virtues of dynamism, power, energy, valour and strength, and hence is worshipped by warriors and rulers in general. The Mantra of this Lord is believed to be very powerful and effective against enemies and opponents.

Iconographically, there are many forms of Nrisingh. Some of them are as follows—as seated (Aasin), as standing (Sthaanak), as boon-giver (Vardaayak), as ferocious and angry (Ugra), as striding (Yaanak), in the company of Laxmi, the Goddess

of wealth and the divine consort of Vishnu (Laxmi-Nrisingh), as seated in Yoga or doing meditation like Shiva (Yoga-Nrisingh), as a resident of a mountain (Girija), etc.

His images depict him in either the two-hand form or in a four-hand form. In the latter case, the two back hands hold a conch and discus like the case of Vishnu. The two front hands are shown as killing the demon Hiranyakashipu by forcing the latter on his lap, tearing his abdomen, and yanking his entrails out by his sharp nails.

An entire Puran called Narsingh Puran is likewise dedicated to this Godhead. This Puran glorifies Nrisingh as an incarnation of Vishnu, and is regarded as being synonymous with Narayan, one of the names of Lord Vishnu who is none but the Supreme Being called Brahm. Since Lord Vishnu himself is a macrocosmic, all-inclusive and invisible form of the supreme transcendental Brahm, therefore Nrisingh is a de-facto visible form of the otherwise invisible Brahm.

Similarly, an entire Upanishad known as the *Nrisingh Tapini Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition is dedicated to this deity. It also lists the various divine Mantras dedicated to Lord Nrisingh. It is the 7th Upanishad of this Veda.

The *Shukar Rahasya Upanishad* of Krishna Yajur Veda, verse no. 27, while describing the process of invoking one of the components 'Asi' ('is') of the Maha Vakya (the great saying of the Vedas) 'Tattwamasi' ('that essence is you') says that the Shakti (dynamic energy) of this individual component 'Asi' is Nrisingh.

The *Skanda Upanishad* of Krishna Yajur Veda, verse no. 13 praises Lord Nrisingh as an incarnation of the Trinity Gods consisting of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the sustainer, nourisher and protector, and Shiva the concluder of creation. His divine and glorious virtues are similar to Brahm. Earlier in this Upanishad it has already been established that these three Gods of the Trinity are Brahm personified, as well as the fact that the creature's Atma or pure 'self' which is Consciousness personified, are also Brahm personified. Hence, by worshipping Nrisingh one is offering prayers to Brahm and honouring the grand virtues of creation exemplified by the latter. He is also offering worship to the 'consciousness' that represents Brahm in the physical body of Lord Nrisingh.

(v) *Vaaman/Vaman* or the Dwarf incarnation of Vishnu—This is the fifth incarnation of Vishnu. When Bali, the grandson of Prahalad for whom Vishnu had incarnated as Nrisingh, conquered the entire world and deprived Indra, the king of Gods who ruled over the heavens, Vishnu had taken the dwarfish form of a Brahmin mendicant to retrieve the heaven for Indra when he was requested by Aditi, the mother of Gods, to do so. He approached Bali, who was famous for his charities, as a 'Vaaman' or a dwarf, and begged him for ground sufficient enough to be covered by his three small steps. When the unsuspecting Bali agreed, Vaaman measured the entire earth with one step, the heaven with the second step, and for the third step he measured Bali's own head symbolizing the crown of the kingdom of Bali. He put his third step on Bali's head and pushed the latter to the nether world. Hence, Vishnu is also called 'Trivikram'—one who conquered the three worlds in three steps. But the Lord is so kind and gracious that he saw the injustice done to a magnanimous Bali who had been righteous and firm in his vow of making charity, and never rescinded on his commitments. So, the Lord made him the king of the nether world, and himself took up the job of protecting him there as his gatekeeper. This incarnation of Lord Vishnu is his fifth and followed the Nrisingh form which was the

fourth. The idea behind this Vaaman incarnation is that even the most humble looking man, represented by the diminutive Vaaman in this story, can indeed have the stupendous power of the Spirit that even the most powerful gods and kings lack.

(vi) *Parashuram* or Ram with a battle-axe—This is the sixth incarnation of Vishnu. Parashuram was the son of sage Jamdaagni and his wife Renuka. He had subdued the haughty Kshatriya race or the warrior race led by king Kaartavirya who had become tyrannical and were oppressing others.

(vii) *Lord Ram*—This was the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. Ram was born in the Ikshwaku dynasty belonging to the solar race that ruled the kingdom of Ayodhya as the son of Dasrath and his eldest queen Kaushalya. In this incarnation, Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity who is the divine consort of Lord Vishnu, accompanied him as Sita, the divine consort of Lord Ram. The epic story of Ramayan in which the Lord slayed the arrogant and cruel demon Ravana is woven around this incarnation. Lord Ram exemplified the grand virtues of righteousness, auspiciousness, nobility, propriety and probity, and is therefore lauded as the ‘Maryada Purshottam’—the excellent male who always observed the strictest code of proper conduct. Lord Ram’s divine name ‘Ram’ is regarded as a Tarak Mantra—i.e. a Mantra that has the spiritual power to bestow liberation and deliverance to the creature. There are three Upanishads dedicated to the Lord—viz. Ram Purvatapini Upanishad, Ram Uttartapini Upanishad and Mukti Upanishad. The former two belong to the Atharva Veda tradition, and the third to the Shukla Yajur Veda tradition.

Lord Ram manifested himself in the Treta Yug which is the second era of the four-era one cycle of creation according to Hindu philosophy.

(viii) *Lord Balraam*—This is regarded as the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. Balram was the strong elder brother of Lord Krishna of the Mahabharat fame. Both Balram and Krishna, being brothers, were born in Dwapar Yug which was the third era of the four-era cycle of creation. At the time of his death, the celestial serpent Sheshnath emerged from his mouth giving credence to the theory that he was an incarnation of Sheshnath who had earlier manifested himself as Laxman, the younger brother of Lord Ram during the seventh incarnation of Vishnu.

If this is the case then according to some scholars it would not be proper to include Balraam as an incarnation of Vishnu. Therefore, Balraam is excluded from the list and Lord Krishna is regarded as the eighth incarnation.

If this is taken into account, then it is suggested that Lord Buddha who established Buddhism is to be regarded as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu instead of it being Lord Krishna.

(ix) *Lord Krishna*—Krishna is the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. He is a well known deity and it is he who had pronounced the famous Gita and preached it to Arjun on the eve of the epic Mahabharata war. Krishna’s story is narrated in full in Srimad Bhagwat Mahapuram. But according to some accounts, Krishna is the eighth incarnation replacing Balraam. This has been explained above.

(x) *Kalki*—This would be Vishnu’s tenth and last incarnation before one cycle of creation ends. It is predicted that he would be born during the present Kali Yug, which is the fourth and the last era. He is visualized as riding on the back of a white horse, a drawn sword in hand, eliminating evil-mongers and those who are opposed to Dharma or righteous way of life. His main aim would be to restore Dharma.

Besides the above described ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, there are said to be **fourteen more minor Avtaars or incarnations of Vishnu**, thereby bringing the **total number of incarnations to twenty-four Avtaars** or incarnations of Vishnu. They are also called the twenty-four *Vyuhās* of Vishnu, and they are the various manifestations of the Lord on different occasions to fulfill his obligations of taking care of the creation.

Aside of the ten Avtaars described above, the rest of the fourteen other Avtaars are briefly the following—

(xi) Sages Sankaadi, (xii) Sage Narad, (xiii) Sage Kapil, (xiv) Sage Veda Vyas, (xv) Lord Nar-Narayan, (xvi) Lord Dattatreya, (xvii) Lord Rishabdeo, (xviii) King Prithu, (xix) Dhanvantri, (xx) Mohini, (xxi) Lord Hayagriva, (xxii) Sri Hari, (xxiii) The Yagya or the sacred Fire sacrifice as a manifestation of Lord Vishnu, and (xxiv) The Hans, the divine Swan.

Now, let us have an overall knowledge of all these incarnations of Lord Vishnu. (xi) Sages *Sankaadi*—The sage *Sanatkumar* and others ancient sages are called *Sankaadi Rishis*. Sage Sanatkumar is considered as one of the four Manas Putras or the mental-born sons of the creator Brahma. The other three are Sanak, Sanatsujaat and Sanandan. They are regarded in a perpetual state of boyhood. Together they are called ‘Sanakaadi Rishis’.

Sanatkumar had taught the greatness of Vishnu to demon Vrittaasur, the enemy of Indra, the king of Gods. He also taught spiritual wisdom to sage Narad, the celestial sage.

Sanatsujaat taught spiritual wisdom to Dhritrashtra who was the blind father of the Kauravas of the epic Mahabharat fame. Sanak is said to an eternal companion of Lord Vishnu. Sanandan is regarded as the ancient preacher of the Sankhya Shastra, even more ancient than Kapil.

