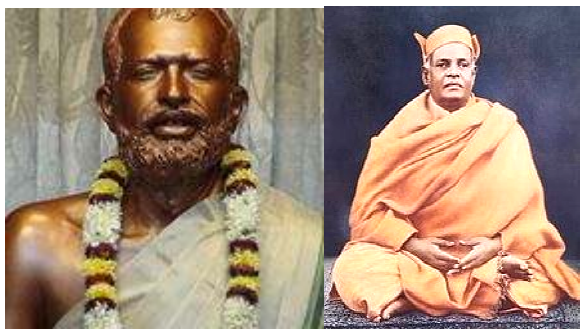




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## THE SPIRITUAL ASPIRANT AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

### Chapter 1



IF WE WANT TO UNDERSTAND SRI RAMAKRISHNA as a spiritual aspirant, we must first understand what sadhana [spiritual discipline] is. Some readers may comment that the people of India are always practising sadhana in some form or other. Why then are we making this book longer by raising this topic? From time immemorial Indians have spent most of their energy [in the quest] for the direct experience

of spiritual truths. Is there any other country that can make this claim? Is there any other country in which so many avatars and knowers of Brahman have been born? Since we are so familiar with the topic of sadhana, it should be unnecessary to recapitulate here the basic principles of the subject.

Although what has been said above is true, it is still necessary to discuss sadhana because many people have strange ideas about it. Losing sight of the goal of sadhana, some people consider it to be mere physical mortification, or the performance of rituals that require one to

1 Erroneous conception about sadhana

collect rare objects in a particular place, or control of the breath, or even the strange activities of deranged minds. In fact, great teachers sometimes advise disturbed people who are obsessed with evil impressions and habits to perform special practices to make them calm and normal so they can follow a spiritual path. Some people consider those prescribed disciplines to be sadhana and claim that they are suitable for every aspirant to practise. In addition, some people who are attached to transient sensual objects of the world make vain efforts under the erroneous notion that God can be controlled by means of mantras or particular rituals, like a snake charmed by a spell. So it will not be out of context to briefly discuss the truths of sadhana that were discovered by Indian sages through millennia of persistent effort.

The Master used to say, "Seeing Brahman, or God, in all beings is the last word of sadhana." At the culmination of sadhana, one reaches that plane.

2. Sadhana's ultimate result is the experience of Brahman in all beings.

The Vedas and Upanishads, the most authoritative Hindu scriptures, support this statement. The scriptures say that whatever you see in the world is truly one nondual Brahman, be it gross or subtle, sentient or insentient, bricks, wood, clay, stone, trees, plants, human beings, animals, gods, or demigods. You are seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting the same Brahman in various forms and in different

states. Although you accomplish all of your daily activities with Brahman's help, you are unaware of It: you believe you are dealing with a multiplicity of objects and persons. When we hear statements such as these, doubts may arise in our minds. This topic will be easy for the reader to understand if we set forth, in question and answer form, certain doubts that arise and how the scriptures satisfy them.

Question: Why do we not perceive that all is Brahman?

Answer: You are deluded. Until your delusion is dispelled, how can you detect it? We recognize our delusions only by comparing our perceptions with real objects or states. You need to have a basis for comparison in order to discover that delusion.

Question: What is the cause of that delusion? When did it come to us?

3. Truth is not revealed when delusion or ignorance is present. The cause of ignorance cannot be understood while one is ignorant

Answer: The cause of this delusion is ignorance, just as it is in all other situations. How can you know when that ignorance first appeared? As long as you remain in ignorance, all of your efforts to realize this will be futile. As long as one is dreaming, the dream appears to be reality. When one awakens, the dream is compared with the waking state and is recognized as unreal. You

may say that sometimes while dreaming one may realize it is a dream. But in such a situation that knowledge appears in the mind from the memory of the waking state. Similarly, while perceiving the world in the waking state, some people have the memory of nondual Brahman.

Question: What is the way out then?

