

ANNIE BESANT

AVATÂRAS

Annie Besant

Avatâras

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Annie Besant

Avatâras / Four lectures delivered at the twenty-fourth anniversary / meeting of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Madras, / December, 1899

First Lecture

Brothers: – Every time that we come here together to study the fundamental truths of all religions, I cannot but feel how vast is the subject, how small the expounder, how mighty the horizon that opens before our thoughts, how narrow the words which strive to sketch it for your eyes. Year after year we meet, time after time we strive to fathom some of those great mysteries of life, of the Self, which form the only subject really worthy of the profoundest thought of man. All else is passing; all else is transient; all else is but the toy of a moment. Fame and power, wealth and science – all that is in this world below is as nothing beside the grandeur of the Eternal Self in the universe and in man, one in all His manifold manifestations, marvellous and beautiful in every form that He puts forth. And this year, of all the manifestations of the Supreme, we are going to dare to study the holiest of the holiest, those manifestations of God in the world in which He shows Himself as divine, coming to help the world that He has made, shining forth in His essential nature, the form but a thin film which scarce veils the Divinity from our eyes. How then shall we venture to approach it, how shall we dare to study it, save with deepest reverence, with profoundest humility; for if there needs for the study of His works patience, reverence and humbleness of heart, what when we study Him whose works but partially reveal Him, when we try to understand what is meant by an Avatâra, what is the meaning, what the purpose of such a revelation?

Our President has truly said that in all the faiths of the world there is belief in such manifestations, and that ancient maxim as to truth – that which is as the hall mark on the silver showing that the metal is pure – that ancient maxim is here valid, that whatever has been believed everywhere, whatever has been believed at every time, and by every one, that is true, that is reality. Religions quarrel over many details; men dispute over many propositions; but where human heart and human voice speak a single word, there you have the mark of truth, there you have the sign of spiritual reality. But in dealing with the subject one difficulty faces us, faces you as hearers, faces myself as speaker. In every religion in modern times truth is shorn of her full proportions; the intellect alone cannot grasp the many aspects of the one truth. So we have school after school, philosophy after philosophy, each one showing an aspect of truth, and ignoring, or even denying, the other aspects which are equally true. Nor is this all; as the age in which we are passes on from century to century, from millennium to millennium, knowledge becomes dimmer, spiritual insight becomes rarer, those who repeat far out-number those who know; and those who speak with clear vision of the spiritual verity are lost amidst the crowds, who only hold traditions whose origin they fail to understand. The priest and the prophet, to use two well-known words, have ever in later times come into conflict one with the other. The priest carries on the traditions of antiquity; too often he has lost the knowledge that made them real. The prophet – coming forth from time to time with the divine word hot as fire on his lips – speaks out the ancient truth and illuminates tradition. But they who cling to the words of tradition are apt to be blinded by the light of the fire and to call out "heretic" against the one who speaks the truth that they have lost. Therefore, in religion after religion, when some great teacher has

arisen, there have been opposition, clamour, rejection, because the truth he spoke was too mighty to be narrowed within the limits of half-blinded men. And in such a subject as we are to study to-day, certain grooves have been made, certain ruts as it were, in which the human mind is running, and I know that in laying before you the occult truth, I must needs, at some points, come into clash with details of a tradition that is rather repeated by memory than either understood or the truths beneath it grasped. Pardon me then, my brothers, if in a speech on this great topic I should sometimes come athwart some of the dividing lines of different schools of Hindu thought; I may not, I dare not, narrow the truth I have learnt, to suit the limitations that have grown up by the ignorance of ages, nor make that which is the spiritual verity conform to the empty traditions that are left in the faiths of the world. By the duty laid upon me by the Master that I serve, by the truth that He has bidden me speak in the ears of men of all the faiths that are in this modern world; by these I must tell you what is true, no matter whether or not you agree with it for the moment; for the truth that is spoken wins submission afterwards, if not at the moment; and any one who speaks of the Rishis of antiquity must speak the truths that they taught in their days, and not repeat the mere commonplaces of commentators of modern times and the petty orthodoxies that ring us in on every side and divide man from man.