Sanatkumar, along with sages Pippalaad and Angira, had approached sage Atharva to ask him about the highest form of meditation, the different aspects of OM and the culmination of spiritual journey by realising Brahm in the form of Shambhu, one of the names of Lord Shiva, in Atharva Veda’s Atharva-shikha Upanishad.

It is narrated in the Brihajjabal Upanishad of the Atharva Veda tradition, in its Brahman 7, verse no. 8, that he had gone to Lord Kalagnirudra, one of the forms of Lord Shiva and who had first revealed this Upanishad to one sage Bhusund (Brahmans 1-6) to learn about the metaphysical importance and spiritual value of the Rudraksha beads. [Rudraksha beads are the seeds of the tree *Eleocarpus ganitrus*.]

According to Kalagni Rudra Upanishad of Krishna Yajur Veda, Sanatkumar was taught how to wear the Tripundra, the three lines marked on the forehead of all Hindus, by Lord Kalagnirudra himself.

The Sharav Upanishad of Atharva Veda, in its verse no. 22 stresses the greatness of Lord Shiva known as Maheshwar by saying that even such great sages as Sankadi and Sanatsujat (i.e. sages Sanatkumar and others collectively called the Sankaadi Rishis) had

praised and prayed to the Lord, implying that if these great sages had worshipped Shiva then the latter must surely be a great Lord.

(xii) Sage *Narad*— The celestial sage Narad is said to be a manifestation of the Supreme Being's Mana (mind and its thoughts, intentions, hopes, desires and wishes, as well as the heart and its emotions and sentiments). The Supreme Being implements his wishes and expresses his intentions and wishes by making Narad his spokesperson. Purans list uncountable instances when Narad has approached people—both the good and righteous as well as the demonic and unrighteous ones—to tell them the path best suited to them, and the wise ones treated this advise as the Lord's wish while the unwise ones still benefited from it because Narad's intention was always to turn a living being away from his sinful ways and lead him towards the good.

Since he is a personified Mana, he is as fickle, unstable and transient as the Mana—never staying at one place for more than a fleeting moment, always roaming here and there in the entire creation, having nothing to stop his path as he could go anywhere he wished. And the remarkable thing is that he was never unwelcome anywhere—even the demons welcomed him with the same respect as did the Gods.

It is believed that he is born in each Kalpa to carry out the wishes of the Supreme Being. [1 Kalpa is equivalent to 4.32 billion human years.] He was a Gandharva (a semi-God who is a celestial musician) named Upbarhan in the previous Kalpa. He was physically very charming and an expert musician. Once he showed his amorous intentions towards Urvashi, a celestial dancer, in the presence of Brahma the creator where he was supposed to show exemplary restraint, and this overt show of lust resulted in his being cursed by Brahma that he would become fallen and take birth in the mortal world as a Shudra (a low caste). So, he was born from a maid servant of low caste working as a devoted servant of a learned Brahmin. Under the constant companion of this great Brahmin, Narad developed noble and auspicious virtues in him even though he was a mere child of five years. He was very modest, devoted, pious, noble hearted and diligent.

Since he had the Lord's genes in him, his inclinations were more inclined towards the Spirit than the worldly charms of material sense objects which he detested from childhood. As luck would have it, once some wondering mendicants came to spend the four-month period of the rainy season in the hermitage of this Brahmin. Narad served them with great devotion. Impressed by his service and having some inner vision of his high spiritual stature and the spark of divinity that was lying hidden in him waiting for an opportune moment to leap up and shine through, they blessed him, taught him meditation and contemplation, besides initiating the child into the path of the Lord.

Thus, the dormant fire of renunciation and spiritual awareness was immediately ignited in Narad's little heart and he wished to take to Sanyas (a renunciate's life markds by constant wandering as a mendicant in search of the supreme bliss and Truth), but he did not wish to hurt his mother's emotions. But the Lord had other plans for him, and soon his wish was fulfilled when his loving mother died of snake bite while milking a cow. Instead of grieving at such a loss in human terms, the child Narad felt happy as if the last fetter was broken and he was liberated form worldly obligations.

He immediately headed north towards the mighty Himalaya Mountains to do severe Tapa (penance and austerity) to attain access to the Supreme Being. The little one

walked on and on, and finally he was so tired and exhausted that when he saw a cool lake he drank water, ate fruits that he found there, and sat under the shadow of a tree and became lost in meditation. Lord Vishnu revealed himself in his four-arm form in his heart, but Narad was so thrilled and excited with this divine vision that he wished to see the Lord in practical terms with his physical eyes rather than the subtle eyes while he was in deep meditation. But as soon as he opened the eyes, the Lord vanished. Most sorry and overwhelmed with this loss, the child began to cry bitterly. Then a cosmic formless reverberating voice said—‘Oh son! Your penance is accepted, and I do love you. Though I bless you with an eternal life and that your memory of me would never be erased, but you would not be able to see me with physical eyes in this world. So go back to the world and carry out my divine mandate for me. Become my messenger and go preach the path of my devotion and holy name to this world so that other unfortunate creatures also can get liberation and deliverance from the fetters in which they have bound themselves with no one to show them an easy and practical way out of their predicaments. Go and preach my message to such people in every corner of the earth; go and preach my devotion and let them have faith in my holy name. Your salvation would come naturally and automatically to you as an unasked reward.’

Narad turned back with this divine mandate of the Lord to be carried out just like the great Apostles of Lord Jesus Christ had went, on the Lord’s instructions, to spread his message to the people on this earth. Henceforth, he wandered in the entire creation like a mendicant, with an Indian lute upon which he sang the Lord’s glories and his divine name, spreading the divine message of the Lord’s mercy, compassion, benevolence and love everywhere, attempting to turn everyone towards the Lord and away from this sinful and mortal world so that each individual creature could get his spiritual liberation and deliverance. Such are the ways of great and holy saints that instead of being selfish to seek his own liberation and deliverance from the Lord as the grant of a boon and letting the rest of the world go to hell, Narad chose to sacrifice his own life, liberation and deliverance at the altar of larger good of creation and to fulfill the wish of the Lord. Of course there is another twist to this tale—the Lord does not select everyone to carry on his own divine agenda, and a soul who the Lord designates for this purpose is indeed the most favoured and lucky one—because the Emperor chooses only those upon whom he has utmost confidence to carry out his personal task. It is just like Jesus choosing his disciples and ordaining them the task of spreading his glorious Gospel of love and salvation.

Therefore, Narad, the apostle of the Supreme Being, is the most loved disciple of the Lord, and it is evidenced by the fact that he is the only saint who has unrestricted access to the abode of the Trinity Gods (Lord Vishnu the sustainer and protector of creation, Brahma the creator and Shiva the concluder of this creation) besides every nook and corner of creation without hindrance and even without seeking any previous permission and appointment from anyone, be it a God or a Demon or anybody else. Narad’s visit was always for the host’s long term good, so he was always welcome and revered.

When the time came and the age of the physical body ended, he left the mortal coil like a serpent leaves its cuticle and went to heaven to sing the Lord’s holy and divine name in the presence of Brahma, the old patriarch of creation. At the end of the Kalpa, at the time of Doomsday, he merged and became one with Brahma, the creator.

When the new cycle of creation came into being, he was born again from the Mana (mind) of Brahma the creator after the Sankadi sages were born. That is why, in the present Kalpa, Narad is called the 'Manas Putra' of Brahma, i.e. the son born out of Brahma's mental powers or his wishes. With this heritage and gene running in his blood, it is natural that he is highly respected and regarded as one of the greatest devotees of Lord Vishnu who is the Supreme Being personified. It is from the navel of Lord Vishnu that Brahma, the creator of the visible world, was born atop a divine Lotus that emerged from it while he was reclining on the bed made of the coiled body of the legendary serpent named Seshnath who floated on the surface of the celestial ocean of milk called Kshirsagar.

Narad preached renunciation of this material world and an extreme sense of faith in and complete devotion for Lord Hari (Narayan, Vishnu, the Supreme Being). But this was against the process of creation, because if everyone followed the path preached by Narad and renounced the material world then the process of propagation of the world and its inhabitant creatures along with its development would come to a naught. So, when Narad preached renunciation and detachment from this material world of sense objects that was mortal, transient and never a giver of peace and happiness to the ten thousand mental sons who were created by Daksha Prajapti (the first male from whom the rest of the human race was born and who was assigned the task by Brahma to propagate creation) in order to propagate this human race, Narad obviously annoyed him. These sons were preached by Narad and they all became mendicants, renouncing their attachment with this life and all charms of the material world along with the desire to enjoy it, gratify their sense organs and remain entangled in affairs of this world. Daksha Prajapti was exasperated and he created another set of ten thousand sons. But when Narad again played spoil-sport, Daksha cursed him that Narad would have to remain on the move always and he would not be able to stay at one place for more than two 'Gharis'. [1 Ghari = 24 minutes. In practice the term means a very short period of time; a fleeting moment as small as batting an eyelid.] As a result of this curse, Narad became an ever-wandering mendicant. But this suited the divine mandate of the Lord—for now Narad was forced to keep on the move and reach newer corners of the worldly and celestial realm to preach the Lord's message amongst the mortal creatures on earth and the Gods and Spirits in the heaven.

