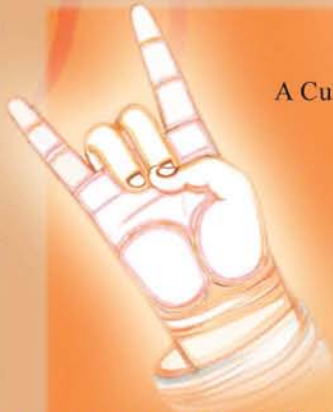


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A Cultural and Spiritual Monthly of the Ramakrishna Order Since 1914



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Spotlight:

Joy of Spirituality



December 2011



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—Swami Vivekananda



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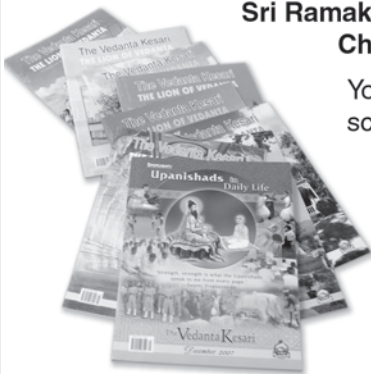
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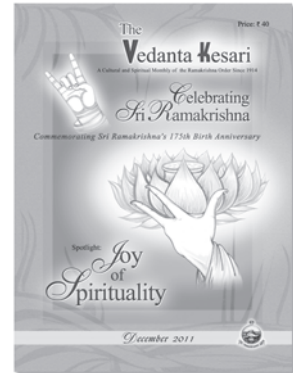
'Doing is very good, but that comes from thinking. . . . Fill the brain, therefore, with high thoughts, highest ideals, place them day and night before you, and out of that will come great work.'

—Swami Vivekananda

COVER STORY

Joy of Spirituality

Joy is the one thing that everyone seeks. Means and forms vary but what is sought is same—joy. Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master of Spirituality, always insisted that one could find lasting joy only *within*. This inner joy wells up in mind when we turn away from the lower forms of joy which senses and ego promise, and make the mind free from all impurities and complexes. In the cover-picture, the bloomed lotus, held near the centre of chest, alludes to the well-known photograph of Sri Ramakrishna in samadhi, taken at Keshab Chandra Sen's house in Kolkata. The bubbling up of the inner joy is symbolized by blossoming forth of 'lotus of heart'—an enduring motif of spiritual awakening and joy.



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EACH SOUL IS POTENTIALLY DIVINE. THE GOAL IS TO MANIFEST THE DIVINITY WITHIN.

5

Prayers

हृदयकमलमध्ये राजितं निर्विकल्पं सदसदखिलभेदातीतमेकस्वरूपम्।
प्रकृतिविकृतिशून्यं नित्यमानन्दमूर्तिं विमलपरमहंसं रामकृष्णं भजामः॥

The changeless Absolute shining bright in the lotus of the heart,
The Unitary Being beyond the grasp of
concepts like existence and non-existence,
And devoid of the modifications of Nature—
thus abides the blissful being of Ramakrishna.
To Him the spotless Spiritual Swan, our salutation.

प्रेम्नः स्वरूपमिह यद्विमलं पवित्रं निःस्वार्थमित्यभिधया कथितं सुबोधैः।
तत् प्राप्नुमिच्छसि यदि प्रणयार्द्रचित्तान् कुर्वन्तमाश्रितजनान् भज रामकृष्णम्॥

If thou aspiest for the state of selflessness,
Called as the holy, pure and motiveless love by enlightened men,
Then do thou adore Ramakrishna, who saturates
the hearts of his devotees with love.

जानामि तत्त्वं न हि देशिकेन्द्रं किं वा स्वरूपं कथमेव भावम्।
हे रामकृष्ण त्वयि भक्तिहीने कृपाकटाक्षं कुरु देव नित्यम्॥

What art Thou?
We know not, the 'Greatest Teacher,'
What Thy measure,
The depth of wisdom or nature.
O Ramakrishna! ever cast Thy glance of grace
On him, who hath not devotion's trace.

