

Chapter XIII. The Avatar as Guru

God: source of time, creation, activity

The cosmos or creation, time, activity (*karma*) —all these are manifestations of the will of God and are bound to Him. They are considered by some as “false” and “unreal”, but how can God, who is the very embodiment of truth (*sathya*), will anything not true? Therefore, it can be said that these two are true, in one way. When evolution changes over into involution and the ultimate stage of mergence of both the conscious and the unconscious is reached, God (Iswara) is the only One existent.

Time is the manifestation of the power of God, so it has no measurable beginning or end. Activity (*karma*) is also an important truth to be reckoned as such. God is no wayward force, unmindful of bounds and limits. He creates situations and environments strictly according to the activities in which people engaged during their previous lives. The creation, the time, and the action —all three are true in God and true along with God. They are instruments that He uses. They are bound to Him.

God (Iswara), though not ordinarily perceptible to the senses, becomes so perceptible to the devotee who has such deep attachment to Him that there is a yearning to merge in Him. Why? Such devotees perceive God as clearly as they perceive external objects. God is said to be formless; that is to say, He can assume or adopt any form. He has endless forms. Then, in what form does He grant a clear vision to the devotee? He manifests in the form for which the devotee yearns, the form that will grant the highest satisfaction. These forms are His *Avatars*. God doesn't limit Himself when He thus manifests; He is fully present in every such *Avatar*; He manifests Himself with His full glory in every *Avatar*.

It is said that some manifestations are partial and others full, that some are temporary and others lasting. But these are called *Avatars* only by courtesy. Narada, Sanatkumara, and other similar sages are referred to in some texts as such *Avatars*. They don't have all the divine characteristics, so they are not worshiped.

The individual soul (*jiva*) is by its very nature “eternal and immortal”. It has no end or beginning that can be calculated. It has neither birth nor death. It is self-illuminating. It is the knower and the knowledge, the doer and the enjoyer. Whether bound or liberated, the individual soul has all these characteristics intact. But whatever it is, it doesn't have the freedom that God has. In every act, the individual soul has to involve the body, the senses like the ear, and the vital airs that operate in the body. All these coexist with the Divine in the individual.

Whatever it is, the individual soul is not a machine that has no will of its own. Just as the activities in this life are determined by the nature of the activities in previous lives, the activities of this life determine the activities of the next life. God (Iswara) decides the time and place, the circumstance, and the consequence in accordance with the nature of the activities presently undertaken. God has the power to shape the nature of people, but He does not exercise that power and mould it differently. He leaves it to the free will of the individual, which has to learn the lesson by experience.

God, nature, and people

The flake of stone that is chipped off the rock is a part of the rock, but the individual is not a part of God like

that. In one sense, the individual soul (*jivi*) and the cosmos (*jagath*) are distinct and different from God. In another sense, they are inseparable. This mystery of separateness and identity cannot be grasped by means of reason and intellect. It can be understood only through the *Vedas* and their message. This is the main lesson that this “Stream of Indian Spiritual Values (*Bharathiya Paramaartha Vahini*)” can instil.

Every child arrives in the world bearing the burden of unrequited consequences accumulated in previous lives. It does not drop from the lap of nature, as a streak of lightning from the clouds. It is born in this world in order to experience the beneficial and the malignant consequences that are the products of its own acts in past lives. This is the explanation for the differences that are evident among people. This is the principle of *karma*.

Each person is the cause of their own fortune, good or bad. Each is themselves the builder, the architect. Fate, destiny, predetermination, the will of God—every one of these explanations is toppled by the principle of *karma*. God and people can be reconciled and affiliated only on the basis of this principle of *karma*. When one realizes that God has no share in causing one’s suffering, that one is oneself the sole cause, that no blame attaches to any other person, that one is the initiator as the beneficiary—the cause and the effect—of one’s acts, that one is free to shape one’s future, then one approaches God with a firmer step and a clearer mind.