It is believed that Narad is immortal and is symbolic of the stupendous powers of a man's mind. The mind is ever-wandering like Narad, and the subtle message in the entire lore is that one should tame this restless mind and train it to turn away from this mortal engrossing material world and instead turn towards the Lord for finding permanent liberation and deliverance from this world. A wise mind would teach (preach) the aspirant about the futility of pursuing this artificial world, and instead seek ways of finding the Truth that gives eternity and brings to an end the endless litany of miseries and horrors, perplexities and confusions, restlessness and agitations that are invariably associated with un-truth, delusions and ignorance.

Narad was the most erudite and scholarly devotee of the Lord. No other sage or saint could match him in his scholarly acumen and profundity of wisdom (ref. Chandogya Upanishad, Canto 7, section 1, verse no. 2). Narad is also credited with the composition of the great Sutra (formula or key) called 'Narad Bhakti Sutra' which defines the eclectic principles and characteristics of the spiritual practice called Bhakti which is to have a

profound and exemplary degree of devotion for and surrender to the Supreme Being. Narad himself epitomizes Bhakti at its most refined and developed form.

(xiii) Sage *Kapil*— He was the celebrated sage who is regarded as the fifth incarnation of Lord Vishnu (Bhagavata, 1/3; 3/24). He is compared to Lord Krishna in Bhagavata (10/26). He was the brother-in-law of sage Vashistha, being the brother of his wife Arundhati, and the only son of sage Kardama and his wife Devahuti. He taught even his mother spiritual wisdom in Bhagavata, and hence this part of this scripture is called ‘Kapil Gita’ in which the sage has expounded upon the philosophies of Sankhya Shastra, Ashtanga Yoga (the eight-fold path of Yoga) and Bhakti-yoga (the path of devotion for and submission to the Lord) (3/25-33).

Sage Kapil is however renowned for one of the six schools of Indian philosophies known as Sankhya Shastra.

(xiv) Sage *Veda Vyas*— Veda Vyas was the great grandson of sage Vashistha, grandson of sage Shakti, and the son of sage Paraashar and his wife Satyawati, a fisherwoman. Since he had dark complexion, he was also called Krishna, and since he was born on an island, he was called Dvaipayana. Hence his other name was Krishna Dvaipayana.

He is said to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu himself. The Lord felt that the vast knowledge enshrined in the scriptures were so huge, jumbled up, abstract and complicated that they were beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. Further, till this time, everything was based on memory—hearing and speaking, passing from one generation of disciple to another generation in the oral form. There was a need to sort them out, to codify, systematise and classify this vast ocean of knowledge contained in the Vedas to make them more useful and handy.

So, Vishnu took the form of Veda Vyas to undertake this mammoth, daunting and formidable task. It is believed that Veda Vyas was born at the end of Dwapar Yug during the period of the Mahabharat war.

Soon after his birth, he took permission from his mother Satyawati and went to Badrinath in the Himalayas to do severe penances and austerities (Tapa), and he established his hermitage there. Hence, he was also called ‘Badarayana’.

Veda Vyas gathered all the Mantras of the hitherto undivided Vedas, edited them and grouped them according to the use to which they were put during fire sacrifices. He named them according to the class or section of the priests (called Ritwij) who would use them for their ritualistic practices, such as the fire sacrifices. This added another epithet to his name—viz. ‘Vyas’, the one who knew the Vedas like the back of his hands and was therefore able to classify and divide them into four distinct texts as they now exist; the one who is the best preacher of the subject and made it easy for dissemination and teaching purposes. He classified the Vedas into four basic texts called the Rik, the Atharva, the Sam and the Yajur Vedas.

The four classes of such expert priests and the relevant Vedas were—(i) ‘Riks’—they were also the senior most priests who presided over the ritual, and were also called Hota. They chanted the hymns of the Rig Veda. (ii) ‘Yajus’—these priests were junior to the Riks and were also called Adhwaryou, and they chanted the verse categorised as the Yajur Veda. (iii) ‘Samans’—these priests were the chanters of the holy hymns in chorous, in a loud, clear and melodious voice. They can be called modern day classical

singers who attend any great function or festivity. They were also called Udgata. The Sam Veda was meant for them. (iv) 'Atarvans'—these priests did the actual, physical offerings of oblations in the fire pit of the fire sacrifice. They were called Brahma because they represented the senior most God, and the hymns used by them were classified and collected under the name of the Atharva Veda. So, as we have seen, the basic function of this classification was to facilitate the performance of the fire sacrifice.

But this exercise did not give peace of mind to Veda Vyas. His soul was yearning for something higher than these futile ritualistic exercises. So, as a next step, he further classified the Vedas into various Sanhitas, the Brahamans, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads.

The result of this tireless exercise produced a much vaster tome of spiritual, philosophical and metaphysical literature so much so that Veda Vyas thought it necessary and fit to write the basic tenets and maxims of the Vedas into a single volume for quick referral. This was called 'Vedant Sutra', literally, the key to the Vedas.

The concept of the Vedas was still indigestible and daunting for the masses. So, he rendered the precepts palatable and within the grasp of the common man by resorting to the time-tested and more acceptable method of the story-telling form by writing the eighteen Purans and the eighteen sub-Prans—a stupendous literary achievement of mammoth proportions.

He had also penned the epic Mahabharat besides these eighteen Purans and eighteen sub-Purans. It is said that Ganesh, the most revered and wise son of Shiva who has the head of an elephant, was the scribe who wrote down the dictation of Mahabharat as Veda Vyas narrated it non-stop, a job which is not a child's play. It is also believed that inspite of remaining a chaste saint for life, he had begot the three legendary figures of Mahabharat, viz. Dhritraastra, Pandu and Vidur, from the wives of Vichitravirya at the behest of his mother Satyawati. He gave divine sight to Sanjay, the charioteer who narrated the on going famous battle of the Mahabharat to Dhritraastra who was blind. Being a contemporary sage of the Mahabharat period, he knew almost all the persons of this great epic.

During the reign of Kurus, he was revered by both the Kurus as well as their arch rivals, the Pandavas. Both the heroes of the epic Mahabharat war held him in high esteem. When he decided to write the story of Mahabharat—the documentary narration of the epic story of clan-fight and the devastating war that followed it—he chose Lord Ganesh as his scribe; Veda Vyas had dictated while Ganesh had written the epic. It is said that the site where the epic Mahabharat was written is called 'Vyas Gufa' (Vyas' cave) located near Bharoach while the place where he did his final Tapa is called Vyas Ashram located in the village of Mana two miles from the shrine of Badrinath in the Himalayas. His hermitage during the epic Mahabharat war was located in a village about ten miles north of the city of Ambala in Haryana state. River Saraswati flows nearby. This place is also famous as Vyas Ashram.

Time flew by, but still Veda Vyas did not get peace at heart. Once, while he sat near river Saraswati, full of remorse, unsatisfied and contrite, sage Narad came to him and advised him to write Srimad Bhagwat containing 18000 Slokas. This voluminous work gave him his final peace, so it is said.

His Guru was sage Yagyawalkya. His son was sage Shukdeo, the parrot saint. Veda Vyas chose five chief disciples who were initiated by him in the four Vedas and

Purans. They were as follows—(a) He taught Rig Veda to his disciple named Paila; (b) Yajur Veda to his disciple Vaishampayana; (c) Sam Veda to his disciple Jaimini; (d) Atharva Veda to his disciple Sumanthu; and (e) the Purans to his disciple Ramharshan.

It is believed that sage Veda Vyas still lives, albeit in an invisible, intangible and subtle form in the shape of the vast repertoire of spiritual, philosophical and metaphysical literature that he has created for humankind, something which is not possible for any ordinary human being. These fortify the legend that he was an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and not an ordinary human being, a fact that is extensively covered in Vishnu Puran 3.3.

Summary of His Works :—

Veda Vyas classified the Vedas into four volumes— Rig, Yajur, Sam, Atharva.

Each of the four Vedas had various Sanhitas and Brahmanas as follows—(a) The Rig Veda—Aitareya, Kausitaki; (b) the Yajur Veda—Taiteriyā, Satpath; (c) the Sam Veda—Panchvimansa, Arseya, Vamsa, Talavakara, Daivata, Sadnimansa, Mantra, Chandogya, Samavidhana, Samhitopanishad; (d) the Atharva Veda—Gopath.

Each Veda had a sub-Veda as follows—Rig Veda had Artha-Veda, Yajur Veda had Dhanur-Veda, Sam Veda had Gandharva-Veda, and Atharva Veda had Ayurveda.