I propose in order to simplify this great subject to divide it under certain heads. I propose first to remind you of the two great divisions recognised by all who have thought on the subject; then to take up especially, for this morning, the question, "What is an Avatâra?" To-morrow we shall put and strive to answer, partly at least, the question, "Who is the source of Avatâras?" Then later we shall take up special Avatâras both of the kosmos and of human races. Thus I hope to place before you a clear, definite succession of ideas on this great subject, not asking you to believe them because I speak them, not asking you to accept them because I utter them. Your reason is the bar to which every truth must come which is true for you; and you err deeply, almost fatally, if you let the voice of authority impose itself where you do not answer to the speaking. Every truth is only true to you as you see it, and as it illuminates the mind; and truth however true is not yet truth for you, unless your heart opens out to receive it, as the flower opens out its heart to receive the rays of the morning sun.

First, then, let us take a statement that men of every religion will accept. Divine manifestations of a special kind take place from time to time as the need arises for their appearance; and these special manifestations are marked out from the universal manifestation of God in His kosmos; for never forget that in the lowest creature that crawls the earth I'shvara is present as in the highest Deva. But there are certain special manifestations marked out from this general self-revelation in the kosmos, and it is these special manifestations which are called forth by special needs. Two words especially have been used in Hinduism, marking a certain distinction in the nature of the manifestation – one the word "Avatâra," the other the word "A'vesha." Only for a moment need we stop on the meaning of the words, important to us because the literal meaning of the words points to the fundamental difference between the two. The word "Avatâra," as you know, has as its root "ṭri," passing over, and with the prefix which is added, the "ava," you get the idea of descent, one who descends. That is the literal meaning of the word. The other word has as its root "viṣh," permeating, penetrating, pervading, and you have there the thought of something which is permeated or penetrated. So that while in the one case, Avatâra, there is the thought of a descent from above, from I'shvara to man or animal; in the other, there is rather the idea of an entity already existing who is influenced, permeated, pervaded by the divine power, specially illuminated as it were. And thus we have a kind of intermediate step, if one may say so, between the divine manifestation in the Avatâra and in the kosmos – the partial divine manifestation in one who is permeated by the influence of the Supreme, or of some other being who practically dominates the individual, the Ego who is thus permeated.

Now what are the occasions which lead to these great manifestations? None can speak with mightier authority on this point than He who came Himself as an Avatâra just before the beginning of our own age, the Divine Lord Shrî Kṛiṣhṇa Himself. Turn to that marvellous poem, the *Bhagavad-*

Gîtâ, to the fourth Adhyâya, Shlokas 7 and 8; there He tells us what draws Him forth to birth into His world in the manifested form of the Supreme:

यदा यदाहिधर्मस्य घ्लानिर्भवति भारत ।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥
परित्राणाय साधूनाम् विनासायचदुष्कृताम् ॥
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे ॥

[Sanskrit:

yadA yadAhidharmasya GAnirBavati BArata ।
aByutthAnamadharmasya tadAtmAnaM sRujAmyaham ॥
paritrANaya sAdhUnAm vinAsAyacaduShkRutAm ॥
dharmaMsdhApanArthAya saMBavAmi yuge yuge ॥]

"When Dharma, – righteousnes, law – decays, when Adharma – unrighteousness, lawlessness – is exalted, then I Myself come forth: for the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil, for the establishing firmly of Dharma, I am born from age to age." That is what He tells us of the coming forth of the Avatâra. That is, the needs of His world call upon Him to manifest Himself in His divine power; and we know from other of His sayings that in addition to those which deal with the human needs, there are certain kosmic necessities which in the earlier ages of the world's story called forth special manifestations. When in the great wheel of evolution another turn round has to be given, when some new form, new type of life is coming forth, then also the Supreme reveals Himself, embodying the type which thus He initiates in His kosmos, and in this way turning that everlasting wheel which He comes forth as I'shvara to turn. Such then, speaking quite generally, the meaning of the word, and the object of the coming.