If a person is afflicted by misfortune now, it is assuredly the result of their previous acts. Accordingly, one has to believe that happiness and good fortune also lie in one’s own hands. If one decides, happiness and good fortune can be gained.

A person who is pure in spirit now is themselves the cause. Without yearning, a person cannot earn. So, it is clear that the will inherent in a person is beyond all stages and conditions, all formations and transformations. The freedom that it represents is the result of one’s past acts; it is powerful, infinitely fruitful, and supreme.

The problem of liberation

The next problem is liberation (*mukthi*). The *Atma* is neither masculine nor feminine; it is not possible to impose these distinctions on it. They are merely physical attributes pertaining to the body. When talking about the *Atma*, ideas such as these are but signs of delusion. They are relevant only when the physical body is under discussion. The discussion of “age” is also a product of this delusion. The *Atma* is eternal. This ageless Entity is ever One and Only.

How did the *Atma* get incarnated? In the scriptures (*sastras*), there is just one explanation. For all this encasement and bondage, there is only one reason: ignorance (*a-vidya*), or absence of right awareness. Through ignorance, one gets bound, so wisdom is the cure. Only that can take one across. How can this awareness be accomplished?

There are three ways to acquire awareness. The first is through love (*prema*), through worship of God in full devotion and dedication (*bhakthi*), through loving service and adoration directed toward every living being—who is but a moving temple of God, for He resides in each one. Through such love and devotion, the false knowledge, the ignorance, can be scattered and the bonds made to fall off; the individual will then be released.

God with and without form

Two ideas about God are described in the scriptures (*sastras*): the idea that He is cognizable as having attributes and the idea that He is free from all attributes, so He cannot be described as thus and thus. These are the

with-form (*sa-guna*) and the without-form (*nir-guna*) aspects. The with-form God is cognized as present everywhere, as the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of everything and being, as the Father and Mother of the Universe. Therefore, He is beyond and above all beings and things and eternally distinct and different from humanity. It is said by upholders of the with-form aspect that the very cognition of this attributeful principle brings about liberation (*mukthi*). Liberation is attained when one establishes oneself in this knowledge and lives in and through it.

The second way to acquire awareness is through contemplation on the attributeless without-form principle. During this contemplation, the truth that the ascription of attributes to the divine principle is undesirable and inappropriate is realized and the attributes are shed from the concept of God. Then, the one universal attributeless person will alone remain in the consciousness. It can be referred to as the Knower (*Jnatha*). For, wisdom (*jnana*) is relevant only in the context of the human mind and human consciousness. It cannot be designated as the inquirer, because inquiry is the mark of the weak. It cannot be related to the intelligence, for intelligence discriminates, and the attempt to divide and dissect is again a sign of unsteadiness. It cannot be designated the Creator, for creation is the activity of the bound, the limited. It or He has no bonds or limits. Activity implies a wish, a want, a desire; it does not originate from any other cause. All work has as its base some inner pain that is sought to be alleviated.

In the *Vedas*, the Divine is spoken of only as THAT. The reference is always to THAT. The word “He” is susceptible of provoking ideas of difference, so the word THAT is used to indicate that it is free from all limitations and bonds imposed by the ascription of attributes. This is the essence of the philosophy of nondualism, for attributes divide and distinguish.

Self liberation and fulfillment

It is the inescapable destiny of everyone to fulfil themselves. Every living being has to attain fullness in the end. Each one is at present at a particular stage of this march, as a result of the activities engaged in during previous lives and the feelings entertained in the past. The future is being built by the activities being engaged in now and the feelings that urge and shape them. That is to say, what one does, feels, or thinks about at present are the basic reasons for the good or bad fortune that is in store.