Again, the Rig and the Yajur Vedas had different Aranyakas as follows—(a) The Rig Veda—Aitareya, Kausitaki; (b) the Yajur Veda—Taiteriyā, Brhidarankya.

Each of the Vedas further had different Upanishads as follows—(a) The Rig Veda—there are 10 principal Upanishads of the Rig Veda, such as Aitareyaopanishad, Kausitaki Upanishad etc.; (b) the Yajur Veda—there are 19 principal Upanishads of the Shukla Yajur and 32 principal Upanishads of the Krishna Yajur Veda, such as Taiteriyā, Svetashvatra, Katho, Brihdaranakya, Maitri, Ishavasya Upanishads etc.; (c) the Sam Veda—there are 16 principal Upanishads of the Sam Veda, such as Keno, Chandogya Upanishads etc.; and (d) the Atharva Veda—there are 31 principal Upanishads of the Atharva Veda, such as Mundako, Mandukyo, Prasano Upanishads etc.

Veda Vyas also wrote the 18 Purans as follows—Brahma, Padma, Vishnu, Vayu, Bhagwat, Narad, Markandey, Agni, Bhavisiya, Brahamavaivarta, Linga, Varah, Skanda, Vaaman, Kurma, Matsya, Garuda, Brahamanand Purans.

His other contributions to spiritual literature include—Mahabharat, Srimad Bhagwat, Vedant Sutra, Vyas Smriti and Laghu Vyas Sanhita.

(xv) Lord Nar-Narayan— As the name suggests, this incarnation of Lord Vishnu was to establish the principle of Advaitya or non-duality of Vedanta which says that the Jiva, the living being, and the Ishwar, the Supreme Being known as Brahm are not two distinct entities but the same cosmic Consciousness existing in two different planes—the former at the microcosmic level of creation and the latter at the macrocosmic level of creation.

The word ‘Nar’ literally means a man, and ‘Narayan’ refers to the supreme Lord. At the beginning of creation, the supreme Brahm had revealed himself in two forms called Nar and Narayan. From the angle of the Upanishads and the genesis of creation described in them, the Nar was the primary man, and the Narayan was the Viraat Purush known as Vishnu. The Nar was created as an image of Narayan. [Refer Aiteriya Upanishad of the Rig Veda.]

These two images of the Supreme Being, i.e. Nar and Narayan, were assumed by Lord Vishnu, the Viraat Purush, to establish the importance of Tapa (austerity and

penance) as well as Vairagya (renunciation and total detachment from the material charms of this deluding world). They had matted lock of hairs on the head, held a Swan in their hands to indicate purity and wisdom, had the mark of the Chakra (discus of Vishnu) on the sole of their feet to indicate that they have conquered the world, and the sign of the Srivatsa (the foot-print of sage Durvasa) on the chest to imply their grand virtues of extreme humility, forgiveness, fortitude, tolerance, and love for devotees.

After birth, they went to the higher reaches of the northern Himalayas to do severe Tapa in the region now known as Badrikaashram. There they did Tapa for thousands of years. The king of Gods felt jealous of them and tried his best to distract them by employing all the tricks he could—such as luring them with great boons, sending Apsaras (celestial beauties) and Kaamdeo (the God of lust and passion) to distract them with sexually explicit overtures, singing, music and dance, and so on and so forth. But he failed in all attempts, and had to surrender. The sages neither fell in any trap nor did they become angry or cursing. This incarnation therefore was taken to establish the glorious virtues of Tapa, Vairagya, Kshamaa (forgiveness), Namrataa (humility), Titiksha (endurance, sufferance, fortitude and tolerance), not having Ahankar (ego, pride, haughtiness and arrogance) etc.

It is believed that Lord Nar and Narayan are personified forms of these grand and glorious virtues, and are still doing Tapa in the Himalayas. Perhaps this is the reason why one finds an extreme sense of spiritual fulfilment and surging exhilaration when one meditates in the Himalayas.

(xvi) Lord *Dattatreya*— Lord Dattatreya is a fractional incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the supreme Lord of creation in his cosmic form as the Viraat Purush from whom the rest of the creation, including the creator Brahma himself, was created. The word ‘Dattatreya’ means ‘one who was given to Atri’. According to mythological accounts, sage Atri and his chaste wife Anusuyia were childless, and having a desire to have a son they prayed and did severe penance. All the three gods of the Hindu Trinity, i.e. Brahma the creator, Vishnu the sustainer, and Shiva the concluder appeared before the couple and requested them to ask for a boon. Upon the couple’s request, all the three Gods became their sons. Brahma became the sage known as Chandra representing the Moon God, Vishnu became the wise and enlightened sage Dattatreya, and Shiva became the angry sage Durvasa.

The *Brihajjabal Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, in its Brahman 7, verse no. 3 asserts that Dattatreya was one of the great ascetics who were known as ‘Paramhans’, showing that he was extremely wise, erudite, enlightened, self-realised and Brahm-realised besides being exemplarily detached and dispassionate towards this world and its material objects. He was renunciation personified.

The *Shandilya Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition endorses this episode with a slight change in its Canto 3, section 2, verse nos. 7-8 wherein it is said that the Supreme Being himself revealed in the form of sage Atri. Now let us see what it says—

“Verse no. 7 = [Sage Shandilya asked—] ‘Why is it (Brahm) known as Lord Dattatreya?’ [Refer last stanzas of verse no. 6 of section 1 of Canto 3 of this Upanishad.] (7).

“Verse no. 8= [Sage Atharvaa replied—] ‘It is because sage Atri did very severe Tapa (austerity and penance) to wish for a son. Pleased by his sincerity and devotion, the splendid and self-illuminated ‘Bhagwan’ (Lord God; the Supreme Being) blessed the

sage and offered himself as his son. Thereafter, the Lord himself revealed as a son to sage Atri and his wife Anusuiya. In this way he (the Lord) became famous as Lord Dattatreya (8).”

The word ‘Dattatreya’ has two parts—‘Datta’ and ‘Treya’. The first half ‘Datta’ refers to the Lord who gives boons, and the second part ‘Treya’ refers to something that has three dimensions.

This latter part ‘Treya’ again has the following meanings—(1) It refers to Lord Shiva who has three eyes, and hence called ‘Trinetra’, because Shiva is also known as ‘Maheshwar’, the great Lord by which epithet the Supreme Being is honoured (refer Canto 3, section 2, verse no. 5-6 of Shandilya Upanishad). (ii) It refers to the supreme transcendental Brahm which has three forms known as Sakal, Nishkal and Sakal-Nishkal which incorporates in their ambit the entire creation, both the visible and the non-visible, the gross and the subtle (refer Canto 3, section 1, verse nos. 2-6 of Shandilya Upanishad).

According to another version of this story, the three Gods decided to check the chastity vows of the wife of Atri and came disguised to cheat on her. Anusuiya was no ordinary lady, and realizing their ill intentions she transformed them into her son with three heads and six arms, each head standing for one of the Gods.

Dattatreya is counted amongst the seven celestial sages called the Sapta Rishis. He is said to have created the Soma Plant whose juice, called the ‘Som Rasa’, is used during fire sacrifices as an offering to Gods.

Iconographically, Dattatreya is shown with three heads and six arms holding the emblems of the three Gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, viz. a water pot, a conch and a discus, and a trident respectively. In fact, this great sage is regarded as a combined revelation of the Trinity Gods, i.e. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, in as much as he possessed the virtues of them all.

A bull representing Dharma (righteousness) is depicted as his mount. Four dogs representing the four Vedas are his constant companion.

The concept of Dattatreya is an attempt by ancient sages and seers to harmonize the three cults of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva that had created an artificial and unwarranted rift in the edifice of religious unity amongst the Hindus.

An entire Upanishad titled ‘Dattatreya Upanishad’ is dedicated to this great sage, and it appears in the Atharva Veda tradition as its 30th Upanishad.

Dattatreya is also credited with expounding the great characteristics of Avadhut Sanyas in Avadhut Upanishad of Krishna Yajur Veda tradition when he taught them to sage Sankriti. He had also preached Prahalad, the great devotee of Lord Vishnu, about the eclectic state of Avadhut Sanyasi in the form of a huge python. He had taught King Alarka about Tattva Gyan (the fundamental knowledge of spiritual Truth and the quintessential philosophy of metaphysics).

Being a great Sanyasi himself, he was endowed with stupendous mystical powers called Siddhis. One of the sects of Siddhas regard him as their patron sage.

Sage Dattatreya had made twenty four Gurus or teachers. The remarkable thing is that none of these twenty four Gurus was a human being—he had learnt even from the elements (earth, water, fire, air, sky), animals (elephant, deer), birds (pigeon, hawk), reptiles (snake, worm), insects (moth, bee, spider), a fish, the moon and the sun, a child, a girl, a prostitute, an arrow-smith etc. These are very interesting episodes, and are being briefly summarized here.

