

Avatar

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Avatar means a divine descent into embodied existence. In Theosophical usage, it concerns an exalted being who has passed beyond the necessity of rebirth and freely enters a human vehicle for the assistance of the world. The word directs attention to compassion expressed through a life, while asking us to distinguish the visible person from the spiritual reality working through that person. Its deepest significance lies in the relation between an inexhaustible source of wisdom and the particular needs of humanity.

H.P. Blavatsky's *The Theosophical Glossary* describes the descent of a god or exalted being into the body of a mortal, naming Krishna as an avatar of *Vishnu*. This definition establishes a distinction from ordinary reincarnation. The returning human soul continues an unfinished education under karma. The avatar, in the sense defined here, comes through a freedom already won. Both involve embodiment, but the causes and consciousness of that embodiment differ. A shared outward appearance does not establish an identical inward condition.

Professor Iyer develops this distinction in "The Rebirth of Humanity." The spiritual Teacher's visible passage through the stages of a life expresses only a small portion of an essentially unmanifest Self. This is a metaphysical account, inviting contemplation of a consciousness that cannot be exhausted by form. It does not make the historical life unimportant. Teaching, example and sacrifice become accessible through that life, while their source remains greater than the instrument through which they reach the world.

The sun and its rays offer a helpful analogy. A ray brings light into a room without enclosing the sun there. Similarly, an embodied Teacher may convey a spiritual illumination whose scope exceeds the circumstances of the embodiment. The analogy expresses a relation of source and manifestation; it does not describe a physical process or prove a claim about any particular person. Its usefulness depends upon keeping both the nearness of the light and the immeasurability of its source in view.

In "Mahat, Manu and the Avatar," Professor Iyer places the teaching within a vast conception of cosmic intelligence. *Mahat* is cosmic mind; *Manu* is considered in relation to divine ideation and the guidance of humanity. The avatar belongs within that larger order. The visible mission must therefore be understood through universal purpose rather than personal eminence. A biography may record events, but understanding their spiritual significance asks what enduring truth they disclose and what responsibility that truth awakens in those who receive it.

This wider setting also calls for care with sacred names. Terms such as *Manu*, *Dhyani* and *Logos* can apply at different levels of a teaching. Professor Iyer compares such terms to symbols in an abstract formula whose application depends upon context. We should resist making a rigid catalogue from passages that explore different scales of manifestation. Reverent study can compare them patiently, allowing a relationship to become clearer without pretending that verbal arrangements have captured the whole mystery of spiritual embodiment.

The purpose of descent is given an ethical direction through Krishna's teaching of the renewal of righteousness. Professor Iyer recalls the *Bhagavad Gita's* account of the preservation of the just and the restoration of spiritual order. In his own exposition, the call extends to the common earth and the danger humanity creates for itself. The sacred does not belong only within a protected sanctuary. Its desecration includes the abuse of the conditions through which human beings and other lives must flourish.

Human Solidarity follows from this universal purpose. If spiritual assistance is offered for humanity, gratitude for it cannot be confined to the security of a favored group. A teaching may be received through a particular language or tradition while directing the student beyond sectarian possession. The relevant question becomes whether our response makes the world more habitable for others. We can care for the common ground, resist unfair treatment, and make room for people whose manner of belief differs from our own.

The doctrine therefore gives no easy warrant for declaring an admired person an avatar. Charisma, extraordinary stories and strong devotion do not by themselves establish the spiritual condition defined by the term. Discrimination belongs within reverence. A student may examine a teaching, appreciate a noble example and learn from its effects without claiming knowledge of the teacher's ultimate status. This restraint protects the freedom of inquiry and keeps attention upon the truth and responsibility that can actually be understood and practised.

Receptivity is an active part of that practice. Professor Iyer uses W.Q. Judge's image of the allegorical umbrella: its structure suggests the transmission of spiritual light and the protection necessary to receive it. *Buddhi-Manas*, mind illumined by spiritual discernment, appears as the channel of conscious communication. The image asks us to consider the preparation of the receiver. An inward life crowded with self-importance may admire wisdom while leaving little room for its correction of familiar habits and cherished assumptions.