—Swami Abhedananda



I know one [Sri Ramakrishna] whom the world used to call mad, and this was his answer: 'My friends, the whole world is a lunatic asylum. Some are mad after worldly love, some after name, some after fame, some after money, some after salvation and going to heaven. In this big lunatic asylum I am also mad, I am mad after God. If you are mad after money, I am mad after God. You are mad; so am I. I think my madness is after all the best.'

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 3: 100



Sri Ramakrishna's face beaming with inner joy—a close up of the photograph taken at Keshab Chandra Sen's house

Glimpses of Sri Ramakrishna's Joy

Sri Ramakrishna lived in a state of continual joy. His words of wisdom were full of love as also it was a joy to be in his company. The following compilation from The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, recorded by 'M', published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, gives an idea of this perennial joy.

The Joy of Illumination

It is a joy to merge the mind in the Indivisible Brahman through contemplation. And it is also a joy to keep the mind on the Lila, the Relative, without dissolving it in the Absolute.¹

There are three kinds of *ananda*, joy: the joy of worldly enjoyment, the joy of worship, and the Joy of Brahman. The joy of worldly enjoyment is the joy of 'woman and gold', which people always enjoy. The joy of worship one enjoys while chanting the name and glories of God. And the Joy of Brahman is the joy of God-vision. After experiencing the joy of God-vision the rishis of olden times went beyond all rules and conventions.²

That is why one should cultivate a taste for God's name. Any name will do—Durga, Krishna, or Siva. Then if, through the chanting of the name, one's attachment to God grows day by day, and joy fills the soul, one has nothing to fear. The delirium will certainly disappear; the grace of God will certainly descend.³

Attribute to yourselves the bliss of God-Consciousness; then you too will experience ineffable joy. The bliss of God-Consciousness always exists in you. It is only hidden by the veiling and projecting power of maya. The less you are attached to the world, the more you love God.

But it is one thing to hear of God, another thing to see God, and still another thing to

talk to God. Some have heard of milk, some have seen it, and some, again, have tasted it. You feel happy when you see milk; you are nourished and strengthened when you drink it. You will get peace of mind only when you have seen God. You will enjoy bliss and gain strength only when you have talked to Him.⁴

The instruction of a man who has not seen God does not produce the right effect. He may say one thing rightly, but he becomes confused about the next. Samadhyayi [a popular preacher] delivered a lecture. He said: 'God is beyond words and mind; He is dry. Worship Him through the bliss of your love and devotion.' Just see, he thus described God, whose very nature is Joy and Bliss! What will such a lecture accomplish? Can it teach people anything?⁵

There are signs by which you can know whether a man has truly seen God. One of these is joy; there is no hesitancy in him. He is like the ocean: the waves and sounds are on the surface; below are profound depths.⁶

You talk about the virtues of a person as long as you haven't seen him, but no sooner does he appear before you than all such talk stops. You are beside yourself with joy simply to be with him. You feel overwhelmed by simply conversing with him. You don't talk about his virtues any more.⁷

The nearer you approach to God, the more you feel His love. As the river approa-

ches the ocean it increasingly feels the flow of the tides. . . .

Why then do I take care of the body? It is to enjoy God, to sing His name and glories, and to go about visiting His jnanis and bhaktas.⁸

A little spiritual discipline is necessary. Through the practice of discipline one gradually obtains divine joy. Suppose a jar with money inside is hidden deep under the earth and someone wants to possess it. In that case he must take the trouble of digging for it. As he digs, he perspires. After much digging the spade strikes the metal jar. He feels a thrill at the sound. The more sound the spade makes, striking against the jar, the more joy he feels.⁹

The aspirant, while practising spiritual discipline, looks upon the world as a 'framework of illusion'. Again, after the attainment of Knowledge, the vision of God, this very world becomes to him a 'mansion of mirth'. . . . Chaitanya is an example of such ecstatic love. He laughed and wept and danced and sang in divine ecstasy.¹⁰