The following are the twenty four teachers and what Dattatreya learnt from them.

(1) Earth—the earth sustain all sorts of life and nourishes each creature, even those who virtually eat into her bosom by mercilessly and ruthlessly exploit her. The human race is the greatest exploiter of the earth by digging into her bowels and extracting whatever it can to satisfy its selfish vested interests without bothering for the future of earth much like a vulture digging its beak and extracting last bit of flesh from a cadaver. The earth is very magnanimous and forgiving. It goes on giving and giving without expecting any thing in return, and does not complain like a loving mother who would rather prefer to die than deny her child whatever she can afford. The greatness is that still she does not complain!

(2) Air—the wind moves everywhere, visits all kinds of places but never gets attached to any place or thing. The air is free from all attachments, relations and bonding though it touches all and pervades everywhere. It purifies everything and gives life to all in the form of ‘Pran’ or breath without any discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, race, creed etc. It gives life to a friend as much as it gives life to one’s enemy. The air taught him to be totally detached in his dealings with the world inspite of living in it and helping it by infusing fresh breath of knowledge and hope to the best of his ability.

(3) Sky or Akash—the space of the sky accommodates everything and everyone in its vast bosom. This taught him to accept and accommodate all in life, but remain uninvolved in or unattached with them just like the sky which harbours uncountable number of things in its vast bosom but remains totally indifferent to them and unaffected by them.

(4) Water—it is refreshing and cool and nourishing. No life is possible without water, and it is regarded as the only universal elixir of life. This taught him to sustain all and be soothing, comforting and refreshing for all the creatures. Like the inherent quality of water to act as the universal soother and lubricant of this creation, to cool down the heat and provide solace and succour to tormented creature, a true saint should also act as the one whose company gives happiness and joys to all, whose company provides the much-needed spiritual solace and succour to all.

(5) Fire—it gives light, heat and energy. It is upwardly mobile—as is evident from the direction the flame of a raging fire takes. It is all-purifying on the one hand, and burns to ashes whatever impurity is put into it on the other hand. This taught him to welcome everything like the fire does, but purify them before finally accepting anything, and to reduce to ashes all that is impure and tainting that would affect the purity of the Atma.

(6) Moon—it appears to wax and wane, but really it remains the same. This taught him the fact that the world and the body undergo innumerable changes but the true ‘self’ always remains unchanging, steady, uniform and immutable.

(7) Sun—it is the ‘eye’ of the world and gives the latter light, heat and energy in a selfless and unbiased manner. The sun illuminates all but does not need anything to illuminate its own self, and neither does it get tainted by the dark and gloomy things it illuminates. On the contrary, the darkness of all things vanishes as soon as the brilliant light of the sun falls upon them. The glory of the sun is so overwhelming that no form of gloom and darkness can ever survive in its presence. This taught him to illuminate the world and remove its darkness of ignorance by the light of knowledge and wisdom while

remaining immune himself to the darkening and spiritually denigrating affects that are caused by this deluding and corrupt world.

(8) Pigeon—this is the typical story of a householder's life. The parent pigeons went out in search of food for their young one day when a bird-catcher spread his nets and caught the offspring. When the parents returned, the mother pigeon saw the plight of the young one and jumped into the net. Then the male pigeon too jumps into the net because he cannot live without the family. The bird-catcher was overjoyed. This taught him that worldly attachments only lead to one's ruin and downfall.

(9) Python—it stays at one place and swallows any creature that happens to pass that way. He would not forage for food but wait for it to come to him. This taught him to be contented with whatever comes his way.

(10) Ocean—The Ocean is a vast and fathomless reservoir of water but it continues to continuously receive waters from all the rivers that incessantly pour their contents into it. In spite of this, the ocean never overflows with water, and it never breaks self-imposed restrictions of not submerging the earth. This taught the sage that no matter how much knowledge and wisdom one possesses or thinks that he has, he must keep on learning throughout his life; he must have an open and receptive mind that welcomes all sorts of knowledge. Again, as all the waters being poured into the ocean from different rivers having their sources in myriad of places becoming one and homogenous with the water of the ocean, the wise and enlightened man should accept knowledge from all sources but extract their essence and convert them all into one uniform body of knowledge that would not act as a distraction or a cause of perplexity for him but would only add to his profound knowledge and wisdom. Like the ocean remaining within its boundaries, the wise man is one who never shows off his knowledge, or becomes haughty and arrogant because of his mystical powers and knowledge. The ocean harbours a complete marine eco-system in spite of its harsh salty waters—this taught the sage to be benevolent, compassionate, magnanimous and kind towards all in spite of the harsh conditions in which he might be forced to live; he must give shelter to all who come seeking refuge with him, and take care of his dependants to the best of his ability. Like the ocean, he too must be self-contented and aloof from the world, because the ocean never expects any water from the rivers, and is unconcerned with what is happening on land.

(11) Moth—it gets attracted to the fire, and as a result of his infatuation with the fire and its light it gets caught and burnt. This taught him not to be tempted by the beauty and charm, the fascinating colours and magnificent forms of this artificial world of sense objects, for they would trap him and eventually drain him of all his energy and vitality, leading to his destruction. Any sort of worldly attachments would sear and scorch his soul and rob it of its peace and bliss. The attractions of the world are like the trap that would scorch his spirit by forcing it to lead a lifetime pursuing the sense objects of the world which keep on burning him with desires and expectations that are never fully fulfilled. Jealousy, hatred, frustration, animosity, malice and greed are its natural attendants. After having spent a lifetime in realizing the material objects of the world, a day would finally come when his worn out and descript body would die. Like the fire of the flame burning the moth, the attachments with this world and desire for it would also burn the man.

(12) Honey Bee—it collects nectar from numerous flowers and converts them into one homogenous honey. This taught him to imbibe knowledge from whatever source available, and then convert it into one body of knowledge that is ‘truthful’. A wise man is one who draws the essence, the nectar, from all sources of knowledge, and then deduces the ‘truth’ from it which would of any value for him like the ‘honey’ produced from the nectar drawn by the bee from various flowers. It also taught him that a mendicant should also collect a little bit of food from different households instead of relying on one house.

(13) Elephant—it is notorious for the sense of touch. During the mating season they rub against each other. This weakness is exploited by hunters to catch them. This weakness taught the sage that he should be wary of the pleasures obtained by touching sensual things in this world.

(15) Honey Gatherer—he stealthily takes away all the honey so painstakingly collected by the honey-bee over a long period of time involving immense labour. This taught him two things—it is useless to hoard things as one day death would snatch everything away, and second it is futile to hoard without sharing things with others because one day they are bound to be snatched away from us.

(15) Deer—it is by nature attracted to music, a weakness exploited by the hunter to trap it. So, one should be wary of pleasant and sweet sounds emanating from this world because poison is more often than not laced with sugar.

(16) Fish—it is attracted to the hook and got caught due to its desire to eat the bait. So, the fish taught him to have control over the taste buds of his tongue.

(17) Pingala—she was a prostitute. One day the saint, during his wanderings, came to take rest under the tree on a street where she lived. He watched her eagerly waiting for a customer who never turned up. She finally gave up and went to sleep with the realization that if she had spent so much time invoking the Lord present in her own bosom, she would not have to wait for the Lord so long. This taught the saint that disappointments come to us when we expect something from this world and then hope that it would provide it to us. It is therefore an exercise in futility to expect the world to give real comfort and joy to anyone. The real happiness lies inside.

(18) The Kurara Bird (a species of Hawk; an Osprey)—the bird had a small piece of flesh in its beak. Seeing it, other larger and stronger birds pounced on the unsuspecting poor Kurara bird. Distraught, the Kurara suddenly realised that the cause of its torments is the piece of meat, and so it dropped it instantly from its beak. The other birds swooped on the meat and stopped pursuing the Kurara. This incident taught the saint that if one clings on to material things in this world, no matter how desirable they are, they would never let him live in peace. It is better to drop them at the earliest; it is better to drop all worldly attachments, and instead devote time in the search of the Truth of life.

(19) Child—a child becomes so engrossed in his playthings that he forgets hunger and other bodily needs. Children fight with each other during the course of playing, but soon forget everything. This taught him to remain engrossed in contemplation and meditation on the ‘self’ and enjoy this state of existence like a child remaining engrossed in its playthings and being oblivious to anything else around him in this world. A wise ascetic should also be as deeply submerged in meditation as this child playing with his toys so much so that he becomes totally oblivious of the surrounding world around him. He should be immune to the world as well as even to one’s own bodily problems. A wise man must be innocent like a child—he might get angry at others but never takes anything

to heart. The child plays with toys, but suddenly throws them away and wants something new. Likewise, the wise man enjoys the world, but he never gets hooked to it at the emotional and sentimental plane.