Consider a small group restoring a neglected community space. One person may bring an inspiring vision, but the work depends upon many people understanding and carrying it forward. Tools must be shared, unfamiliar contributions welcomed, and mistakes corrected without humiliation. The example illustrates response to a generous purpose; it does not confer the title avatar upon the organizer. Its value is modest and concrete: inspiration becomes fruitful

when those receiving it take responsibility for the conditions through which others can participate.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception changes how that responsibility is imagined. The immediate participants are joined in thought by those who will use the space later, those unable to volunteer, and those whose needs were overlooked in the first design. A larger horizon can alter the placement of a path or the distribution of work. The metaphysical idea of universal assistance thus finds a practical echo in careful inclusion. A broad ideal gains credibility through its attention to an ordinary detail.

The same movement can occur in study. An inspiring passage may awaken enthusiasm, followed by a wish to repeat it before its meaning has been examined. We can let the first warmth become patient inquiry: what does the passage say, what does it presuppose, and where might it challenge us? A willingness to learn from correction makes the mind a more useful instrument. Receiving spiritual help then involves an ongoing education rather than the possession of an elevated feeling or a preferred explanation.

Professor Iyer connects this preparation with serenity, honesty and the courage of selflessness. Growth in strength should increase the capacity to recognize an error without panic and to begin again without theatrical self-condemnation. Such steadiness matters because noble purposes are often served over long periods in unremarkable ways. A promise kept, work completed carefully, or a burden quietly relieved may express a more durable response to inspiration than a succession of declarations about the greatness of the ideal.

Avatar finally invites us to contemplate freedom taking the form of assistance. The descent of wisdom does not remove the learner's task; it gives that task a larger meaning and a living orientation. The light is received through discernment, gratitude and responsible action. We may remain far from understanding the full mystery of a divine incarnation while becoming more faithful to the good already visible before us. The teaching bears fruit when reverence deepens our willingness to make room for life beyond ourselves.

Glossary

Absolute — Unconditioned Reality, beyond the distinctions and limitations of manifestation.

Aditi-Akasha — Boundless noumenal Space, expressed through the combined symbolism of *Aditi* and *Akasha*.

Akshara — The imperishable; in the quotation, the enduring spiritual ground of sacred sound.

Amitabha — The *Buddha* of boundless light in Buddhist symbolism; named in the historical glossary account of avatars.

Amsha — A portion or aspect; used of the fragment of divine splendour expressed through an embodiment.

Anupapadaka — Parentless or self-born; a term for beings not produced through ordinary physical generation. Also written *anupapâdaka*.

Archetypal — Pertaining to a formative pattern or principle underlying particular expressions.

Avalokiteswara — A Buddhist name associated with compassionate spiritual illumination; spelling varies, including *Avalokiteshvara* and *Avalokitêshwâra*.

Avatar — A divine descent or incarnation; in the definition used here, an exalted being's voluntary embodiment beyond the necessity of ordinary rebirth. *Avatâra* is the Sanskrit form.

Buddhi-Manas — Self-conscious mind illumined by *Buddhi*; the conjunction of spiritual discernment and higher thought.

Dalai Lama — The title of a major Tibetan Buddhist spiritual teacher; the historical glossary passage relates it to *Avalokiteswara*.

Dharma — Law, duty or the sustaining order of life; its practical meaning includes the responsibilities appropriate to a situation.

Dhyani-chohans — Orders of spiritual intelligences through which cosmic law is expressed; also written *Dhyan Chohans* or *Dhyan-Chohans*. *Dhyani* and *Dhyanis* are related general forms.

Diamond Soul — An image of luminous spiritual wisdom and compassion; associated with *Vajrasattva*.

Discernment — The capacity to distinguish what is true, fitting and spiritually significant; Buddhist discernment transcends personal preference.

Divine ideation — The spiritual conception or archetypal thought through which manifestation is understood to unfold.

Elementals — Orders of lives or forces associated with the elements and the formation and activity of Nature.

Guru — A spiritual teacher or guide.

Human Solidarity — The common dignity and interdependence of human beings, expressed through responsibility for one another's welfare.

Ideation — The formation or activity of thought, considered spiritually as well as psychologically.