Answer: One must eradicate ignorance. I can definitely assure you that delusion and ignorance can be removed. The sages of the past were able to rid themselves of ignorance and have left us instructions for doing the same.

Question: Before we learn the means, we want to ask a few more questions. You assert that what so many ordinary people see and experience is unreal, and that what only a few sages have experienced is real. Could it be that their perceptions are wrong?

4. Only the sages' perception of this world is true: the reason

Answer: There is no rule that what most people believe is always true. We know that the sages direct experiences are true because, with the knowledge they gained, they became free from misery and attained complete fearlessness and eternal peace. Moreover, they discovered the ultimate purpose of all actions and efforts of human life, which inevitably ends in death. In addition, this true knowledge manifests itself as forbearance, contentment, compassion, humility, and other noble qualities. It also makes a person's outlook amazingly catholic. In the scriptures we find evidence of these extraordinary qualities and powers in the lives of the sages; and even now we find the same in those who have attained perfection by following in their footsteps.

Question: Well, how is it that all of us experience the same delusion? What I recognize as

5. Though the same delusion may be seen by many, that does not make it true

an animal, you also see as an animal —by not as a man. It is the same for all external objects. It is many, that does not amazing that so many people have the same delusion at the same time, regarding all objects. Everywhere it can be seen that although some people have a false impression of a certain thing, others

correctly perceive the same object. But here we find an exception to that rule; your position seems to be indefensible.

Answer: You find here an exception to that rule, because you are not including those few sages among the people. If you do include them, you will see that the answer was given in response to your previous question. You ask how all people can be under the same delusion. The scriptures say in reply: The universe has arisen by way of ideation in the limitless, infinite Cosmic Mind. We all experience the same mental images

6. The imaginary world exists the Cosmic Mind, so all beings have the same delusion. But the Cosmic Mind is not deluded because of this.

because the individual minds of yours, mine, and all people are parts of and included in the Cosmic Mind. That is why we cannot see an animal in any way we like, nor can we perceive it to be other than an animal. Similarly, one among us may attain true knowledge and become free from all delusion, while others remain under its spell. Although the world arises in the Cosmic Mind of the Divine Being by ideation, He is not affected by the bond of ignorance as we are. Because He is omniscient, He sees that the nondual Brahman thoroughly pervades this world, which originated from ignorance. Because we are incapable of this perception, our case is different. The Master used to say: "There is poison in the fangs of the snake. The snake eats its food daily with those fangs and is not at all affected. But a person bitten by a snake dies instantly."

From the standpoint of the scriptures it can be seen that the world which is only an idea in the Cosmic Mind, is in a way imagined by our minds as well. Our limited individual minds have an eternal and inseparable relationship with the collective Cosmic Mind, like one's limbs with the rest of one's body. Again, one cannot say that at an earlier time

7. The world is beyond space and time. Prakriti [Nature] is without beginning

the idea of the world did not exist in the Cosmic Mind, and that it later arose. This is not possible because name and form, or space and time - without which there cannot be any diversity in creation - are included in the idea of the world; they are eternally inseparable from that idea. With a little calm reflection, the reader will understand this and will realize why the Vedic scriptures have taught that prakriti, or maya - the basic cause of creative power — is without beginning and is beyond time. If the world is an idea of the mind, and if the beginning of that idea is not within what we know as "time," then it must be that the idea of time and the idea of the world exist simultaneously in the Cosmic Mind, the source of all ideas. Because our limited individual minds have been experiencing this idea [i.e., the world] for a very long time, we are firmly convinced that the world is real. We cannot detect our own delusion because we have completely forgotten that the world is imaginary, and for a long time we have been deprived of the direct experience of nondual Brahman, who is beyond the imaginary world. As we have said earlier, we are able to recognize deluded ideas or perceptions only by comparing them with the real things and states.