(20) A Girl—some people had come to see the girl with a proposal of marriage. She went inside the house to prepare food for them. In the course of grinding spices her bangles clashed with each other and made a disturbing noise. She removed them one by one until one remained—then there was no noise. This taught him that when the mind is distracted by so many things, the man never finds peace. So the best way to concentrate the mind is to remove all extraneous distractions in the form of numerous paths and philosophies, and instead focus on one path that would lead him to the ultimate Truth preached by the Upanishads, the Truth that is absolute, uniform and immutable.

(21) An Arrow-smith—he was so engrossed in his single-pointed devotion to his work of preparing the arrows and giving them the right contours, aerodynamic shape and sharpness to their tip that he was unaware that the king's entourage was passing by. This taught the saint the importance of single-minded pursuit of one's goal.

(22) Snake—it never makes its own hole and lives in holes made by nature or other animals. A true saint should realise that the Atma has no body of its own but lives on borrowed bodies during its sojourn in this world. Again, the snake effortlessly leaves its dead cuticle, and this taught the sage that the Atma would similarly leave this body one day at the time of the body's death, without any effort, pain or attachment to the older body, to find a new abode for its self. Hence, one should not be unduly concerned about the gross body which is bound to be abandoned one day. Another thing that the sage learnt was that the body is not one's true identity as the 'truthful self'; it is merely a temporary habitat for the 'self'. This 'self' is the pure consciousness known as the Atma that would move to another body when the latter becomes too old and useless for it just like the snake leaving its dead cuticle and moving out into a new skin.

(23) Spider—it creates a web from its own body, moves around it, and then swallows it. Similarly, the supreme Lord has created this world, sustains it, and finally retracts it into himself. Further, the spider creates the web and remains trapped in it much like the creature who creates this artificial world by his mind and then remains trapped in it for life.

And finally (24) Worm—a wasp caught hold of a worm and kept it in a hole. The wasp kept humming around this worm that was so terrified of the wasp and continuously subjected to this humming that ultimately it became wasp-like itself. Similarly, when a man concentrates upon something continuously, whether willingly or unwillingly, he would become one like the subject on which he contemplates. If he contemplates upon the world, he would become one like other mortal ignorant creatures, and if he contemplates upon something that is sublime and divine, he would become sublime and divine himself.

(xvii) Lord *Rishavdeo*— King Naabhi had no son, so he did a great fire sacrifice accompanied by his wife Merudevi. As a result, the Yagya Purush—the personified form of the Fire God who is none other than Lord Vishnu because it is also one of the Lord's many forms—appeared before them and asked them to ask for a boon of their choice. They requested a son in the image of the Lord, i.e. a son who would possess all the divine

virtues as possessed by the Lord himself. The Lord granted them their wish and said that since there was no one like him, he would himself incarnate as their son.

Thus was born a divine son whom the king named 'Rishavdeo'—literally meaning the best one. The child had a magnificent charm around him and was endowed with auspicious virtues. When he came of age, the king handed over the reins of the kingdom to him and himself went to the forest to do Tapa.

Rishavdeo ruled the kingdom very righteously and strictly according to the tenets of Dharma (laws of correct and rightful conduct, ethics and morality, propriety and probity). He was very endeared to his subjects. Once, the king of Gods tested his abilities by stopping clouds from giving rain, so Rishavdeo created rain by his own mystical powers so that the subjects of the kingdom would not starve.

He had a hundred sons, the eldest one being Bharat. It is after him that India is called 'Bhaarat'. Bharat was an image of his father, and similarly endowed with noble virtues and mystical powers that come with Tapa. His nine younger brothers were Kushavarta, Ielavarta, Brahmavarta, Malaye, Ketu, Bhadrasen, Indrasprik, Vidharva and Kikat established their own kingdoms.

The next ten younger brothers remained Brahmacharis from childhood, i.e. they never married and became great sages who spent their entire life as great devotees of Lord Vishnu, preaching about the Lord and spreading his gospel. They are Kavi, Hari, Antariksha, Prabuddha, Pippalaayan, Avihotra, Drumil, Chamas and Karbhaajan.

When the time came, king Rishavdeo handed over the responsibilities of the kingdom to his eldest son Bharat and went to the forest. He was so full of Vairagya (renunciation, detachment and dispassion towards this material world) and overwhelmed with Gyan (enlightenment and wisdom) that he became a top-class Sanyasi (a mendicant, a monk or a hermit) of the order of Avadhut as well as a Paramhans. These two states are the highest levels of Sanyas. He roamed around unconcerned with anything, lost in his own blissful thoughts about the Truth and the Consciousness. People regarded him as having become mad, and his behaviour was so odd and unconventional that sometimes people even insulted him. But Rishavdeo was so engrossed in meditation and contemplation, so focused on his 'self' known as the Atma that he paid no heed. He was a personified form of Sanyas and the extreme measure of Anand (bliss, ecstasy, joys and happiness) that comes with self-realisation. He epitomised the exemplary state of highest spiritual realisation and achievement of supreme bliss which is the aim of Yoga.

When the time came for him to discard his mortal body, he sat down in deep meditation and was burnt in a fire that lit itself in the surrounding forest of bamboo trees. In the way he led his life, Lord Rishavdeo laid down a sterling example as to how a truly wise man should live a fruitful life, and how he should end it.

(xviii) King *Prithu*— The story of Prithu is a narration of how Lord Vishnu actively takes part in making the earth self-sustaining for its inhabitant creatures, and how the Lord did this by manifesting as a great king to ensure that the creation revealed by him would not suffer for want of daily necessities of life.

In the race of Manu (the first Man) was a Prajapati (the father of a large clan) named Anga. He was married to Sunitha, the mentally-created daughter of Mritu (the God of death). From her he begot a son named Ven who was of a sinful nature, most pervert and an atheist. Sages were so annoyed at him that they killed him by employing

the mystical power of their Tapa (penance and austerity). From his dead body they created another king named 'Prithu'.

Prithu was crowned Emperor of the whole earth. He was a wise king and an able administrator who organised the working of the state and established a system of government.

Once there was a great famine and he sternly warned the earth to produce food (crop) from the seeds sown and not to swallow them up, or face action. The earth was terrified and appeared before him as a cow. She apologized and asked him and others to milk her and get what they wanted. So, Prithu and other sages and seers milked her, and thus were produced the agricultural crops, the body of knowledge called the Vedas, the Soma juice for doing fire sacrifices and providing refreshment, the virtues of strength and vigour, music, offerings fit for making oblations to Gods and Spirits of dead ancestors, etc. Prithu also made the earth plain and livable, created villages and towns, provided protection from fears and dangers of all kinds to the earth's inhabitants, and established the tradition of doing fire sacrifices in order to honour the Yagya Purush who is none but Lord Vishnu.

In other words, the barren earth became productive and habitable, and Prithu did the first ground-breaking work and laid the first foundation of a complex infrastructure that would be eventually built on this earth to sustain the needs of increasing population and expansion of civilization that would eventually take place on the earth.

Hence, the earth came to be known as 'Prithivi'—the daughter of Emperor Prithu to commemorate his contribution to creation.

He performed a hundred Ashamedh Yagyas (Horse sacrifices). Towards the end of his life he preached his subjects and appointed his son Vijitaashwa on the throne. Then he went to the forest with his queen named Archi to do severe Tapa (austerity and penance) to attain Nirvana or final emancipation and salvation.

His story appears in Srimad Bhagvat, 4/15-23, and in Vishnu Puran, 1/13.

(xix) Lord *Dhanvantri*— He was the Medicine Man of Gods and the one who discovered the curative powers of herbs. He is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu to provide the cure in the form of herbal remedies from the innumerable diseases that the creatures would suffer from in this world. In his role as the sustainer, protector and nourisher of this creation, this role of Vishnu was very vital as otherwise the creatures would suffer and die of so many natural diseases that the agenda of the Supreme Being to make the creation self-sustained and self-propagating would be defeated.

He emerged from the ocean when it was churned at the beginning of creation in the search for Amrit (or the elixir of life) along with other wealth or assets that are necessary to sustain and develop a pleasurable and comfortable life on earth. The pot of Amrit was held by him towards the end of this churning. Since he was a fractional incarnation of Lord Vishnu, he too had four arms and a glowing complexion that was dark with the bluish tinge of the sky.

The kings of Gods, Indra, appointed him as the celestial physician of Gods.

Once, severe disease swept through earth. Then Indra requested Dhanvantari to manifest himself to eliminate the suffering of the creature. Dhanvantari was thus born as Divodas, the king of Kashi (Varanasi in the present day India). He was a great botanist and a naturalist, and compiled a *Materia Medica* of herbs. The science of healing with

plants and shrubs is called Aurveda, and is given a status of a minor Veda. The etymology of the word 'Ayurveda' means 'the knowledge (Veda) that makes life enjoyable, disease free and enhances its span and utility (Ayu)'.

There are other names of Dhanvantari—viz. Bhishak and Vaidya. While Dhanvanatri is an expert in 300 medicines, Bhishak is in 200, and Vaidya in only 100 medicines.