From that we may fitly turn to the more special question, "What is an Avatâra?" And it is here that I must ask your close attention, nay, your patient consideration, where points that to some extent may be unfamiliar are laid before you; for as I said, it is the occult view of the truth which I am going to partially unveil, and those who have not thus studied truth need to think carefully ere they reject, need to consider long ere they refuse. We shall see as we try to answer the question how far the great authorities help us to understand, and how far the lack of knowledge in reading those authorities has led to misconception. You may remember that the late learned T. Subba Rao in the lectures that he gave on the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* put to you a certain view of the Avatâra, that it was a descent of I'shvara – or, as he said, using the theosophical term, the Logos, which is only the Greek name for I'shvara – a descent of I'shvara, uniting Himself with a human soul. With all respect for the profound learning of the lamented pandit, I cannot but think that that is only a partial definition. Probably he did not at that time desire, had not very possibly the time, to deal with case after case, having so wide a field to cover in the small number of lectures that he gave, and he therefore chose out one form, as we may say, of self-revelation, leaving untouched the others, which now in dealing with the subject by itself we have full time to study. Let me then begin as it were at the beginning, and then give you certain authorities which may make the view easier to accept; let me state without any kind of attempt to veil or evade, what is really an Avatâra. Fundamentally He is the result of evolution. In far past Kalpas, in worlds other than this, nay, in universes earlier than our own, those who were to be Avatâras climbed slowly, step by step, the vast ladder of evolution, climbing from mineral to plant, from plant to animal, from animal to man, from man to Jîvanmukta, from Jîvanmukta higher and higher yet, up the mighty hierarchy that stretches beyond Those who have liberated Themselves from the bonds of humanity; until at last, thus climbing, They cast off not only all the limits of the separated Ego, not only burst asunder the limitations of the separated Self, but entered I'shvara Himself and expanded into the all-consciousness of the Lord, becoming one in knowledge as they had ever been one in essence with that eternal Life from which originally they came forth, living in that life, centres without circumferences,

living centres, one with the Supreme. There stretches behind such a One the endless chain of birth after birth, of manifestation after manifestation. During the stage in which He was human, during the long climbing up of the ladder of humanity, there were two special characteristics that marked out the future Avatâra from the ranks of men. One his absolute bhakti, his devotion to the Supreme; for only those who are bhaktas and who to their bhakti have wed gnyâna, or knowledge, can reach this goal; for by devotion, says Shrî Kṛiṣṇa, can a man "enter into My being." And the need of the devotion for the future Avatâra is this: he must keep the centre that he has built even in the life of I'shvara, so that he may be able to draw the circumference once again round that centre, in order that he may come forth as a manifestation of I'shvara, one with Him in knowledge, one with Him in power, the very Supreme Himself in earthly life; he must hence have the power of limiting himself to form, for no form can exist in the universe save as there is a centre within it round which that form is drawn. He must be so devoted as to be willing to remain for the service of the universe while I'shvara Himself abides in it, to share the continual sacrifice made by Him, the sacrifice whereby the universe lives. But not devotion alone marks this great One who is climbing his divine path. He must also be, as I'shvara is, a lover of humanity. Unless within him there burns the flame of love for men – nay, men, do I say? it is too narrow – unless within him burns the flame of love for everything that exists, moving and unmoving, in this universe of God, he will not be able to come forth as the Supreme whose life and love are in everything that He has brought forth out of His eternal and inexhaustible life. "There is nothing," says the Beloved, "moving or unmoving, that may exist bereft of me;"¹ and unless the man can work that into his nature, unless he can love everything that is, not only the beautiful but the ugly, not only the good but the evil, not only the attractive but the repellent, unless in every form he sees the Self, he cannot climb the steep path the Avatâra must tread.

These, then, are the two great characteristics of the man who is to become the special manifestation of God – bhakti, love to the One in whom he is to merge, and love to those whose very life is the life of God. Only as these come forth in the man is he on the path that leads him to be – in future universes, in far, far future kalpas – an Avatâra coming as God to man.

Now on this view of the nature of an Avatâra difficulties, I know, arise; but they are difficulties that arise from a partial view, and then from that view having been merely accepted, as a rule, on the authority of some great name, instead of on the thinking out and thorough understanding of it by the man who repeats the shibboleth of his own sect or school. The view once taken, every text in Shruti or Smṛiti that goes against that view is twisted out of its natural meaning, in order to be made to agree with the idea which already dominates the mind. That is the difficulty with every religion; a man acquires his view by tradition, by habit, by birth, by public opinion, by the surroundings of his own time and of his own day. He finds in the scriptures – which belong to no time, to no day, to no one age, and to no one people, but are expressions of the eternal Veda – he finds in them many texts that do not fit into the narrow framework that he has made; and because he too often cares for the framework more than for the truth, he manipulates the text until he can make it fit in, in some dislocated fashion; and the ingenuity of the commentator too often appears in the skill with which he can make words appear to mean what they do not mean in their grammatical and obvious sense. Thus, men of every school, under the mighty names of men who knew the truth – but who could only give such portion of truth as they deemed man at the time was able to receive – use their names to buttress up mistaken interpretations, and thus walls are continually built up to block the advancing life of man.

