James Cameron’s 2009 mega movie “Avatar” is a monumental happening. Over 200 million people worldwide have seen the film. It grossed over $2.7 billion, the largest to 2012. The blockbuster film provides an opportunity to describe the Sanskrit meaning of the term, and to elucidate spiritual teachings of the Avatar.

The story line in Cameron’s film runs like this: In 2154, the RDA Corporation is mining a valuable mineral called unobtanium on Pandora, a lush, Earth-like habitable moon. Pandora is inhabited by the Na’vi, 10-foot tall, blue-skinned, sapient (intelligent) humanoids. The Na’vi worship the mother goddess Eywa. The Na’vi can communicate with animals and the vegetable kingdom by directly plugging into their nerve system. They are gentle in their ways and live in harmony with nature.

To learn about the Na’vi, scientists create hybrid bodies called avatars that are operated via mental link by genetically matched humans. Jake Sully, a paraplegic former marine, is a Na’vi Avatar, created to penetrate the Na’vi people. His job is to work with the Na’vi and get their cooperation so that the valuable minerals can be mined. If the Na’vi do not cooperate, force would be used to evacuate them so that mining could occur.

James Cameron’s film is a critique of corporate greed. The profit-only corporations think nothing of destroying indigenous cultures. Their only motive is profit for the company and multimillion dollar bonuses for the bosses.

The film’s message could also be taken as a critique of predatory religious and political ideologies. Certain religions market their wares through financial inducements. Cultural and religious autonomy should be respected around the globe. I stand for a pluralistic, multi-cultural world rather than a uni-cultural world. Let the hundred flowers bloom.

**Avatar in Sanskrit**

The word *Avatar* is a Sanskrit word, the ancient language of India. Avatar combines Ava=to descend, with tara=to heal, to restore, to crossover. In Hindu epic stories, a divine being descends to earth in order to heal, to restore, and to re-establish Dharma, the natural order. Lord Krishna, an Avatar of Lord Vishnu, declares in the Bhagavad Gita (4: 7-8):

> Yada yada hi dharmasya, glanir bhavati bharata
> Abhaya uthanam adharmasya, tad atmanam sarjami aham
> Paritrinaya sadhunam, vinashaya cha dushkritam
> Dharma sansthapan arthaya, sambhavami yuge yuge

> When dharma (righteousness) is under attack,
> When adharma (unrighteousness) grips the land,
> I come down to Earth.
> To protect the good, to annihilate evil ones,
> And to reestablish dharma,
> I am born age after age.
The Ten Avatars
The ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu are popular in Hinduism.

1. **Matsya**, or the fish-Avatar who saved mankind from the great flood. Manu, the progenitor of mankind, was instructed to prepare a big boat and rescue important items from being lost to the floods. Manu loaded up, among other items, seeds of various kinds, a variety of animals and seven Rishis, or the learned men along with their wives. Manu also secured the Vedas, the sacred books. The Matsya Avatar propels the boat to safety. Lord Matsya is generally represented as a four-armed figure with the upper torso of a man and the lower of a fish. Story can be found in the *Matsya Purana*.

2. **Kurma**, or the tortoise-Avatar, who helped in the churning of the ocean in order to extract the nectar of immortality. Story can be found in the *Kurma Purana*.

3. **Varaha**, the boar-Avatar, who rescued the earth from sinking deep under the ocean. He killed her kidnapper, the evil and powerful despot, Hiranyakashipu. Varaha is generally depicted in art as having a boar’s head on a man’s body. The story symbolizes the resurrection of the earth from being drowned with the weight of greed and exploitation. Story can be found in the *Varaha Purana*.

4. **Narasimha**, or Narasingha, the half man-half lion Avatar. Lord Narsimha killed the demon-king Hiranyakashipu, and saved his devotee, a young boy named Prahalad. The young boy was to be put to death for refusing to worship the demon king, rather than the Lord. Lord’s grace is ever protecting.

5. **Vamana**, the dwarf-avatar. He subdued the demon king Bali and rescued his subjects. Story can be found in the *Vamana Purana*.