Now and then man catches a glimpse of his real Self and becomes speechless with wonder. At such times he swims in an ocean of joy. It is like suddenly meeting a dear relative.¹¹

Do you know another way a jnani meditates? Think of infinite akasa and a bird flying there, joyfully spreading Its wings. There is the Chidakasa, and Atman is the bird. The bird is not imprisoned in a cage; it flies in the Chidakasa. Its joy is limitless.¹²

One cannot describe in words the joy of play and communion with Satchidananda. He alone knows, who has realized it.¹³

If but once He should give man a taste of divine joy, then man would not care to lead a worldly life. The creation would come to an end.¹⁴

There are sages who, even after attaining Knowledge, work to help others and also to enjoy the Bliss of God in the company of devotees. 'I want to eat sugar. I don't want to be sugar.'¹⁵

In the State of Samadhi

In samadhi I lose outer consciousness completely; but God generally keeps a little trace of ego in me for the enjoyment of divine communion. Enjoyment is possible only when 'I' and 'you' remain.¹⁶

My joy after that experience was equal to the pain I suffered before it. Mahabhava is a divine ecstasy; it shakes the body and mind to their very foundation. It is like a huge elephant entering a small hut. The house shakes to its foundation. Perhaps it falls to pieces.¹⁷

The Master went into deep samadhi. His body was motionless; he sat with folded hands as in his photograph. Tears of joy flowed from the corners of his eyes. After a long time his mind came down to the ordinary plane of consciousness. He mumbled something, of which only a word now and then could be heard by the devotees in the room. He was saying: 'Thou art I, and I am Thou—Thou eatest—Thou—I eat! . . . What is this confusion Thou hast created?'

'I see everything like a man with jaundiced eyes! I see Thee alone everywhere. O Krishna, Friend of the lowly! O Eternal Consort of my soul! O Govinda!'

As he uttered the words 'Eternal Consort of my soul' and 'Govinda', the Master again went into samadhi.¹⁸

He shed tears of joy as he repeated the holy name of Rama. M. wondered whether this very saint was the person who a few minutes earlier had been behaving like a child of five.¹⁹

Spellbound, they looked on a great yogi, his face lighted with a divine smile, his countenance radiating love, his eyes sparkling with joy—a man who had renounced all for God and who knew nothing but God. Unceasing words of wisdom flowed from his lips.²⁰

When he [M.] looked at Sri Ramakrishna he was struck with wonder; for the Master stood motionless, with eyes transfixed. He seemed not even to breathe. A devotee told M. that the Master was in samadhi. M. had never before seen or heard of such a thing. Silent with wonder, he thought: 'Is it possible for a man to be so oblivious of the outer world in the consciousness of God? How deep his faith and devotion must be to bring about such a state!'²¹

In His Joyous Company

Sri Ramakrishna was sitting in his room after his midday meal, with Rakhal, Ram, and some other devotees. He was not quite well. The injured arm was still bandaged.

But in spite of his illness, his room was a veritable mart of joy and he the centre of it. Devotees thronged there daily to see the Master. Spiritual talk went on incessantly, and, the very air of the room vibrated with bliss. Sometimes the Master would sing the name and glories of God, and sometimes he would go into samadhi, the devotees being amazed at the ease with which the Master freed himself from the consciousness of the body.²²

The Master was having great fun with the boys, treating them as if they were his most

intimate friends. Peals of side-splitting laughter filled the room, as if it were a mart of joy.²³

He talked with the devotees in great delight. With a radiant smile lighting his face, and his eyes fixed on Narendra, he was giving them various spiritual teachings, interspersing these with incidents from his own life.²⁴

You see, you are a devotee of God. The very sight of you gladdens my heart.²⁵

Sri Ramakrishna was pacing the room with M. He had put on his slippers. In spite of his painful illness his face beamed with joy.²⁶

The flood-gate of the Master's heart was open so wide, that night, that he could hardly contain himself for joy. It was eight o'clock in the evening. Intoxicated with divine love, he paced the long verandah north of his room. Now and then he could be heard talking to the Divine Mother.²⁷