Incarnation — The embodiment of an enduring principle or individuality in a particular life.

Ineffable — Beyond adequate expression in words.

Kalahansa — The swan of eternity in sacred symbolism, associated in the quotation with the eternal saviour in time.

Kalki — The avatar associated with the close of a cycle and the renewal of righteousness.

Karma — The continuity of action and consequence; karmic law links responsibility with the wider order of life.

Krishna — The divine teacher of the *Bhagavad Gita*, traditionally regarded as an avatar of *Vishnu*.

Kshetragna — The knower of the field; a term for the spiritual knowing principle. Also transliterated *Kshetrajna*.

Life-atoms — Lives understood as participating in the constitution and activity of embodied beings, extending the ethical significance of how their vehicles are used.

Logos — The principle of divine expression or ideation; its application varies with the level of manifestation. *Logoi* is the plural, and Logoic means pertaining to it.

Mahat — Cosmic intelligence or cosmic mind, understood in relation to universal ideation.

Maitreya — The figure of the future *Buddha* and universal loving-kindness; connected in the quotation with the avatar of mercy.

Manifestation — The emergence or expression of differentiated worlds and beings; the manifest is considered in relation to an unmanifest spiritual ground.

Manu — A name for a spiritual progenitor or guiding intelligence associated with humanity and cosmic cycles; its scope varies by context.

Manvantara — A period of manifestation or activity, alternating with *pralaya*, withdrawal or rest. Manvantaric means pertaining to such a period.

Metaphysical — Concerning fundamental principles of reality and being, beyond a description limited to sensory phenomena.

Monad — An enduring spiritual unit; in the human constitution commonly *Atma-Buddhi*, considered through its evolutionary pilgrimage.

Myalba — The earthly sphere of suffering in the Theosophical use of the term.

Narayana — A name of *Vishnu* associated with the divine presence resting upon primordial waters.

Noumenal — Pertaining to the underlying spiritual or intelligible reality of an appearance, distinguished from the phenomenal.

Pre-cosmic — Prior to the emergence of a manifested cosmos, within the metaphysical account.

Preceptor — A teacher or guide whose instruction supports the student's spiritual and intellectual development.

Purna Avatar — A full divine incarnation; Professor Iyer uses the expression in his discussion of Krishna and the avatar.

Reincarnation — The return of the enduring human individuality to embodied life for further experience and learning under karma.

Rishi — A seer or sage; *Rishis* is the plural.

Shabdabrahman — The spiritual Word or sound considered in relation to *Brahman*; in the quotation, the potency of the *Logos*.

Shesha — The cosmic serpent associated with *Vishnu*'s repose upon the primordial waters.

Spiritual Sun — A contemplative image of the universal source of spiritual illumination, distinguished from a physical object inside the body.

Supernal — Belonging to a higher or heavenly order.

Tad ekam — That One; an expression for the One without a second.

Teschu Lama — A historical form of the title associated with the Panchen Lama; used in Blavatsky's glossary account.

Tson-kha-pa — Tsongkhapa, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher and reformer named in the historical glossary passage.

Vaivasvata Manu — The *Manu* associated with the present human cycle in Theosophical cosmology and with the avatar in Professor Iyer's exposition.

Vehicle — A principle or medium through which another principle can be expressed; *Buddhi* is the spiritual vehicle of *Atman*.

Vishnu — The divine preserver in Hindu tradition; *Mahavishnu* or *Maha Vishnu* emphasizes the cosmic scope of that principle.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 46, “Avatâra”.

“*Avatâra* (Sk.) Divine incarnation. The descent of a god or some exalted Being, who has progressed beyond the necessity of Rebirths, into the body of a simple mortal. Krishna was an avatar of *Vishnu*. The Dalai Lama is regarded as an avatar of *Avalokiteswara*, and the Teschu Lama as one of Tson-kha-pa, or *Amitâbha*. There are two kinds of avatars: those born from woman, and the parentless, the *anupapâdaka*.”

Meditation thought: Consider the distinction between a life compelled by unfinished karma and a life freely offered for the good of others.