6. **Parashurama**, who held back the advancing seas thus saving the lands of Konkan and Malabar from a deluge. Parushrama is generally shown as wielding an axe. He also put down many arrogant Kshatriya overlords.

7. **Rama**, the king of Ayodhya and the hero of the popular epic Ramayana. Rama adheres to dharma despite tremendous personal suffering. Rama is an ideal man and a just ruler. Originally written by Sage Valmiki, the Ramayana story has been told and retold in many languages in India and in countries of South East Asia.

8. **Krishna**, the author of Bhagavad Gita, the most often quoted Hindu scripture. Krishna is a many-faceted Avatar. He guides Arjuna to victory in the Mahabharata War, ca 3102 BC. He sports with village cow-herd girls, called the Gopis. He rescued people from the demonic rule of king Kansa. The extensive Krishna artwork may be seen at: [www.krishnastore.com](http://www.krishnastore.com)

9. **Gautama Buddha**. Many Hindus, though not all, accept Buddha as the ninth Avatar of Lord Vishnu. Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by the life and teachings of Buddha.

10. **Kalki**, Eternity or Time. Kalki is the future Avatar. He is expected to appear at the end of Kali Yuga, the present dark-age. He will destroy the vulgar, corrupt and insatiable overlords of the earth. He will unfold a New Golden Age. Story can be found in the *Kalki Purana*

Abbreviated stories of the avatars can be easily found on the Internet. To view images of the ten Avatars, click: [http://www.hindugallery.com/](http://www.hindugallery.com/), and go to Dasavataram—Incarnations of Vishnu.

**Hindu Avatars: A Parable of Evolution**

The story of ten avatars suggests evolutionary process of life on earth. God appears in successively more developed life-forms: from a fish, to a tortoise (an amphibian animal who lives both in water and on land), to a half man-half animal Narsingha, to the dwarf Vamana, to Parsurama with the axe, to
Avatarhood would have little meaning if it were not connected with the evolution. The Hindu procession of the ten Avatars is itself, as it were, a parable of evolution. First the Fish Avatar, then the amphibious animal between land and water, then the land animal, then the Man-Lion Avatar, bridging man and animal, then man as dwarf, small and undeveloped . . . then the rajasic, sattvic, nirguna Avatars, leading the human development . . . Krishna, Buddha and Kalki depict the last three stages, the stages of the spiritual development. The progression is striking and unmistakable.

The Avatar is a Hindu concept. Some New Age practitioners regard Jesus as an Avatar.

**THEMES OF THE AVATAR**

1. The Avatar descends in answer to an appeal from Mother Earth. Earth is personified in ancient Indian stories. Earth is not dead matter. India has long held the view that the Divine intervenes in human affairs.

2. In certain religions, God is known only through an intermediary, the last Prophet or the only Begotten Son. God does not Himself take birth. He deals with humanity through a chosen proxy. In Hinduism, God manifests personally without the need of an intermediary. “Surely for the earth-consciousness the very fact that the Divine manifests himself is the greatest of all splendors. Consider the obscurity here and what it would be if the Divine did not directly intervene and the Light of Lights did not break out of the obscurity.” (Sri Aurobindo)

3. The idea of the Avatar has persisted in Hinduism because it is a logical outcome of the Vedantic point of view of life. All existence is a manifestation of the Divine and nothing could exist separate and apart from the Divine.

4. The Avatar descends to combat evil and restore righteousness. Ancient Indian thought accepted the idea that “there is continually a struggle between right and wrong, justice and injustice, the force that protects and the force that oppresses.” A man of action must not fear the battle to overcome evil. See Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, Chapter 5.

5. The Avatar appears in different locations at different times. This gives rise to pluralism and multiplicity. God’s revelation is not a single historical event. Rama, Krishna and Buddha are three important Avatars in India.

6. The real Avatar is in the heart. The Divine is available to us in prayer and meditation. He/she answers to our heartfelt need. Shut thy door and go within. The Lord will speak to you.

7. The inner divinity is the eternal Avatar.
I appreciate James Cameron for his movie, Avatar. Mr. Cameron borrowed one of the most potent spiritual words among the Hindus in India and has given it a global relevance.

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**Reading**