Now it is clear that our conceptions about and experiences of the world have taken their present form as a result of habits thereof accumulated over a very long period of time. If we want to have the right knowledge about the world, we shall have to realize that truth which is beyond name and form, space and time, mind and intellect, and

8. Sadhana is the effort to know the cause of the world, which is beyond space and time!

other attributes of the world. The effort to know that truth has been called *sadhana* by the Vedas and other scriptures. This effort exists, knowingly and unknowingly, in men and women who in India are called *sadhakas*, or spiritual aspirants.

Generally speaking, this effort to know the truth that transcends the world has developed along two main paths: the negative and the positive. The first is described by the scriptures as *neti, neti* [not this, not this], the path of knowledge; the second as *iti, iti* [this, this], the path of devotion.

The aspirant who follows the path of knowledge understands the ultimate goal from the very beginning; remembering the goal, the aspirant consciously moves forward towards it every day. Followers of the path of devotion, however, are not fully aware of their ultimate goal. They move forward by adopting higher and higher ideals one after another, until they finally have direct experience of the nondual Reality beyond the world. The followers of both paths must renounce the idea about the reality of the world that is held by ordinary people. The *jnani* [follower of the path of knowledge] tries to renounce this idea completely from the beginning. The devotee begins *sadhana* by partly renouncing the world and partly holding onto it, but eventually reaches the truth, "One without a second," and renounces everything, as does the *jnani*. Giving up the ordinary, selfish, sense-pleasure-oriented idea about the world is called *vairagya* [renunciation] by the scriptures.

Because human life is ever-changing and subject to inevitable death the knowledge that the world is impermanent comes naturally. For that reason it seems that in ancient times people first renounced the ordinary conception of the world and then began to search for the cause of the world by following the path of *neti, neti*. Although the paths of devotion and knowledge were both in practice during the same period, it is seen in the Upanishads that the path of knowledge was fully developed before every aspect of the path of devotion reached completion.

The Upanishads bear witness to the fact that people who followed the path of *neti, neti* quickly became introspective: Brahman, the cause of the world, is "not this, not that." These spiritual aspirants understood that it was better to explore their own bodies and minds, which were directly connected with the world, rather than other external objects.

It would therefore be quicker to discover the cause of the world if they proceeded through the body and mind. As one can press one grain of rice to see if the entire pot of rice is well cooked, so if one finds Brahman within oneself, one can see It in all animate and inanimate objects. This is why the inquiry "What am I?" becomes the only goal of the *jnani*.

We have mentioned before that those who follow the path of knowledge, as well as those who follow the path of devotion, have to give up the common conception of the world [that it is real]. The complete eradication

of that idea frees the human mind from thought waves and leads it to *samadhi*. This particular state is called by the scriptures *nirvikalpa samadhi*. We shall tell the reader in a different place (see III.2.32-34) how the follower of the path of knowledge proceeds with the inquiry of "What am I?" and how he attains *nirvikalpa samadhi*; then we will describe the experience he



has at that time. But now it is necessary to briefly tell the reader how one who follows the path of devotion attains the experience of nirvikalpa samadhi .

We have described the path of devotion as the path of iti, iti. Although the devotee experiences the impermanence of the world, he or she believes in God, the creator of the world; and he or she also believes that His creation exists and is real. Devotees look upon the world — and all beings and objects in it — as related to God, so they consider everything to be their very own. They shun whatever they believe to be an obstacle on the path leading to the experience of that relationship. The pressing goal of a devotee is to love and be absorbed in meditation on a particular form of God<sup>1</sup> and to perform every action for His delight.