As the carriage went along, the Master put his head out of the window and looked with childlike enjoyment, at the people, the vehicles, the horses, and the streets, all flooded with moonlight. Now and then he heard European ladies singing at the piano. He was in a very happy mood.²⁸

Suddenly Sri Ramakrishna went into a spiritual mood and said to Dr. Sarkar: 'Mahindra Babu, what is this madness of yours about money? Why such attachment to wife? Why such longing for name and fame? Give up all these, now, and direct your mind to God with whole-souled devotion. Enjoy the Bliss of God.'²⁹ □

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Sri Ramakrishna's Message of Inner Joy

Three Types of Joys

'I never saw Master sad. He was joyous in the company of everyone, whether a boy of five or an old man. I never saw him morose,' remarked Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi about Sri Ramakrishna.¹

Of the days she spent in Dakshineswar, Holy Mother, who was married to him at an early age, reminisced,²

I then felt as if a pitcher of bliss was kept in my heart. . . It was a constant experience with me then. It is very difficult to convey an idea of this experience to others.

In both these statements one thing that stands out is: Sri Ramakrishna was always in a state of bliss and joy which radiated on everyone who came in touch with him. Happiness was writ large on his countenance. He was joyous under all circumstances. Even when he was stricken with serious illness, with throat cancer, he lived in joy, as the following anecdote illustrates:

Harinath (future Swami Turiyananda) asked Sri Ramakrishna, 'Sir, how are you?' The Master replied, 'Oh, I am in great pain. I cannot eat anything, and there is an unbearable burning in my throat.' Harinath knew that a knower of Brahman is beyond the pairs of opposites, pleasure and pain. He understood that the Master was testing him, so he said to him, 'Sir, whatever you may say, I see you as an infinite ocean of bliss.' At this Sri Ramakrishna said with a smile, 'This rascal has found me out!'³

How did he live in perpetual joy? What was the nature of his joy?

'There are', says Sri Ramakrishna,

three kinds of *ananda*, joy: the joy of worldly enjoyment, the joy of worship, and the Joy of Brahman. The joy of worldly enjoyment is the joy of 'woman and gold', which people always enjoy. The joy of worship one enjoys while chanting the name and glories of God. And the Joy of Brahman is the joy of God-vision.⁴

Obviously Sri Ramakrishna lived in *brahmananda*, the joy of God-vision. And he taught it through his actions and words. He said that if one wants ever-lasting joy, one should seek God. Sri Ramakrishna's whole life is an illustration of this fact.

Happiness Explored

Everyone, without exception, wants happiness. At the immediate or far end of all our plans and action it is happiness that we seek. Our ideas and methods of seeking happiness vary but it is happiness that we seek. We want to be happy.

Most of us, body-bound or earth-bound that we are, have a very gross idea of what happiness is. Achieving worldly success, and becoming powerful and famous is considered a byword of being happy. To be happy, therefore, means to have a good source of income, have a large house with all modern amenities, being powerful in social and economic matters and so on. Happiness, in other words, means 'the joy of worldly joy' (*vishyananda*).

In how many ways men seek joy in life! From gross sensory indulgence to breathtaking adventures, and a wide range of 'joys' in between, there is no end to the ways we seek happiness. While most people take a lot of time to discover the value of 'toys' of life, Sri Ramakrishna could see through it with astounding speed. Here is an incident from his life:

Once the idea came to me to put on a very expensive robe embroidered with gold and to smoke a silver hubble-bubble. Mathur Babu sent me the new robe and the hubble-bubble. I put on the robe. I also smoked the hubble-bubble in various fashions. Sometimes I smoked it reclining this way, and sometimes that way, sometimes with head up, and sometimes with head down. Then I said to myself, 'O mind, this is what they call smoking a silver hubble-bubble.' Immediately I renounced it. I kept the robe on my body a few minutes longer and then took it off. I began to trample it underfoot and spit on it, saying: 'So this is an expensive robe! But it only increases man's *rajas*.'⁵

This happiness-ideal of life is further reinforced by the heightened consumerist culture advocated and popularised through media and all allied forces. 'Buy this gadget! Buy this product! And discover bliss!' 'Make the "right choice", and make your life complete!' Messages such as these, advocating the idea that all glory of human life lies in acquiring and enjoying the objects of senses, are found everywhere, in many forms and idioms. Unbridled enjoyment of sense objects has been a source of much inner restlessness and emptiness of life—but that is never referred to.