Now let me take one example from one of the greatest names, one who knew the truth he spoke, but also, like every teacher, had to remember that while he was man, those to whom he spoke were children that could not grasp truth with virile understanding. That great teacher, founder of one of the three schools of the Vedânta, Shrî Râmânujâchârya, in his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* – a priceless work which men of every school might read and profit by – dealing with the phrase in which

¹ *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*, x. 39.

Shrî Kṛiṣṇa declares that He has had बहुनिजन्मानि [Sanskrit: bahUnijanmAni] "many births," points out how vast the variety of those births had been. Then, confining himself to His manifestations as I'shvara – that is after He had attained to the Supreme – he says quite truly that He was born by His own will; not by karma that compelled Him, not by any force outside Him that coerced Him, but by His own will He came forth as I'shvara and incarnated in one form or another. But there is nothing said there of the innumerable steps traversed by the mighty One ere yet He merged Himself in the Supreme. Those are left on one side, unmentioned, unnoticed, because what the writer had in his view was to present to the hearts of men a great Object for adoration, who might gradually lift them upwards and upwards until the Self should blossom in them in turn. No word is said of the previous kalpas, of the universes stretching backward into the illimitable past. He speaks of His birth as Deva, as Nâga, as Gandharva, as those many shapes that He has taken by His own will. As you know, or as you may learn if you turn to *Shrîmad-Bhâgavata*, there is a much longer list of manifestations than the ten usually called Avatâras. There are given one after another the forms which seem strange to the superficial reader when connected in modern thought with the Supreme. But we find light thrown on the question by some other words of the great Lord; and we also find in one famous book, full of occult hints – though not with much explanation of the hints given – the *Yoga Vâsishṭha*, a clear definite statement that the deities, as Mahâdeva, Viṣṇu and Brahmâ, have all climbed upward to the mighty posts They hold.² And that may well be so, if you think of it; there is nothing derogatory to Them in the thought; for there is but one Existence, the eternal fount of all that comes forth as separated, whether separated in the universe as I'shvara, or separated in the copy of the universe in man; there is but One without a second; there is no life but His, no independence but His, no self-existence but His, and from Him Gods and men and all take their root and exist for ever in and by His one eternal life. Different stages of manifestation, but the One Self in all the different stages, the One living in all; and if it be true, as true it is, that the Self in man is

प्रजो नित्यः शस्वतोऽयंपुराणो

[Sanskrit: prajo nityaH SasvatoayaMpurANo]

"unborn, constant, eternal, ancient," it is because the Self in man is one with the One Self-existent, and I'shvara Himself is only the mightiest manifestation of that One who knows no second near Himself. Says an English poet:

Closer is He than breathing, nearer than hands and feet.

The Self is in you and in me, as much as the Self is in I'shvara, that One, eternal, unchanging, undecaying, whereof every manifested existence is but one ray of glory. Thus it is true, that which is taught in the *Yoga Vâsishṭha*; true it is that even the greatest, before whom we bow in worship, has climbed in ages past all human reckoning to be one with the Supreme, and, ever there, to manifest Himself as God to the world.

