Faces of Joy: Perspective on the Ten Incarnations

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Bliss is the essence of God-realization. One who has been blessed by divine grace is one who is freed from attachments to pleasure objects and anticipations, whose joy is causeless and transcends time. Not only freedom, insight and bliss but even the realized Self is the reflection of God: so says tradition.

While God manifests himself in countless ways and contexts, the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu are the most celebrated. Many wise teachers have commented on these incarnations from various perspectives. It has more recently been pointed out by scientists that these ten incarnations beginning with the Fish Form to the Kalki Form are in amazing correspondence not only with the natural evolution in the world of living things but also with the transformations of the human infant in the mother’s womb. There are thus various ways to look at these ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu.

Yet if bliss is the reflection of the divine, it should be possible to see these ten incarnations as ten faces of joy: let us do so.

In the course of everyday life amidst the chores and duties of the day, spontaneously and without any provocation we feel joyous: this is the Fish Incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Just as a fish prances around in the water flashing silvery in light without bothering about the mud underneath or the other creatures in the same body of water, this dynamic experience of joy transcends time, space and context. This independence of externals, this utter spontaneity is the indicator of the nature of the blissful Self.

In contrast to this is the situation in which we often withdraw our awareness from our immediate mundane but insistent surroundings and feel a peace and joy. This experience, too, is remarkable in that the joy does not originate in any immediate cause but only in the easing of that which was distracting. This is the Tortoise Incarnation. Just as a tortoise withdraws its limbs and head to within its own shell to be by itself, the individual self withdraws his sense organs and his perceptions from the external world to attain peace. We are reminded of Lord Krishna’s discourse with Arjuna about the nature of the person of becalmed mind in the Bhagavad Gita.

The behavior of the wild bear is that it proceeds its own way with nary a care for the apparent obstructions in its path. The boar just lowers its head and forges ahead: this is to be contrasted with the fish which goes around unmindful of the surrounding dirt or the tortoise that with draws its head and limbs. In our life we come across many kinds of circumstances. Some may be obstructions in our path; some may be unpleasant or even repellent to us; and some may prevent our progress by obscuring the true nature of our environs. Proceeding forward despite all these obstacles with determination and a strong heart and thus triumph over the context in an experience of bliss—this is the Boar Incarnation. It is the fickle mind that preoccupies itself with the surroundings, involved in the unpleasant and threatening, and thus imbues them with a power to frighten oneself. As if in response to it the mind, and with it the embodied person, retreats and is denied the experience of bliss. The antidote to it is the one-pointed attention, the sankalpa, highlighted by the wild boar. Recall that the Boar Incarnation had to retrieve the Sacred Veda from the slime in which it was hid by the demon. In other words, the mind insists that only such and such circumstances can be auspicious and conducive to spiritual progress and is thus often prevented from progress. Yet it is only by delving deeply into the slime and dirt that the sacred can
be brought to light! The Boar Incarnation is thus the experience of bliss by going deeply into life without regard to whether it is acceptable by some random criterion.

The wild boar travels with equal facility on land or in water and goes about without being deterred by circumstance. The obstructions are mostly ignored: they continue to be there, only they are not able to serve as deterrents. In contrast we have the lion, the king of beasts which makes a total elimination of its foes. The root cause of the chain of causation should be removed for a permanent elimination of the constraints of karma, of the tendencies and predilections of individual existence. The destruction of this demon Hiranyakasipu, the vasana which subjugates our life and virtually forbids its enlightenment is the flash of joyful insight symbolized by the Man-Lion Incarnation. In the experience symbolized by the Boar Incarnation while the slime and mud of our environs is not an obstruction, just as darkness reappears when the light is removed, the world would close in once that bliss experience is no longer felt. But the Lion Incarnation symbolizes a flash of insight which destroys the very roots of our tendencies and releases us from a chain of causation that binds us. When Lord Narasimha disappeared, a permanent change had taken place. In place of the demon appears the devoted Prahlada who reigns as emperor with his sole attention anchored to the Lord. In other words, this searing flash of insight will leave us humble and one-pointed.

These blessed insightful experiences of bliss should enable us to proceed with our everyday life with skill and humility: while immersed in duties yet in constant contemplation of the essence of bliss. To deliver such an individual from the crown of duties and the throne of obligations and involvements, bliss appears in the form of a shining uninvited but engaging guest. In exchange for the scepter and the crown it is freedom that this Dwarf Incarnation of the Lord in the form of spontaneous bliss offers. The gift of freedom, of release that is so obtained is a permanent attainment. Unlike the king-emperor beset with duties and having to be on the lookout for allies and enemies, one who has independence, kaivalya, no longer has friend or foe, attachment or fear: again evocative of the characteristic of the person who has attained peace as deserved by Lord Krishna.

