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*Īśvara*, *Kṛṣṇa* can say, as he did here ‘Keeping My *māyā* under My control, I become one who as though has a body.’ This is the definition of an *avatāra*.

When it is said that an *avatāra* is one who comes down, what is meant is that he assumes a body. He ‘as though’ has a body, ‘as though’ because he is not lost in the body — in other words, he does not take himself to be the body. A *jīvanmukta*, one who is liberated, can also say, ‘I ‘as though’ have a body,’ because this person knows the real nature of ‘I,’ the *ātmā*. To be able to say this requires knowledge and, to acquire this knowledge one has to be living. This is why the person who has such knowledge is called *jīvanmukta* — living, he is liberated. And, before this knowledge takes place, the *jīva* comes into this world as a result of the past *karma* alone.

By the force of *karma*, meaning one's past actions and their results, a physical body, along with a mind and senses, is created with a parentage and a time and place, and we say the person is born. Such a person is called *jīva*. Only by acquiring the knowledge that he or she is *paraṃ brahma* can the *jīva* be free of the cycle of birth and death and all that goes with it. Knowing thus, the person is free, but the body continues to exist, because it is the creation of *Īśvara* — *īśvara-sṛṣṭi*.

### OMNISCIENCE DOES NOT REQUIRE A MIND

Thus, *Kṛṣṇa* tells *Arjuna* here that, as *Īśvara*, he keeps the *māyā* under his control. His powers, the *jñāna-śakti*, the power to know, the *kriyā-śakti*, the power to do, and the *icchā-śakti*, the power to desire, are all under his control and are not limited in any way. Since his power to know is without limitation, he does not require an *antaḥ-karaṇa*, a mind, to know. Without the mind, he has all knowledge. All-knowledge, omniscience, cannot depend upon a given mind because any mind will have some limitation. Furthermore, the mind itself is a creation and, before creating it, the Lord must have knowledge. Therefore, no mind is required by *Īśvara*. The very *māyā* itself makes him omniscient. He is called *Parameśvara* and this *Parameśvara* alone becomes the world. This is the *māyā*, the trick of it all.

### AN UNDERSTANDING OF AVATĀRA

In order to understand the Vedic and *Purāṇic* literature, one needs to have some understanding of the concept of *avatāra*. In the *Bhāgavata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāma*, *Kṛṣṇa* and certain others are presented as *avatāras*. ‘*Avatāra*’ means ‘God incarnate.’ Because of its significance here, this concept will be analysed briefly in terms of orders of reality.

In general, we can divide the orders of reality into three. One is the absolute reality, *pāramārthika*, that which is *satya-jñāna-ananta-brahma*, free from all attributes, and upon which the entire world depends. Then there is the empirical reality, *vyāvahārika*, which accounts for the world and all that is in it, space, air, fire, water,

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earth, the sun, moon, and stars, the natural laws, and so on. Included in this order of reality are the various situations that cause joy and sorrow, as well as your physical body, mind, and senses. All means and ends — *sādhana* and *sādhya*, also have an empirical reality, some of which are already known to you and others are revealed by the Veda. There are certain Vedic rituals, for example, that are prescribed for having a child or for going to heaven. The heaven mentioned by the *śāstra* is considered to be as empirically real as a material object here in this world. Thirdly, there is a purely subjective order of reality, *prātibhāsika*, such as that we experience in a dream.

### EMPIRICAL REALITY

A pot, for instance, is not something that you imagine; it actually holds water. But it cannot be considered to be independently real, absolutely real, because it is dependent on something else for its existence — the material out of which it is made. Therefore, you cannot say it is *pāramārthika-satya*. Nor can you dismiss it as non-existent because it holds water! If you say the pot is absolutely real or that it is absolutely non-existent, your very statement does not hold water. Only an existent pot can hold water, a non-existent pot cannot.