But now we come to a distinction that we find made, and it is a real one. We read of a Pûrṇâvatâra, a full, complete, Avatâra. What is the meaning of that word "full" as applied to the Avatâra? The name is given, as we know, to Shrî Kṛiṣṇa. He is marked out specially by that name. Truly the word "pûrṇa" cannot apply to the Illimitable, the Infinite; He may not be shown forth in any form; the eye may never behold Him; only the spirit that is Himself can know the One. What is meant by it is that, so far as is possible within the limits of form, the manifestation of the formless appears, so far as is possible it came forth in that great One who came for the helping of the world. This may assist you to grasp the distinction. Where the manifestation is that of a Pûrṇâvatâra, then at any moment

² Part II., Chapter ii., Shlokas 14, 15, 16.

of time, at His own will, by Yoga or otherwise, He can transcend every limit of the form in which He binds Himself by His own will, and shine forth as the Lord of the Universe, within whom all the Universe is contained. Think for a moment once more of Shrî Kṛiṣṇa, who teaches us so much on this. Turn to that great storehouse of spiritual wisdom, the *Mahâbhârata*, to the Ashvamedha Parva which contains the Anugîtâ, and you will find that Arjuna after the great battle, forgetting the teaching that was given him on Kurukshetra, asked his Teacher to repeat that teaching once again. And Shrî Kṛiṣṇa, rebuking him for the fickleness of his mind and stating that He was much displeased that such knowledge should by fickleness have been forgotten, uttered these remarkable words: "It is not possible for me to state it in full in that way. I discoursed to thee on the Supreme Brahman, having concentrated myself in Yoga." And then He goes on to give out the essence of that teaching, but not in the same sublime form as we have it in the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*. That is one thing that shows you what is meant by a Pûrṇâvatâra; in a condition of Yoga, into which He throws Himself at will, He knows Himself as Lord of everything, as the Supreme on whom the Universe is built. Nay more; thrice at least – I am not sure if there may have been more cases, but if so I cannot at the moment remember them – thrice at least during His life as Shrî Kṛiṣṇa He shows himself forth as I'shvara, the Supreme. Once in the court of Dhritarâshṭra, when the madly foolish Duryodhana talked about imprisoning within cell-walls the universal Lord whom the universe cannot confine; and to show the wild folly of the arrogant prince, out in the court before every eye He shone forth as Lord of all, filling earth and sky with His glory, and all forms human and divine, superhuman and subhuman, were seen gathered round Him in the life from which they spring. Then on Kurukshetra to Arjuna, His beloved disciple, to whom He gave the divine vision that he might see Him in His Vaiṣṇava form, the form of Viṣṇu, the Supreme Upholder of the Universe. And later, on his way back to Dvârakâ, meeting with Utanka, He and the sage came to a misunderstanding, and the sage was preparing to curse the Lord; to save him from the folly of uttering a curse against the Supreme, as a child might throw a tiny pebble against a rock of immemorial age, He shone out before the eyes of him who was really His bhakta, and showed him the great Vaiṣṇava form, that of the Supreme. What do those manifestations show? that at will He can show himself forth as Lord of all, casting aside the limits of human form in which men live; casting aside the appearance so familiar to those around Him, He could reveal himself as the mighty One, I'shvara who is the life of all. There is the mark of a Pûrṇâvatâra; always within His grasp, at will, is the power to show Himself forth as I'shvara.

But why – the thought may arise in your minds – are not all Avatâras of this kind, since all are verily of the Supreme Lord? The answer is that by His own will, by his own Mâyâ, He veils Himself within the limits which serve the creatures whom He has come to help. Ah, how different He is, this Mighty One, from you and me! When we are talking to some one who knows a little less than ourselves, we talk out all we know to show our knowledge, expanding ourselves as much as we can so as to astonish and make marvel the one to whom we speak; that is because we are so small that we fear our greatness will not be recognised unless we make ourselves as large as we can to astonish, if possible to terrify; but when He comes who is really great, who is mightier than anything which He produces, He makes Himself small in order to help those whom He loves. And do you know, my brothers, that only in proportion as His spirit enters into us, can we in our little measure be helpers in the universe of which He is the one life; until we, in all our doings and speakings, place ourselves within the one we want to help and not outside him, feeling as he feels, thinking as he thinks, knowing for the time as he knows, with all his limitations, although there may be further knowledge beyond, we cannot truly help; that is the condition of all true help given by man to man, as it is the only condition of the help which is given to man by God Himself.