The prompting to save oneself and the power to pull oneself up into liberation cannot be derived from books. This strength has to come from the individual himself. One can spend an entire lifetime scanning profoundly written books; one might earn the highest rank among intellectuals. But at the end of it all, one might not have attained even some little progress in the spiritual field. To conclude that a scholar who has reached the topmost height can therefore be considered ripe in spiritual wisdom will prove to be a great mistake. Scholars themselves might imagine, as they learn more and more from books, that they are progressing more and more on the spiritual path, but when they examine the fruit of their studies, they will recognize that though their intellects have become sharper and heavier, they have not been acquiring awareness of the *Atma* to the slightest degree.

Character: the core of spirituality

Many people have the skill to deliver wonderful discourses on spiritual subjects; but, really speaking, everyone has failed in living the life of the spirit, the highest *Atmic* life. What exactly is the reason for this sad state of affairs? Now, spiritual texts are studied to equip oneself with scholarship in the competitive race for superiority, to earn a livelihood, to pose oneself as an undefeatable upholder of some specific point of view, and generally to earn a reputation as a pundit. The scholar might write elaborate commentaries on the *Gita*. But, as a result of all that

study, if in their character, behaviour, and conduct the scholar does not prove that the *Gita* has soaked in, all that panditry is but a burden to be carrying around. This is the lesson that Indian (*Bharathiya*) culture tries to impress.

The source from which this lesson emerges is the Guru, the soul (*purusha*) latent in you. The study of the scriptures and other texts can reinforce the spiritual urges already in you and induce you to practise the precepts. Don't treat the learning you derive from them as so much fodder for the brain. It must be sublimated into bliss (*ananda*) for the individual. Envy, pompousness, egotism —such evil traits have to be driven out of the individual.

Qualifications of the preceptor

This spiritual treasure can be obtained from another too. However, the giver has to possess supreme attainment, and the recipient has to possess the special merit that deserves the achievement. The seed may have life in it, but the soil must be ploughed and made fit to activate it. When both conditions are satisfied, the harvest of spiritual success is assured. One who instructs in the field of religion has to be of enthralling excellence; the listener, also, has to be of sharp and clear understanding. When both are surprisingly supreme and extraordinarily enthusiastic, the result will be spiritual awakening of the highest level. Otherwise, rarely can such results follow. The real gurus steal your hearts, not your wealth.

The pupil has to concentrate on service to the guru and ruminate over their teachings. The pupil must be eager to translate the teaching into daily activity and actual practices. The pupil must fill the heart with devotion and dedicate all their skill for the actualization of the guru's counsel. Such a person deserves the name pupil (*sishya*).

When the thirst for liberation and the revelation of one's reality is acute, a strange and mysterious force in nature will begin operating. When the soil is ready, the seed appears from somewhere! The spiritual guru will be alerted, and the thirst will get quenched. The receiving individual has developed the power to attract the giver of illumination. That power is strong and full. Therefore, naturally the splendour that can confer illumination will get ready to bless.

Avatar: guru of gurus

Readers! Though gurus of the common type have increased in number, a guru is available for one who is far more supreme and compassionate than any or all gurus. He is none other than the *Avatar* of the Lord. He can, by the mere expression of His will, confer the highest consummation of spiritual life. He can gift it and get one to accept it. Even the meanest of the mean can acquire the highest wisdom, in a trice. He is the guru of all gurus. He is the fullest embodiment of God as a human.

A person can cognize God only in human form. This Indian (*Bharathiya*) Spiritual Stream has been declaring, over and over again, that adoring God in human form is the highest duty. Unless God incarnates as a person, people can never hope to see God or listen to His voice. Of course, one may picture God in various other forms, but one can never approximate the genuine form of God. However much one may try, one cannot picture God in any form except the human.

People can pour out wonderful discourses and talks on God and the nature and composition of all that exists in the universe. They may satisfy themselves, asserting that all accounts of God descending in human form are meaningless myths. That is what the poor ordinary eye can discern. This strange inference is not based on wisdom (*jnana*). As a matter of fact, wisdom is absent in these assertions and declarations. What we can notice in them is

only the froth floating on ego waves.