2. R.N. Iyer — “The Rebirth of Humanity”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 16.

“Sages are fully aware that the voluntary descent of a spiritual Teacher into *Myalba* merely provides the outward illusion of passage through various phases of earthly life, using but a small portion of an essentially unmanifest Self. Impervious to containment by form, the true being of the Avatar abides in timeless duration, always honouring the One without a second, *Tad ekam*, that which as the central Spiritual Sun is the single source of all that lives and breathes throughout the seven kingdoms of nature, and of all that is lit up at any level of reflected intelligence from the tiniest atom to the mightiest star in this vast cosmos which extends far beyond the solar system and this earth.”

Meditation thought: Let the visible life of a Teacher suggest a depth that no biography can exhaust. Reverence grows through this sense of proportion.

3. R.N. Iyer — “The Rebirth of Humanity”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 16.

“In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna disclosed that he incarnates on earth periodically for the preservation of the just, the destruction of the wicked and the establishment of righteousness. In Hindu iconography *Narayana* holds the conch shell, symbolizing his ability to rock the earth through sound, the potency of the *Logos* as *Shabdabrahman*, the Soundless Sound of the indestructible *Akshara* behind and beyond and within all the spaces of ‘the *AUM* throughout eternal ages’.”

Meditation thought: Reflect on righteousness as a living order to be renewed through conduct, including the responsibilities already within reach.

4. R.N. Iyer — “Deity in Action”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 32.

“This sense of limitless sanctity throughout all manifestation brings the true seeker to the mystical and powerful idea of the Diamond Soul. One could think of and see the Diamond Soul as a shining jewel, precipitated from the Absolute into the realm of the relative, a jewel so multifaceted that all sentient beings may find means of approach by some aspect of the Light that it compassionately radiates in every direction. As Krishna, the *Purna Avatar* and the paradigm of all Avatars – who are all one and the same – states, ‘In whatever way men approach Me, in that way do I assist them.’”

Meditation thought: Imagine many approaches to the same spiritual light. What would make your own approach more sincere and less possessive?

5. R.N. Iyer — “Mahat, Manu and the Avatar”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 377.

“To discount the conception of *Manu* as a being, preferring the metaphor of a focussing of rays, suggests that one is threatened by the facts of evolution, foolishly determined to run away from one's spiritual progenitors, preceptors and teachers. And to run away is to cheapen the concept of such beings through the popular notion of an arbitrary personal god. This only arose, and held a hypnotic sway over many people, because it crudely concretized that which is essentially true. Only through the awakened devotional heart may one begin to grasp the indescribable majesty of such beings. Only through a sense of their reality may one begin to apprehend the archetypal meaning of the long pilgrimage of mankind, within which every unit bears fundamental responsibility, but receives divine guidance.”

Meditation thought: Hold individual responsibility and spiritual assistance together. Receiving help need not mean surrendering the work of understanding.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Mahat, Manu and the Avatar”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 377.

“It is in relation to the unmanifest *Logos*, symbolized here as the primeval *Manu*, that the particular *Manus* within manvantaric time may be considered as Avatars of the manifested *Logos* or *Mahat*. The notion of *Vaivasvata Manu* commissioned by the Universal Mind with an aspect of the manvantaric plan can only be understood in relation to states of consciousness and matter so universal and homogeneous that there is instantaneous communication amidst a vast field of pre-cosmic and cosmic ideation.”

Meditation thought: Allow the mind to become spacious enough to contemplate a source of guidance beyond personal preference.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Mahat, Manu and the Avatar”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 378.

“Within this inconceivably large framework, every human being can self-consciously invoke the power of protection, guidance and instruction of the highest *Dhyanis*, *Manus* and *Rishis*. In his essay on ‘The Allegorical Umbrella’, W.Q. Judge conveyed this idea through an apt analogy. The ineffable source of all manifestation may be thought of as a Central Sun, scattering its rays in every direction. The spokes of an umbrella are the *Dhyanis*, the *Manus* and the *Rishis*: they simultaneously guide the supernal light and protect the holder from intense radiation. The handle of the umbrella represents the channel of communication in consciousness from above below, the awakened power of *Buddhi-Manas*. In reality, the holder of the umbrella, its handle, canopy and ribs are all derived from the seven *Dhyanis*.”