And so in other Avatâras, He limits Himself for men's sake. Take the great king, Shrî Râma. What did he come to show? The ideal Kshatriya, in every relation of the Kshatriya life; as son – perfect as son alike to loving father and to jealous and for the time unkind step-mother. For you may remember that when the father's wife who was not His own mother bade him go forth to the forest on

the very eve of His coronation as heir, His gentle answer was: "Mother, I go." Perfect as son. Perfect as husband; if He had not limited Himself by His own will to show out what husband should be to wife, how could He in the forest, when Sîtâ had been reft away by Râvana, have shown the grief, have uttered the piteous lamentations, which have drawn tears from thousands of eyes, as He calls on plants and on trees, on animals and birds, on Gods and men, to tell Him where His wife, His other self, the life of His life, had gone? How could he have taught men what wife should be to husband's heart unless He had limited Himself? The consciously Omnipresent Deity could not seek and search for His beloved who had disappeared. And then as king; as perfect king as He was perfect son and husband. When the welfare of His subjects was concerned, when the safety of the realm was to be thought of, when He remembered that He as king stood for God and must be perfect in the eyes of His subjects, so that they might give the obedience and the loyalty, which men can only give to one whom they know as greater than themselves, then even His wife was put aside; then the test of the fire for Sîtâ, the unsullied and the suffering; then She must pass through it to show that no sin or pollution had come upon Her by the foul touch of Râvana, the Râkshasa; then the demand that ere husband's heart that had been riven might again clasp the wife, She must come forth pure as woman; and all this, because He was king as well as husband, and on the throne the people honoured as divine there must only be purity, spotless as driven snow. Those limitations were needed in order that a perfect example might be given to man, and man might learn to climb by reproducing virtues, made small in order that his small grasp might hold them.

We come to the second great class of manifestations, that to which I alluded in the beginning as covered by the wide term A´vesha. In that case it is not that a man in past universes has climbed upward and has become one with I´shvara; but it is that a man has climbed so far as to become so great, so perfect in his manhood, and so full of love and devotion to God and man, that God is able to permeate him with a portion of His own influence, His own power, His own knowledge, and send him forth into the world as a superhuman manifestation of Himself. The individual Ego remains; that is the great distinction. The *man* is there, though the power that is acting is the manifested God. Therefore the manifestation will be coloured by the special characteristics of the one over whom this overshadowing is made; and you will be able to trace in the thoughts of this inspired teacher, the characteristics of the race, of the individual, of the form of knowledge which belongs to that man in the incarnation in which the great overshadowing takes place. That is the fundamental difference.

But here we find that we come at once to endless grades, endless varieties, and down the ladder of lesser and lesser evolution we may tread, step by step, until we come to the lower grades that we call inspiration. In a case of A´vesha it generally continues through a great portion of the life, the latter portion, as a rule, and it is comparatively seldom withdrawn. Inspiration, as generally understood, is a more partial thing, more temporary. Divine power comes down, illuminates and irradiates the man for the moment, and he speaks for the time with authority, with knowledge, which in his normal state he will be unable probably to compass. Such are the prophets who have illuminated the world age after age; such were in ancient days the Brâhmaṇas who were the mouth of God. Then truly the distinction was not that I spoke of between priest and prophet; both were joined in the one illumination, and the teaching of the priest and the preaching of the prophet ran on the same lines and gave forth the same great truths. But in later times the distinction arose by the failure of the priesthood, when the priest turned aside for money, for fame, for power, for all the things with which only younger souls ought to concern themselves – human toys with which human babies play, and do wisely in so playing, for they grow by them. Then the priests became formal, the prophets became more and more rare, until the great fact of inspiration was thrown back wholly into the past, as though God or man had altered, man no longer divine in his nature, God no longer willing to speak words in the ears of men. But inspiration is a fact in all its stages; and it goes far farther than some of you may think. The inspiration of the prophets, spiritually mighty and convincing, is needed, and they come to the world to give a new impulse to spiritual truth. But there is a general inspiration that any one may share who strives to