The medical treatises attributed to Dhanvantari are the following—Chikitsa Dipika, Baal-Chikitsa (medicines of children), Dhanvantari-Nighantu, Vaidya-Bhaskarodaye, and Ayurveda Saravali (the key note or essential principles of the science of Ayurveda).

(xx) *Mohini*— This is the most charming, bewitching, voluptuous and beautiful incarnation of Vishnu as a lustful enchantress. It so happened that the demons had snatched the pitcher of Amrit produced by the churning of the ocean, depriving the Gods of this ambrosia. So Vishnu had assumed the form of a beautiful and most voluptuous enchantress to deceive the demons and distribute the Amrit amongst the Gods.

This Avtaar or incarnation is meant to convey the spiritual message that one should not fall prey to worldly temptations of passions and lust as well as the charms of the sense organs and their objects in this material world because then Mukti (liberation and deliverance or freedom from the entanglements of the web-like world) would be impossible in spite of the fact that it was almost ready at hand. The demons had already got the pitcher of Amrit, and had they not fallen prey to the tempting overtures of this Mohini they would have drunk it.

(xxi) Lord *Hayagriva*— the horse-headed incarnation—The word 'Hayagriva' has two parts—'Haya' means a horse, and 'Griva' means a neck. Hence, the Lord with the neck, and therefore the head of a horse is known as Hayagriva.

There are two main interpretations of this incarnation of Lord Vishnu. According to one, when sage Yagyavalkya was deprived of the knowledge of the Yajur Veda due to the curse of his Guru Vaishampaayana, he went and did severe Tapa (austerity and penance) to please the Sun God. Pleased, the Sun God taught him another version of the same Veda by assuming the form of a deity with the head of a horse. Since the Sun is a visible manifestation of the Viraat Purush, one of the more subtle forms of Lord Vishnu, it was actually Lord Vishnu himself who had taught the sage this Veda. Hence, Lord Hayagriva is regarded as the Lord of knowledge and learning, and is given the same respect as shown to Goddess Saraswati, the patron goddess of learning and wisdom.

According to another story, there was a demon with the head of a horse, and he was therefore called Hayagriva—the horse-headed one. He was the son of Diti, the mother of demons. He did severe Tapa (austerity and penance) on the banks of the river Saraswati and offered his worship to Goddess Jagdambika (Parvati, the divine consort of Lord Shiva and the cosmic Mother). The Goddess was extremely pleased by his severe Tapa and asked for a boon, upon which Hayagriva requested immortality. The Goddess told him that all who are born must die, so this grant was practically not feasible. She asked him to ask something else. The demon was cunning, so he re-phrased his request and asked that he be killed by someone who was exactly like him. He thought that since no two living beings are alike, he would indirectly get immortality. The Goddess granted

him his desired boon. Thus armed, he let loose terror in the world, thinking that no one would now be able to kill him.

To get rid of him, the Gods designed a strategy whereby Lord Vishnu lost his original head and was grafted with the head of a horse by the medicine men of the Gods named Ashvini Kumars. They are the twin sons of the Sun God. Thus, Vishnu also became a 'Hayagriva'. It was in this form that the Lord slayed the demon. This story appears in Devibhagwat, 1/5.

According to the third story, the Vedas had been stolen by two demons named Madhu and Kaitav who had hidden them in the eastern ocean. Lord Vishnu had assumed the form of Hayagriva to kill them and restore the Vedas.

The legend about the birth of these demon says that at the time Brahma the creator emerged atop a thousand-petal lotus that sprouted from the navel of Lord Vishnu, the Viraat Purush, two drops of water symbolising the two Gunas (qualities) of Raja and Tama (the medium and the lowest type of qualities) were present on one of the petals on which Brahma sat. Madhu was born from the drop of Raja Guna, and Kaitav from the drop of water representing Tama Guna.

Once they went up to the heaven and saw the Vedas in all their glorious form placed alongside Brahma who was engaged in the process of creation. The duo immediately stole the Vedas and hid them under the water of the eastern ocean. Brahma was confounded and requested Lord Vishnu to retrieve them as the Vedas were the former's eyes as they contained all the knowledge needed for all the aspects of creation. So Vishnu appeared as a deity with a head of a horse—i.e. as Hayagriva. The heaven was his head, the rays of the Sun were his glistening hairs, the sky and the underworld were his ears, the earth was his forehead, the river Ganges and Saraswati were the two halves of his chest, the oceans were his thighs, the Sun and the Moon were his eyes, dusk was his nostril, OM was his ornament, electric was his tongue, the Pittars (Spirits of dead ancestors) were his teeth, the Brahma Loka was his lip, and Kalratri (the night of the doomsday) was his neck.

Lord entered the ocean and went to the ocean bed, the nether world called the 'Patal Loka'. There, he began to neigh melodiously, singing the hymns of the Sam Veda. The two demons were so enchanted by this singing that they came out to hear it. Lord Hayagriva got an opportunity and he immediately took the Vedas and gave them to Brahma. After their restoration, he went back to the ocean and lived there for some time.

When the demons reached the place from where they had heard the sweet singing emanating, they found no one. So they got suspicious and rushed back to where they had concealed the Vedas to find them missing. Then they began frantically to search for the Vedas as well as the miscreant who removed the scriptures from the hiding place. They reached the surface of the ocean and found Lord Vishnu peacefully reclined on the bedstead of the celestial serpent named Sheshnath. They assumed that certainly the Lord was the one who had taken away the Vedas. They shouted and caused so much raucous that Lord Vishnu woke up from his cosmic sleep, and then there ensued a battle between the Lord and the demons which lasted for five thousand years.

Pleased by their valour and ardour, Vishnu asked them to request for a grant of a boon. The haughty demons retorted and sneered at the Lord, asking the latter to ask for a boon instead. The Lord asked that they be killed at his hands. [Markandey Puran, 81/74.] Taken aback, the demons said that they were also entitled for a boon as promised by the

Lord himself. The Lord granted them permission to ask, and they requested that they be killed at a place where the earth was not submerged in water. [Markandey Puran, 81/76.] Vishnu immediately spread his thighs on the surface of the ocean, and deluded by the Lord's Maya the demons thought that dry earth has emerged from the ocean. Aside of this, they also found in this happening a chance of their own salvation and so willingly put their heads on it. Vishnu invoked his Sudarshan Chakra (the sharp weapon of Vishnu which is like a circular saw) to chop off their heads. This episode is described in detail in the Markandey Puran, Chapter 81.

Perhaps this episode describes how the continents and islands came into being during the process of creation.

An Upanishad belonging to the Atharva Veda is dedicated to Lord Hayagriva. It is the 29th Upanishad and bears the same name, i.e. Hayagriva Upanishad. It has 20 Mantras.

Iconographically, Lord Hayagriva is depicted as having a human body and the head of a horse. This incarnation resembles the Nrisingh incarnation when the Lord had assumed a body whose lower part was that of human, and the upper part that of a lion.

The *Hayagriva Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition describes the form of Lord Hayagriva in its verse no. 7 as follows—"Lord Hayagriva's divine form holds a conch, a discus (the circular saw-like weapon held by Vishnu), and a book (representing the Vedas and symbolizing knowledge). His hands are held in a special posture known as Maha-Mudra. The Lord has four arms. [This is because Lord Hayagriva is a manifestation of Lord Vishnu, the second of the Trinity Gods and the sustainer and protector of creation.]

I worship and meditate upon Lord Hayagriva's divine form which is as beautiful as the full Moon.' (7)."

There are *five hymns or Mantras* dedicated to Lord Hayagriva. They are given in the *Hayagriva Upanishad* in its verse nos. 3-5, 8-9.

(xxii) *Sri Hari*—The word 'Hari' means one who steals. In the context of Lord Vishnu it means the Lord who eliminates all the sorrows, worries and torments as well as the evil effects of sins and other misdemeanours of his devotees. It was in this form which is munificent and benevolent that he had revealed himself before his child devotee known as Dhruv.

The legend of Dhruv is as follows— He was the elder son of king Uttaanpaad from his first wife Suniti. The king was so charmed by his second wife named Suruchi that he completely neglected Suniti and Dhruv. Once it so happened that the child Dhruv was snubbed by his step-mother for attempting to draw affection of his father. The child was very upset and despondent. He approached his mother for solace. She advised him to accept Lord Vishnu as his eternal and loving Father and protector. For this, Dhruv had to do severe Tapa (austerity and penance). The overwhelmed child was so determined that he immediately proceeded to the forest to do Tapa. He met the celestial sage Narad on the way who instructed him on ways to meditate upon the Lord. The Lord was extremely pleased by Dhruv's sincerity and devotion and appeared before him. He blessed the child and gave him two boons—one was the restoration of his honour and kingdom of the kingdom, and the other was a permanent place in the heavens, a position so exalted, steady and unwavering that even the God could not match it. So, in due course of time,

Dhruv assumed a personified form of a divine God and took up his heavenly abode in the Dhruv Loka. The story related to him is narrated in detail in the Vishnu Puran, section 1, cantos 11-12.