Like an experimental scientist in a laboratory, a liberated person should use his noninvolved status to examine every aspect of normal existence. Then only can he understand the true nature of the phenomenal world and be with it without being of it. But before this can be accomplished just as a spirited horse is held in control by the reins we should rein in the activity-seeking rajasa tendency. This tendency which ascribes to the Self the doership is made inoperative by a firm determination, by sankalpa, by adherence to a discipline. This mindset is the ax-weapon of the Parasurama Incarnation which itself is the bliss experience emergent upon the ceasing of the doership, of the joy of being the eternal witness. Like John the Baptist, Parasurama was also a forerunner: the cessation of doership is a forerunner to the blessed and blissful state in which the critical points of phenomena are revealed to the adept.

The ideal of human existence is not the retreat from action but to carry them out without ego-involvement, as if one were only the witness and but the accidental cause. When an adept is heir to bliss, he is enabled to act without attachment to the fruits of action: then the phenomenal world becomes ideal and in accordance with natural law. This is the rama rajya: and this mindset is the Sri Rama Incarnation. The purpose of actions in this experiential mode is for the welfare of the world only. In the Parasurama Incarnation the sattvic tendencies are become ascendant over the rajasic tendencies by direct effort. But in the Sri Rama Incarnation such an ascendency spontaneously obtains by virtue of the purity of intention and the concern for the welfare of the whole world. Sri Rama who abandoned the throne to fulfill the words of his king and father, who abandoned his beloved queen in the forest in accordance with the wishes of his subjects and his royal duty is an ideal for the householder and for anyone immersed in the transactions of the everyday world. When all attachments to the fruits of action fade away, the Lakshmana of ego becomes one’s constant companion and faithful assistant and the Urmila of mind becomes devoid
of chains of thought and thus becomes quiescent. At the natural end of this stage, the cause-effect relationship vanishes like Sita; and the adept becomes free from all karma like Sri Rama of Uttararamacharita.

That neither duties nor responsibilities, nor even position in life is deterrent to the path of freedom and bliss, is exemplified in the Balarama Incarnation. Of royal birth and rightful heir to the throne, Balarama never did any act which was not for the welfare of the world. Without abandoning his duties and obligations he still lived a life with the sattvic tendency in the ascendant. He taught his special skill in one-to-one combat to both Bhima and Duryodhana equally; and did not have any part in the great Kurukshetra War. Balarama’s weapon is the plough that prepares the world for plenty and prosperity while the Parasurama Incarnation shows us the mind set to destroy the ego sense that rises against sattva. The Balarama Incarnation shows that equally well it can be dissolved in sattva.

When all the qualities of the being, doing and undoing (sattva, rajas, tamas) are in balance for an adept, for him time is no longer the lord but a chariot. The adept then transforms the world chariot, and the embodied individual in it now experiences bliss. This is the Sri Krishna Incarnation. As the tandava dance of destruction is made auspicious by Lord Shiva, the rajas tendency of doership is made auspicious by Lord Krishna who makes the world itself the means of attainment and the experience of bliss. This magician who appears as the supreme guru in Bhagavad Gita to transform the world and the adept himself into embodiment of the absolute is none other than the bliss experience which converts the mundane into the sacred. But such a blessed adept goes about the world just like an ordinary person: very much in the spirit of the heart-rending hymn of Purandaradasa: “jagadodharane adisital yasoda . . . .” It is this mindset which is celebrated by the beautiful dedication “kayena vacha manasendriyair va . . . .” (What is done by my body, word, senses, by mind, by intellect, by intention, by nature—whatever is done, all that I dedicate to narayana, the spirit that moves.) The person who has this mindset transcends time, space and circumstances, becomes liberated (and beyond desires) and blissful. No wonder we often remind ourselves of the supreme thief Balakrishna who steals our mind and our desires and even our attachments and bondage itself.

It is often our experience that we feel deeply enmeshed in the phenomenal world and we abandon ourselves to darkness without hope. But even in such depths spontaneously and without overt cause, joy flashes and grows, making all the world shine with it. This destroyer of gloom flashes like the lightning in the Kalki Incarnation. Causality like time is in maya: and maya is but the prelude to the vision of Lord Vishnu, the blissful. This bliss when maya is transcended is beyond cause, unlimited by time, space and circumstances and swift as lightning. This is symbolized by the Kalki Incarnation with a flashing sword mounted on a white charger. When such bliss is experienced, all doership ceases and all death ceases, and time and space are but a metaphor. This is the attainment of Vishnu as bliss.

So may we view the Ten Incarnations.