show out the divine life from which no son of man is excluded, for every son of man is son of God. Have you ever been drawn away for a moment into higher, more peaceful realms, when you have come across something of beauty, of art, of the wonders of science, of the grandeur of philosophy? Have you for a time lost sight of the pettinesses of earth, of trivial troubles, of small worries and annoyances, and felt yourself lifted into a calmer region, into a light that is not the light of common earth? Have you ever stood before some wondrous picture wherein the palette of the painter has been taxed to light the canvas with all the hues of beautiful colour that art can give to human sight? Or have you seen in some wondrous sculpture, the gracious living curves that the chisel has freed from the roughness of the marble? Or have you listened while the diviner spell of music has lifted you, step by step, till you seem to hear the Gandharvas singing and almost the divine flute is being played and echoing in the lower world? Or have you stood on the mountain peak with the snows around you, and felt the grandeur of the unmoving nature that shows out God as well as the human spirit? Ah, if you have known any of these peaceful spots in life's desert, then you know how all-pervading is inspiration; how wondrous the beauty and the power of God shown forth in man and in the world; then you know, if you never knew it before, the truth of that great proclamation of Shrî Kṛiṣṇa the Beloved: "Whatever is royal, good, beautiful, and mighty, understand thou that to go forth from My Splendour";³ all is the reflection of that tejas⁴ which is His and His alone. For as there is nought in the universe without His love and life, so there is no beauty that is not His beauty, that is not a ray of the illimitable splendour, one little beam from the unfailing source of life.

³ *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*, x. 41.

⁴ Splendour, radiance.

Second Lecture

Brothers: – You will remember that yesterday, in dividing the subject under different heads, I put down certain questions which we would take in order. We dealt yesterday with the question: "What is an Avatâra?" The second question that we are to try to answer, "What is the source of Avatâras?" is a question that leads us deep into the mysteries of the kosmos, and needs at least an outline of kosmic growth and evolution in order to give an intelligible answer. I hope to-day to be able also to deal with the succeeding question, "How does the need for Avatâras arise?" This will leave us for to-morrow the subject of the special Avatâras, and I shall endeavour, if possible, during to-morrow's discourse, to touch on nine of the Avatâras out of the ten recognised as standing out from all other manifestations of the Supreme. Then, if I am able to accomplish that task, we shall still have one morning left, and that I propose to give entirely to the study of the greatest of the Avatâras, the Lord Shrî Kṛiṣṇa Himself, endeavouring, if possible, to mark out the great characteristics of His life and His work, and, it may be, to meet and answer some of the objections of the ignorant which, especially in these later days, have been levelled against Him by those who understand nothing of His nature, nothing of the mighty work He came to accomplish in the world.

Now we are to begin to-day by seeking an answer to the question, "What is the source of Avatâras?" and it is likely that I am going to take a line of thought somewhat unfamiliar, carrying us, as it does, outside the ordinary lines of our study which deals more with the evolution of man, of the spiritual nature within him. It carries us to those far off times, almost incomprehensible to us, when our universe was coming into manifestation, when its very foundations, as it were, were being laid. In answering the question, however, the mere answer is simple. It is recognised in all religions admitting divine incarnations – and they include the great religions the world – it is admitted that the source of Avatâras, the source of the Divine incarnations, is the second or middle manifestation of the sacred Triad. It matters not whether with Hindus we speak of the Trimûrti, or whether with Christians we speak of the Trinity, the fundamental idea is one and the same. Taking first for a moment the Christian symbology, you will find that every Christian tells you that the one divine incarnation acknowledged in Christianity – for in Christianity they believe in one special incarnation only – you will find in the Christian nomenclature the divine incarnation or Avatâra is that of the second person of the Trinity. No Christian will tell you that there has ever been an incarnation of God the Father, the primeval Source of life. They will never tell you that there has been an incarnation of the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Wisdom, of creative Intelligence, who built up the world-materials. But they will always say that it was the second Person, the Son, who took human form, who appeared under the likeness of humanity, who was manifested as man for helping the salvation of the world. And if you analyse what is meant by that phrase, what, to the mind of the Christian, is conveyed by the thought of the second Person of the Trinity – for remember in dealing with a religion that is not yours you should seek for the thought not the form, you should look at the idea not at the label, for the thoughts are universal while the forms divide, the ideas are identical while the labels are marks of separation – if you seek for the underlying thought you will find it is this: the sign of the second Person of the Trinity is duality; also, He is the underlying life of the world; by His power the worlds were made, and are sustained, supported, and protected. You will find that while the Spirit of Wisdom is spoken of as bringing order out of disorder, kosmos out of chaos, that it is by the manifested Word of God, or the second Person of the Trinity, it is by Him that all forms are builded up in this world, and it is specially in His image that man is made. So also when we turn to what will be more familiar to the vast majority of you, the symbology of Hinduism, you will find that all Avatâras have their source in Viṣṇu, in Him who pervades the universe, as the very name Viṣṇu implies, who is the Supporter, the Protector, the pervading, all-permeating Life by which the universe is held together, and by which it is sustained. Taking the names of the Trimûrti so