Who am I?

Who am I (*Koham*)? Why do I feel that I am the doer? What is the nature of consciousness that I am the enjoyer? Why be born and die at last? How did I deserve this life? Can I be liberated from this series of entrances and exits (*samsara*)? The attempt to discover answers to these questions is what the sages (*rishis*) of old designated as “austerities (*tapas*)”. When the intellect of the individual ripens into this steady inquiry, the individual enters the path of spiritual exercise (*tapas*).

This is the first step. As soon as people have ascended this step, the scriptures —the collective wisdom of seekers enshrined in sacred texts— welcome them. The traditional revealed scripture (*sruthi*, i.e. the *Vedas*) directs them to “listen, ruminare, and practise” the axiomatic counsel of the sages. The sages assure them that they will attain the goal of release and will free themselves from the delusive fascination for the visible world, portrayed for them by their own minds.

A proper guru is in God-consciousness

Only the Divine can be the guide, companion, and counselor on this lone journey of a person. Those styled gurus cannot help or rescue. The *Vedas* (*Sruthis*) advise people to approach gurus who are versed in the *Vedas* (are *srotriyas*) and in God consciousness (*Brahma-nishtas*). They warn people against resorting to others.

What does *srotriya* mean? It means a person who is unquestioningly loyal to the *Vedas* and who adheres to the rules prescribed and the limits imposed therein, without the slightest deviation.

Brahma-nishta means a person who is established in Brahma-consciousness. The person has no doubts to pester them, no diversion to distract, for the person has won steady faith in *Atma*. The person is unconcerned with the material world and sees all worlds as Brahma, as the manifestation of the Brahma Principle. Activities and movements are in consonance with this awareness. The vision encompasses all of time; the person knows the past, present, and future and is beyond all characterization; the three modes have no affect. The person has their being in the One and Only —the *Atma*. The person is unaffected by distinctions and differences, dualities and disparities and is perpetually in bliss (*ananda*).

The *Vedas* exhort the seeker to approach such a guru. But only one person has all these attributes: the Lord of All (*Sarveswara*). Scholars who have learned the truth or are proficient in principles are not in the category of practicers of the *Vedas* (*srotriyas*) and Brahma consciousness (*Brahma-nishtas*). They are not the gurus you need.

The phenomenon of death

The *Yoga-vasistha* says that Sri Ramachandra asked sage Vasistha the question, “Divine Master! Is there a way to avoid death?” The same problem drove Gautama Buddha along the path of renunciation and forced him to give up all traces of attachment; it showered on him eternal fame, as supreme among people. Prahlada, foremost among the devotees of the Lord, addressed his fellow pupils, even as a boy, “Friends! Haven’t you observed that some boys of our own age fall dead and get burned or buried?” Thus, he drew their attention to the event of death and invited them to draw lessons from that inevitable fact. He taught them the higher wisdom.

Those who have the inner urge to achieve the higher wisdom that confers liberation have, therefore, to reflect

upon and investigate the phenomenon of death. Death should arouse no fear. It should not be regarded as inauspicious. You should not run away from the problem, imagining that death happens only to others and that it will not happen to you. Neither should you postpone reflections on death, judging that they are inappropriate now, and profitless, for inquiry into death is really inquiry into one's own reality. This truth has to be recognized.

Discrimination (*viveka*), the special gift to humanity, has to be employed to unravel the reality of the visible universe, its nature and validity. The fact of death is the prime cause that originates the problem "Who am I?" That fact ought not to be ignored as unworthy of attention. You should not flee from it in fear. For if you behave so, you land yourself on the first step toward stupidity (*a-jnana*) and plant in your mind the seedling of the tree of foolishness. You prop up the pillars of delusion (*maya*).