12 The attainment of nirvikalpa Samadhi is reached by following the path of iti, iti

We shall now discuss how a person can forget the existence of the world through deep meditation on the form of God and then reach the transcendental state. We have mentioned earlier that a devotee accepts a certain form of God as his or her own Chosen Deity, and contemplates and meditates on that deity. In the early stages of meditation, the devotee cannot visualize the entire form of the

Chosen Deity. Sometimes the hands or feet, or only the face, appear in the mind. As soon as those are visualized, they disappear; the images do not remain constant. As meditation gradually deepens, that form begins to remain steady in front of the devotee, until the mind becomes restless. Later, as meditation becomes still deeper, the devotee sees that divine form move and smile, hears the deity speak, and ultimately even feels the touch of that divine form. The devotee then perceives that form as alive in all respects. Whether the devotee meditates with eyes open or closed, he or she can see the deity's graceful movements. Later still, as a result of the devotee's faith that the Chosen Deity can assume various forms at will, the devout aspirant attains the vision of various divine forms emanating from the form of the Chosen Deity. The Master used to say that a person who has vividly seen one divine form in this manner can easily have visions of other divine forms.

We can understand one thing from what has been said so far: An aspirant who has been graced with the vision of those living divine forms feels that those forms seen in the realm of ideas during meditation are as real as objects seen in the waking state. The more the devotee feels that the external world and the realm of ideas are both real, the more deeply he or she realizes that the external world is the projection of the mind. During deep meditation, the devotee so intensely experiences the realm of ideas that he or she does not have the slightest knowledge of the external world. The scriptures call this state *savikalpa samadhi*. Although during this samadhi concentration has banished the external world from the devotee's mind, the realm of ideas remains. As we experience happiness and misery every day when dealing with people and objects in the external world, so the devotee experiences the same emotions when interacting with the Chosen Deity. Any thoughts, desires, and doubts that arise in the devotee's mind all relate to the Chosen Deity. Because the series of thoughts that arise at that

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<sup>1</sup> We consider the worship of the Brahmo Samaj as meditation on a form of God: When a person meditates on a Personality endowed with noble qualities but without form, he is bound to think of something like space, water, air, fire, and so on.

time in the devotee's mind focus on one object only, the scriptures call this state *savikalpa*, or samadhi with mental modifications.

When the devotee is thus absorbed in one particular object in the spiritual realm, the gross external world disappears from his or her mind; when one idea becomes predominant, all other ideas cease to exist. For the devout aspirant who has proceeded this far, the attainment of nirvikalpa samadhi is not too remote. One who has been able to eradicate his or her lifelong belief about the reality of the world has developed an extremely powerful and steadfast mind. A devotee who can make the mind completely free from modifications can more deeply enjoy the relationship with God. When the devotee realizes this, his or her whole mind runs enthusiastically in that direction. The devotee soon ascends to the highest plane of consciousness by the grace of the guru and of God, and attains eternal peace by becoming established in nondual knowledge. Alternatively, it can be said that passionate love for the Chosen Deity shows the devotee that highest plane and helps him or her to experience oneness with God, as did the gopis of Vrindaban.

These are the ways, described in the scriptures, by which aspirants who follow the paths

13. Avatars are both divine and human, so they seem to be perfect even during their" sadhana. It is necessary to study their lives in both aspects.

of knowledge and of devotion can reach the ultimate goal. But because both divine and human characteristics always coexist in the lives of the avatars, even during their sadhana they sometimes appear to be perfect and powerful. This may happen because they have the power to move on both divine and human planes naturally; or perhaps because their divine nature is innate and spontaneous, it sometimes pierces the external veil of their

human nature and manifests itself. Whatever the explanation is, such stories [of superhuman perfection early on] have made the lives of avatars difficult to comprehend and mysterious to the human intellect, it seems that this intricate mystery will never be solved completely. It is a gospel truth that people will benefit immensely if they study the lives of the avatars with reverence. During the ancient Puranic [Epic] Age, the avatars' human characteristics were kept hidden and only their divine aspects were discussed. In our sceptical modern age, however, the human aspects of the avatars have been stressed and their divine natures have been completely disregarded. In this present context, while discussing the avatars' lives we shall try to explain to the reader how both aspects exist simultaneously in them. It is no exaggeration to say that we would never be able to understand the life of an avatar in that way if we had not seen the godman Sri Ramakrishna.