Meditation thought: An umbrella can be opened from within. Consider which habit of separateness most often closes your receptivity to a universal ideal.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Mahat, Manu and the Avatar”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 378.

“Everything depends upon one's courage of selflessness and freedom in generosity towards all other beings. The fundamental measure of one's security as a human being is one's willingness to surrender all, to take a stand in the Divine Darkness. According to one's level of courage and freedom will be one's capacity to draw closer to the primeval vibrations of Logoic consciousness. All of these highest energies are focussed within the resplendent instrument of *Vaivasvata Manu* as the Avatar. All derive from *Maha Vishnu*, the seed of all Avatars. Such is the economy of Nature that there is only one Avatar at all times, and only one Avatar at any time.”

Meditation thought: Begin with the courage to become teachable. A quiet willingness to change gives spiritual aspiration practical substance.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Mahat, Manu and the Avatar”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 379.

“The stronger one becomes, the greater one's serenity and the less one's anxiety. Through humility, receptivity grows, and with it the willingness to learn and to love. One may gain the heroic capacity to correct one's errors, the courage painstakingly to retrace one's steps when one has gone wrong, to withdraw harsh words, to forsake regret and, instead, look to the human race and human suffering and for a deepening of pure receptivity to the mirroring of the Universal Mind in *Manu*.”

Meditation thought: Notice whether increased effort brings greater serenity. Honest correction can become a source of strength rather than an occasion for self-punishment.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Mahat, Manu and the Avatar”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 379.

“Even to begin to contemplate these ideas is to transform one's view of reality, displacing much that one had thought important, whilst discovering the relevance of much that one had previously neglected. A greater attentiveness and skillfulness is brought to the performance of dharma, because there is a desire to discharge all obligations to life-atoms, to the elementals of fire, air, water and earth. This may be done through what is called cooking, what is called doing accounts, or what is called earning a living, but these are only words borrowed from a materialistic tongue. All human action involves ideation and has implicit reference to the abiding possibility of lighting up minds and hearts. The inherent function of ideation is to awaken and deepen insight.”

Meditation thought: Choose one ordinary task and perform it with attention to its place in a larger human purpose.

11. R.N. Iyer — “Mahat, Manu and the Avatar”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. I, p. 380.

“Raising one's sights and moving forward, rooting oneself in the *Kshetragna*, one's life may become like a dance or a song, a sonnet or a symphony. Mirroring the natural flow of great rivers and the unhindered movement of the winds, one may become like the ocean, immovable in its depths, and yet variegated in its colours. By creating a flow, and having the strength to experience it inwardly, without external tokens and signs, one may begin to live an authentic inner life. This life of contemplation is the only life in which one will experience true comradeship. This is the life of the spiritual Path, wherein the heart is filled with love until it overflows with gratitude and reverence, releasing its strength for the benefit of fellow pilgrim souls. Such a life, lived selflessly on behalf of the humanity of the future, will draw deeply upon the inexhaustible well of the grace of the Guru.”

Meditation thought: Let gratitude for spiritual help become fidelity to an ideal when enthusiasm subsides and steady work remains.

12. R.N. Iyer — “Kalki Maitreya”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 435.

“*Mahavishnu*, whilst reclining upon *Shesha* (the cosmic serpent eating its tail, floating upon the crystalline waters of *Aditi-Akasha*, noumenal Space in Eternal Duration), emanates this entire cosmos and yet remains in supreme repose. *Kalahansa* is the Swan of Everlasting and also the Eternal Saviour in the realm of Time. The *Purna Avatar* is fully incarnated on earth as the decisive determinant of the destinies of all monads, in the context of all karmic sum-totals displayed on the cosmic computer of *Mahat*, and yet he stands apart from all manifestation, with a mere *amsha* or fragment of his divine splendour ensouling the fullest possible embodiment in the materials of contemporary humanity. As *Kalki*, he is the manvantaric harbinger of the Day of Reckoning for each and all; as *Maitreya*, he is linked with Hermes-Mercury as the Avatar of unconditional love and universal mercy.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate mercy that reaches beyond every chosen circle. What local act could express a little of that boundlessness?