The existent pot is something that has a history. It was born at a given time and has lived in various homes. It has gone through a certain process of growth and old age, holes and repair work. It has seen ages and has passed through many hands. Now, having had its day, it is parked in some corner somewhere, an old useless pot. Thus, the pot definitely enjoys a certain reality, because of which we accept it as something that has a name and form, *nāma-rūpa*, and behaves within certain laws. This reality is what is meant by empirical reality, *vyāvahārika-satya*. And, for understanding the empirical reality, we have sense perception and other *pramāṇas* such as inference and presumption.

When the Veda talks about ends like heaven and the means for attaining them, it is talking only about empirical reality. If heaven is a place, it is something within the creation and, therefore, is included in this order of reality. The various rituals enjoined by Veda imply a doer, *kartā*, who must perform certain *karmas* in order to achieve the desired ends. Since the means and end are interconnected, the means also have an empiricity, whether they involve worldly action, *laukika-karma*, or scriptural injunction, *vaidika-karma*. Because means and ends are all dependent upon something else, they are not absolutely real. Therefore, they are not *pāramārthika*, but *vyāvahārika*, being totally within the empirical sphere.

The word 'empirical' is the closest English translation there is for *vyāvahārika*, which covers everything known and unknown within the sphere of the creation that is not created by a given mind. It includes everything that is understood at a given time. It also includes all that is not understood now but that may be understood later. This kind

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of world and the mind itself — the mind stuff, brain cells, and so on — all belong to the empirical world. The physical body and its organs, the senses and their constituents, the capacity to remember, to love, to think, and to know, are all *vyāvahārika*, meaning that they have an empirical reality.

### SUBJECTIVE REALITY

The third order of reality is purely subjective and is called *prātibhāsika* in Sanskrit. The dream is an example of this order of reality. Something exists because you see it. Any mistaken notion, unknown fears, and all forms of projections are also *prātibhāsika*. When, for instance, you take a post for a man, (*sthāṇau puruṣa-darśana*) or imagine that some one does not like you, it is a projection — purely subjective and therefore, *prātibhāsika*. What you see is not there; but still you see it. The very seeing gives your projection a certain reality.

Everyone projects; everyone commits mistakes. *Prātibhāsika* reality is possible because the mind is limited; it is not omniscient. Also, the mind has a particular background that creates for itself certain prejudices, fears, anxieties, disappointments, sorrows, and perceptions. This is why everyone, at one time or another, sees what is not really there and does not see what is there.

For example, even though a person has some love for you, you may not recognise it, seeing instead some dislike, simply because you happen to notice the person frowning and you know not why! All projections, all mistakes, are possible because you have a mind. You think so and therefore, it is. And since this reality that exists only for you has no empiricity, it is called *prātibhāsika*.

Wherever there is *prātibhāsika* reality, there is error and, wherever there is error, the correction of error must be possible, that is, knowledge must be there. Suppose, for example, you are making pastry and mistake the salt for sugar. What you want is pastry, but what you get is something quite different. Both the sugar and the salt have an empirical reality because the senses are able to differentiate between them. At the same time, there is a mistake because sugar produces pastry and salt produces something else. If you use salt thinking it will make pastry, you are committing a mistake. Given this particular fact, this law, error is always possible.

This is all within our experience. *Ātmā* is the self-evident experience. Consciousness is experience. All experiences are strung into this consciousness by this consciousness, just as beads are held together by a string. Consciousness is there in all the three forms of experience — sleep, dream and waking. These three experiences, severally and totally, are held in one experience called consciousness, which is all-evident.

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It is evident that we create our own subjective realities and it is also evident that we are dealing with a world which conforms to an order, which behaves in an orderly way. Thus, we have a cosmos which is empirical, a chaos which is subjective, and that which is constant, *sat-cit-ānanda-ātmā*. This *sat-cit-ānanda-ātmā* seems to exist in the form of a three-fold reality. For lack of a better term, we use this term, viz., the three-fold reality. In fact, there is only one reality, *satya-jñāna-ananta-brahma*.

### THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE THREE ORDERS OF REALITY

Between the empirical reality and the subjective reality, there is a difference. The entire creation, empirical reality, is called *īśvara-sṛṣṭi*, the Lord's creation, and the projection of one's own mind is called *jīva-sṛṣṭi*, the individual's subjective creation. At all times, we are confronting these two orders of reality, the empirical and the subjective, on the basis of the one absolute reality, *satya-jñāna-ananta-brahma*.

With this understanding of the orders of reality, let us return to the verse. *Kṛṣṇa* says, 'I am born wielding the *māyā*, the *prakṛti*, in My hands. In this way, I assume a body.' Because the Lord can create the whole world and also assume a body, there is no problem in seeing that *Kṛṣṇa*'s birth is referred to here as an incarnation of *īśvara* based on the concept of *avatāra*, *avatāra-vāda*. But the next question would be, 'To which order of reality does the physical body that the Lord assumes belong?'

When *Kṛṣṇa* points out that he is unborn, never born, he is pointing out the absolute reality, *pāramārthika-satya*. In fact, from the standpoint of absolute reality, no one is born. Thus, from this standpoint, *Kṛṣṇa* is not born and *Mr. Kṛṣṇa*, who is standing before *Arjuna*, cannot be that *pāramārthika-satya*. It must be kept in mind here that we are not talking about *Kṛṣṇa* who is *paramātmā*; but we are talking about *Mr. Kṛṣṇa* who was born in prison, who had a body, who wore a yellow piece of cloth, who played a flute, and who, seated in *Arjuna*'s chariot, was holding the reins of the horses in his hands. Is this *Kṛṣṇa*, who was teaching *Arjuna*, *pāramārthika*? No, he is not, because his body is not *pāramārthika*.

Surely, then, we can say that *Kṛṣṇa*'s body is empirically real, *vyāvahārika*. But if it were to be taken as empirically real, would *Kṛṣṇa* not have been born of his own *karma* and therefore, would he not also be a *saṁsārī* like *Arjuna*? And if he were born of his own *karma*, *puṇya* and *pāpa* would be there for him, along with *dharma* and *adharmā*, doership and enjoyership? If he were bound by *karma*, where would be the possibility of his wielding the *māyā*? In order for his birth to be considered empirical, *Kṛṣṇa* had to have been under the spell of *karma*, meaning that without his volition his birth would have been determined by the very laws. Only then can his birth be considered to be like empirical that of *Arjuna*.

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### THE EMPIRICAL REALITY OF A JĪVA'S BIRTH

*Arjuna*, being a *jīva*, was born of *karma*. Even though he was born a prince, he had to go to the forest for twelve years and then live incognito for one year, all of which could be attributed to his past *karma*. The destiny of *Arjuna's* eldest brother, *Dharmaputra*, was also controlled by his own *punya* and *pāpa*. Because of his *pāpa*, he lost the kingdom; otherwise, the dice would have rolled out differently or he would not have thrown them at all! Some *prārabdha-karma* was there for him. The *śāstra* itself talks about this kind of *karma*.

*Arjuna* was a person, a *jīva*, born of *karma* and therefore, his birth, *janma*, was empirically real. He had a parentage and a physical body, mind, and senses, all of which have an empirical reality, as we have seen. *Kṛṣṇa*, on the other hand, said that, as *Īśvara*, keeping the *māyā* under his control, he is born. We will see later why he was born.

### THE REALITY OF KṚṢṆA'S BIRTH

The body of anyone who is born is available for our perception. But what is available for our perception is not always totally true — the blue sky, for example, or a magician's tricks. Therefore, perception itself cannot establish the empirical reality of *Kṛṣṇa's* birth.

If, as *Īśvara*, *Kṛṣṇa* is born, keeping the *māyā* under his control, his birth is definitely not subject to any *punya* or *pāpa*. Therefore, being not bound by *karma*, it has no empirical status. Birth itself, being what it is, cannot be *pāramārthika* either. Nor can *Kṛṣṇa's* birth be totally non-existent, *atyanta-asat*, since he was not a *vandhyā-putra*, the son of a barren woman! He was born of *Devakī* and *Vasudeva*. Thus, it was not a totally non-existent *Kṛṣṇa* who was talking to *Arjuna*.