The *Tripadvibhut Maha-Narayan Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda, in its Canto 5, paragraph no. 15 mentions this Dhruv Loka and Dhruv, the God, when it describes the path taken by a devotee of Lord Vishnu to the latter's abode in heaven when the former leaves his mortal body. The devotee has taken a ride on the back of the Garud, the vehicle of Lord Vishnu who is represented by the divine ethereal Mantra known as OM in this Upanishad, and has already passed through the Satya Loka where Brahma the creator lives, the Ishan Loka where Lord Shiva lives, the Graha Loka where the different Grahas live, the Saptarishi Mandal where the seven celestial sages live (and which is represented by the Great Bear constellation of stars in the sky), the Surya Mandal which is the realm of the Sun God, and the Chandra Mandal which is the realm of the Moon God. Then he reaches this Dhruv Mandal.

The Dhruv Loka or Dhruv Mandal is represented by the North Star and its immediate environs in the celestial map. The North Star is a personified form of Dhruv. The North Star has a great symbolic importance and value here. This star remains static and unchanging in its position in the sky—it is a metaphor for stability, uniformity, unchanging nature, steadfastness and durability. It is a vital guide for navigation purposes in the night. Hence, if a person is steady in his thoughts and single-mindedly pursues his chosen path, always keeping the aim in sight, he is sure to achieve success and obtain his objective in life. The objective of the spiritual aspirant is to attain his Lord Vishnu and find Mukti. So when he has crossed all hurdles and overcome formidable obstacles in the symbolic form of praises and honours lavished on him en-route to heaven as described above in this narration, it is only then that he can rupture through this world and reach the exalted abode where Vishnu lives. Now, if the celestial sky is imagined as a huge sphere, then this is the point from where the cosmic traveller has ruptured the solar system and entered the upper reaches of the cosmos where the upper heaven is situated. Since Lord Vishnu's abode is supposed to be unchanging and steady in its glory unlike other worlds, the metaphor of the North Star as a gateway to Vaikunth, the abode of Vishnu, appears to be very appropriate here.

(xxiii) The *Yagya* or the sacred Fire sacrifice as a manifestation of Lord Vishnu—The legendary story associated with this incarnation is briefly as follows. The daughter of Swayambhuva Manu and his wife Shatrupa was named Aakuti. She was married to Prajapati Ruchi. Lord Vishnu was born as her son who was named 'Yagya'. He was very holy and divine from childhood, and is regarded as the forefather who initiated and established the system of doing fire sacrifices as a means of empowerment and harnessing the dynamic energy and power of Nature. This helped to energise and empower the Gods who represented the various forces of Nature needed for the sustenance, nourishment, development and growth of this creation.

He had also fought the demons who were tormenting his father and mother while they did Tapa, and had vanquished them. His wife was named Dakshina (literally meaning the donation that is given during fire sacrifices), and he had twelve sons from her. The Gods were very obliged with Lord Yagya and anointed him to the throne of Indra, their king in heaven.

In the Purans there are numerous instances when great kings and sages had done fire sacrifices, and the personified form of the sacred fire, the Fire God, had emerged to grant them their desired requests. This glorious revelation of the sacred fire is also Lord Vishnu in his divine form as the Fire God. So we deduce that the Fire God is one of the many manifestations of Vishnu.

(xxiv) *Hans*, the divine Swan—Lord Vishnu had once appeared as a divine Swan to preach the four celestial sages Sankaadi who were the mental sons of the creator Brahma.

Once it so happened that Sankaadi approached Brahma and wanted to know how can someone, who wished to have Moksha (final liberation and deliverance from this material world; freedom from attachment to the sense objects of this world; emancipation and salvation), effectively control his mind and sub-conscious and divert them away from the material charms of the world and its sense objects, and towards the inner self where the Atma, the pure consciousness, resides?

Brahma was confused and did not have the answer. So they meditated upon Lord Vishnu, the Supreme Being, from whom Brahma was born. Thus Vishnu appeared as a divine Swan. The sages could not recognize the Lord in that form and asked who he was. Then Vishnu, in his form as a Swan, preached the great tenets of metaphysics and Vedanta to Sankaadi. Thus, this revelation of Vishnu as a Swan was an embodiment of the greatest and the most refined form of spiritual knowledge, erudition, wisdom and enlightenment. Henceforth, Swan came to be known as a synonym for these eclectic and divine virtues. This story appears in Srimad Bhagwat, 11/13.

The Swan is depicted as a vehicle of Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge and wisdom. In other words, those who worship Swan ride on the crest of knowledge, wisdom, erudition, sagacity and enlightenment.

The *Pashupata Brahm Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition, Canto 1, verse nos. 17, 19-20 clearly say that 'Hans' is a term employed to refer both to the Atma as well as Brahm. While the Atma is the pure consciousness that is the 'true self' of the individual creature, Brahm is the cosmic Consciousness represented by the Mantra 'OM' or 'Pranav'. The Hans Mantra is the 'Sutra' or thread that links the Atma to Brahm.

An enlightened and self-realised person thinks of himself as a Swan and feels exhilarated that he is not an ordinary man bogged down by worldly fetters, but an exalted soul that is like a Swan.

The bird *Swan* or *Hans* is considered the most pure, clean, wise, erudite and clever among the birds. It is said to eat pearls, which means it picks up and accepts only the best amid the variety of things available to it in the form of an assortment of various gems and jewels representing the dazzling charms of this world. It is also reputed to drink milk leaving aside the water content in it symbolising its ability to imbibe the essence and the best, and leave the rest aside. It is also the vehicle of Goddess Saraswati, the patron Goddess of knowledge, wisdom, intelligence, speech and learning, indicating that it bears these glorious virtues. Hence, the reference to a swan while describing a creature conscious of the vital wind or Pran passing through him means the basic, inherent and intrinsic tendency of that wisened and intelligent creature is to be the best, most pure and divine, wise, awakened and enlightened, adroit, clever and sagacious like the swan, and pick all the goodness and forsake all that is bad in this world. Saraswati rides on a swan, symbolising the creature's inborn enlightenment and excellence of his mental caliber.

Symbolically, Saraswati resides in his Pran because it rides on the swan, i.e. in his heart, throat and mind—that is, his heart has purity of emotions, he speaks well of all, and his wise words are sought after by all as priceless gems of wisdom, and his mind is intelligent, discerning and noble.

A wise man is expected to pick up the truth and leave aside the non-truths from the basket full of worldly charms of astounding proportions and myriad forms of temptations present in this creation.

Those wise men who have developed the level of wisdom, erudition and sagacity that they can discriminate between what is good and what is not, what is true and what is false, what is liberating and what is ensnaring for their soul are also honoured by the epithet of being a ‘Hans’ (Swan) because they are just like the Swan which has the legendary ability to pick up pearls from an assortment of gems, and drink milk leaving behind water and other adulterants in it. Even amongst such wise and enlightened men, those who have realised the ‘truth’ about their own self in the real sense, i.e. have become ‘self-realised’ and hence ‘Brahm-realised’ truthfully, and have consequentially attained the highest level of enlightenment and wisdom are called ‘Param Hans’—literally meaning those who have accessed the ‘supreme type of enlightenment’. The grand and auspicious virtues and characteristics of such an exalted Sanyasi who is self and Brahm realised has been described in detail in the *Param Hans Parivrajak Upanishad* of the Atharva Veda tradition.

The alphabet ‘Ha’ of the word ‘Hans’ is sounded by the vibration of the exhaled wind passing through the vocal cords present in the throat or the wind pipe which connects to the nose, while the alphabet ‘Sa’ is sounded by the root of the tongue which opens into the mouth when the breath is inhaled. Both the nose and the mouth open in the same cavity called the throat. Hence, the inter relationship between ‘Ha’ and ‘Sa’ is evident. The main objective of this Upanishad is to make the Yogi (a person who follows its tenets of meditation) aware that he is like the divine swan, but he was unaware of his own divinity and sublimity, his exalted and noble stature, till that was pointed out to him. So he must become one like a ‘swan’, remind himself constantly that he is like a swan, and he must not do anything or act in anyway which is not befitting his exalted and superior status which is equivalent to a wise swan.

During the twenty-four hour period covering a single day and night, a person inhales and exhales, or breathes, roughly twenty-one thousand times, because each cycle of inhalation and exhalation is equivalent to saying one Mantra ‘Hans’ consisting of the two syllables ‘Ha and Sa’ (refer Dhyandindu Upanishad, verse no. 63).

The Srimad Bhagwata gives three lists having 22 names (1/3/6-22), 23 names (2/7/1 ff.), and 16 names (9/1/4/3 ff.). It also declares that the Avatars or incarnations are numerous (1/3/26).

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