Dialogue with God of Death

Every mystery latent in human existence is entwined with inquiry into death. The glory and majesty of the Divine are fully revealed only when death is investigated. According to the *Katha Upanishad*, among the three boons requested by Nachiketas from Yama, the God of Death, the chief was the one relating to death. "Do people exist after death? Some declare that they do; others, that they don't. Each argues as their fancy leads. Which of these opinions is true? Solve this problem for me," pleaded Nachiketas. He insisted on an answer.

Yama tried to avoid his pleading. He said, "Son! Nachiketas. This is an insoluble mystery. The sacred texts treat it as subtler than the subtlest. I find it impossible to make even the gods understand this phenomenon. Nevertheless, you crave this boon. Why should you be troubled by this problem? You are an innocent little boy. You deserve to live long, enjoying many a happy event. I shall grant you, as a boon, enormous riches; accept them and lead a life of unexcelled happiness. Ask for any quantity of material pleasure; they are yours. Come! Ask and reach the height of joy."

But Nachiketas replied, "However vast the riches, however pleasant the experiences they confer, don't they have to receive your impact without a murmur? Nothing in creation can escape you, can it? Everything is immersed in death. Why then should I aspire for items that give only temporary relief? Grant me the boon on which my heart is set."

In the *Mahabharatha*, Dharmaraja is asked to name the greatest marvel in the world. He replies, "Though every day we see people dying, we do not think we ourselves will die. What can be a greater marvel than this?"

God is the true Guru

Similarly, the famous sage Yajnavalkya, after deciding that he would join the monastic order, called his two wives (Katyayani and Maitreyi) and told them that he had partitioned his movable and immovable properties equally, for both of them. On hearing this, the elder wife, Maitreyi, who was endowed with a high level of intelligence and insight, protested and said, with a smile on her face, "Lord! Can these riches you are handing over to me save me from death and render me immortal? If you assure me that they will do so, certainly I shall accept them, with due reverence to you."

Yajnavalkya explained. "Riches make life pleasant and delightful by the chances they give you to live happily. Do you say that you do not need such valuable riches?"

But Maitreyi persisted. "If what you say is true, you could have continued enjoying these riches and deriving

happiness therefrom. Why have you decided to give them up and become a monk? No. It is not proper to cheat us weak-minded women, holding these delusive trinkets before us. How can the riches that you refuse to keep give us peace and happiness? They are temporary objects; they are liable to destruction; they entangle us still further in bondage; they foster the ignorance that we yearn to discard; they are the chief promoters of anxiety and worry. They are basically polluted, since they are not within the realm of the *Atma*.”

When Maitreyi placed before him this truth, Yajnavalkya was silenced, and, not knowing how to proceed, he stood with his head bent before her. Then, Maitreyi fell at the feet of her husband and said, “Lord! You are master of all mysteries. You must have called us and placed before us this proposal in order to test our intelligence. I have no desire for luxury or even comfort. I do not crave riches and possessions. Instruct me about the path that can confer eternal bliss.”

In fact, there is only ONE: the highest *Brahman*. The scriptures on nonduality proclaim that “*Brahman* alone is true; creation is a myth. The individual (*jivi*) is *Brahman* itself (*Brahma sathyam, jagath Mithya; Jeevo Brahmaiva naaparam*).” All that happens in the world is as unreal as the dream experience. Dreams disappear and appear again. The pleasures and joys experienced in life are like mirages appearing on the desert sands of hatred, envy, and selfish greed. Now, how can those people who believe that this mirage is real and run toward it become gurus? Will it be proper to address them as the wise (*jnanis*)? They are installed on high seats of illusory authority. They teach what they do not practise. They hold forth ideals that they themselves ignore. How can such people be examples to seekers who need spiritual progress? They are not genuine, for they have not even an iota of the guru principle in them.

The Lord alone (*Sarveswara*) is the genuine Guru. For all seekers, this is the path; let them hold fast to this faith.