Then, how are we to explain *Kṛṣṇa's* birth in terms of reality? With reference to his birth, *Kṛṣṇa* is *prātibhāsika* — you see him, therefore, he is. His birth is not due to *karma*; it is only apparent. *Prātibhāsika* means that there was a *Kṛṣṇa* whom everyone saw, but his birth and his body were purely *māyā*. Like everything else, they were born of *māyā* but without the force of the law of *karma*. This kind of birth means that *Īśvara* is not condemned to the state of *jīvatva*. He merely assumes a particular body due to a certain necessity alone.

### WHY DOES ĪŚVARA ASSUME A PHYSICAL BODY?

And what is it that makes it necessary for the Lord to assume a physical body? In the *purāṇas* it is said that before every incarnation there is a collective petition to the Lord in the form of prayers on the part of all the good people and even the *devas*: 'O Lord, please do something! Please come and remedy this situation. It is time. Time's up,

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in fact! Why haven't you come? The tyranny of these people is too much for us to bear,' etc. These very prayers themselves become the material cause, the *upādāna-kāraṇa*, for the Lord to introduce himself in a particular form, meaning that he assumes a body.

The prayers of the *jīvas* become the *puṇya* because of which a particular body is born for a given purpose. This incarnation of the Lord is what is meant by *avatāra*. The purpose of the *avatāra*'s coming may be just to do one job, like *Narasimha-avatāra* or *Vāmana-avatāra*, or to do many, as was the case with *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa*. In addition to the many jobs they came to do, *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa* also served as examples with reference to how people should live their lives. *Rāma* exemplified how one can live a life of *dharma* in the face of all adversity and *Kṛṣṇa* was an embodiment of joy and wisdom.

It should be clearly understood that the concept of *avatāra* is not required at all in order to worship *Kṛṣṇa* as the Lord. A picture of *Kṛṣṇa* as *Īśvara* is all that is needed for invoking the Lord. In fact, we can invoke the Lord in anything, even a rock. Invoking the Lord in a particular form and the concept of *avatāra* are entirely different. We discuss it here only because the verse is referring to *Kṛṣṇa* as *avatāra*. *Kṛṣṇa* himself says, 'By my own powers of *māyā*, I "as though" assume a body.' *Śaṅkara* says in his commentary to this verse, while explaining how *Īśvara* assumes a body, '*dehavān iva, jātaḥ iva* — as though with a body, as though born.' The word, '*iva* — as though' in *Śaṅkara*'s commentary indicates that there can be no empiricity here because *Kṛṣṇa*'s birth was not out of *puṇya* and *pāpa*.

If there were *puṇya* and *pāpa* for *Īśvara*, then he would not be *Īśvara* at all! Therefore, when *Īśvara* assumes a body, he is only as though born. He has a body, but his body has no empiricity because it was not born out of *puṇya* and *pāpa*. If there were *puṇya* and *pāpa* for *Īśvara*, we would have the problem of an *Īśvara* with limitations with reference to the *antaḥ-kāraṇa*, which is not acceptable. And, as we have seen, that is not possible, because *Īśvara* is all-knowledge. Therefore, *Kṛṣṇa* tells *Arjuna* here, 'Without *puṇya* and *pāpa*, I am born,' which is the very concept of *avatāra*.

In the next verse, *Kṛṣṇa* explains why, as *Īśvara*, he assumes a body:

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥ ७ ॥

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata

abhyutthānamadharmasya tadātmānaṁ sṛjāmyaham

Verse 7

भारत *bhārata* — O Descendent of the *Bharatas*! (*Arjuna*); यदा यदा *yadā yadā* — whenever; हि *hi* — indeed; धर्मस्य *dharmasya* — of right living; ग्लानिः *glāniḥ* — decline; अधर्मस्य *adharmasya* — of wrong living; अभ्युत्थानम् *abhyutthānam* — rise