familiar to us all – not the philosophical names Sat, Chit, A'nanda, those names which in philosophy show the attributes of the Supreme Brahman – taking the concrete idea, we have Mahâdeva or Shiva, Viṣṇu, and Brahmâ: three names, just as in the other religion we have three names; but the same fact comes out, that it is the middle or central one of the Three who is the source of Avatâras. There has never been a direct Avatâra of Mahâdeva, of Shiva Himself. Appearances? Yes. Manifestations? Yes. Coming in form for a special purpose served by that form? Oh yes. Take the *Mahâbhârata*, and you find Him appearing in the form of the hunter, the Kirâta, and testing the intuition of Arjuna, and struggling with him to test his strength, his courage, and finally his devotion to Himself. But that is a mere form taken for a purpose and cast aside the moment the purpose is served; almost, we may say, a mere illusion, produced to serve a special purpose and then thrown away as having completed that which it was intended to perform. Over and over again you find such appearances of Mahâdeva. You may remember one most beautiful story, in which He appears in the form of a Chandâla⁵ at the gateway of His own city of Kâshî, when one who was especially overshadowed by a manifestation of Himself, Shrî Shankarâchârya, was coming with his disciples to the sacred city; veiling Himself in the form of an outcaste – for to Him all forms are the same, the human differences are but as the grains of sand which vanish before the majesty of His greatness – He rolled Himself in the dust before the gateway, so that the great teacher could not walk across without touching Him, and he called to the Chandâla to make way in order that the Brâhmaṇa might go on unpolluted by the touch of the outcaste; then the Lord, speaking through the form He had chosen, rebuked the very one whom His power overshadowed, asking him questions which he could not answer and thus abasing his pride and teaching him humility. Such forms truly He has taken, but these are not what we can call Avatâras; mere passing forms, not manifestations upon earth where a life is lived and a great drama is played out. So with Brahmâ; He also has appeared from time to time, has manifested Himself for some special purpose; but there is no Avatâra of Brahmâ, which we can speak of by that very definite and well understood term.

Now for this fact there must be some reason.

Why is it that we do not find the source of Avatâras alike in all these great divine manifestations? Why do they come from only one aspect and that the aspect of Viṣṇu? I need not remind you that there is but one Self, and that these names we use are the names of the aspects that are manifested by the Supreme; we must not separate them so much as to lose sight of the underlying unity. For remember how, when a worshipper of Viṣṇu had a feeling in his heart against a worshipper of Mahâdeva, as he bowed before the image of Hari, the face of the image divided itself in half, and Shiva or Hara appeared on one side and Viṣṇu or Hari appeared on the other, and the two, smiling as one face on the bigoted worshipper, told him that Mahâdeva and Viṣṇu were but one. But in Their functions a division arises; They manifest along different lines, as it were, in the kosmos and for the helping of man; not for Him but for us, do these lines of apparent separateness arise.

Looking thus at it, we shall be able to find the answer to our question, not only who is the source of Avatâras, but why Viṣṇu is the source. And it is here that I come to the unfamiliar part where I shall have to ask for your special attention as regards the building of the universe. Now I am using the word "universe," in the sense of our solar system. There are many other systems, each of them complete in itself, and, therefore, rightly spoken of as a kosmos, a universe. But each of these systems in its turn is part of a mightier system, and our sun, the centre of our own system, though it be in very truth the manifested physical body of I'shwara Himself, is not the only sun. If you look through the vast fields of space, myriads of suns are there, each one the centre of its own system, of its own universe; and our sun, supreme to us, is but, as it were, a planet in a vaster system, its orbit curved round a sun greater than itself. So in turn that sun, round which our sun is circling, is planet to a yet mightier sun, and each set of systems in its turn circles round a more central sun, and so on

⁵ An outcaste, equivalent to a scavenger.

– we know not how far may stretch the chain that to us is illimitable; for who is able to plumb the depths and heights of space, or to find a manifested circumference which takes in all universes! Nay, we say that they are infinite in number, and that there is no end to the manifestations of the one Life.

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