Is it wrong to 'enjoy'? Far from, enjoying the happiness brought to us by our senses is well-accepted as one of the four purposes of human beings (*purushartha*). Artha and Kama (money and desire for enjoyment), however,

should be pursued with circumspection and care—the rules of dharma or righteous conduct. Dharma should be the guiding force behind all our endeavours.

But there is happiness and joy which is higher than all the 'good' ways of enjoying life. The Taittiriyaopanishad describes it by enumerating 'joy' in a graded manner. The Upanishad says:⁶

This, then, is an evaluation of that Bliss:

Suppose there is a young man—in the prime of life, good, learned, most expeditious, most strongly built, and most energetic. Suppose there lies this earth for him filled with wealth. This will be one unit of human joy.

If this human joy be multiplied a hundred times, it is one joy of the man-Gandharvas, and so also of a follower of the Vedas unaffected by desires.

If this joy of the man-Gandharvas be multiplied a hundred times, it is one joy of the divine-Gandharvas, and so also of a follower of the Vedas unaffected by desire.

If the joy of the divine-Gandharvas be increased a hundredfold, it is one joy of the manes whose world is everlasting, and so of a follower of the Vedas untouched by desire.

If the joy of the manes that dwell in the everlasting world be increased a hundredfold, it is one joy of those that are born as gods in heaven, and so of a follower of the Vedas untouched by desire.

If the joy of those that are born as gods in heaven be multiplied a hundred-fold, it is one joy of the gods called the Karma-Devas, who reach the gods through Vedic rites, and so of a follower of the Vedas unaffected by desire.

If the joy of the gods, called the Karma-Devas, be multiplied a hundredfold, it is one joy of the gods, and so of a follower of the Vedas untarnished by desire.

If the joy of the gods be increased a hundred times, it is one joy of Indra, and so of a follower of the Vedas untouched by desire.

If the joy of Indra be multiplied a hundred-fold, it is one joy of Brihaspati, and so of a follower of the Vedas unaffected by desire.

If the joy of Brihaspati be increased a hundred times, it is one joy of Virat, and so of a follower of the Vedas untarnished by desire.

If the joy of Virat be multiplied a hundred times, it is one joy of Hiranyagarbha and so is it of the follower of the Vedas unsullied by desire.

Where does the pleasure of senses (*vishyananda*) stand in this ladder of happiness? At the bottom most! To seek worldly happiness is, therefore, to seek the lowest measure of joy. To seek Divine joy is to seek the highest rung of the ladder.

Seeking the Inner Joy

Bliss that man seeks is eternal. In other words, we all seek God for God alone is eternal. All else is ephemeral and momentary. It is the bliss of God-experience which alone can satisfy or fulfil us forever. Divine joy is what spiritual illumination brings. As Sri Ramakrishna says,

Ananda, or perfect bliss within, is one of the signs of God-vision. The waves roll on the surface of the ocean, but the deep expanse of water lies unruffled beneath.⁷

Often the journey to seek inner joy begins with a dark note. Pain and bitter experiences often act as doorkeepers to the kingdom of inner joy. Buddha called pain or *dukhha* as one of the noble truths (*arya satya*). Patanjali says that to a man of inner awakening everything looks to be painful (*sarvam dukham vivekina*). Bhagavad Gita too begins with the grief of Arjuna and the first chapter of the Gita is appropriately called the Way to Yoga through Arjuna's Grief (*Arjuna-vishad-yoga*).

But pain, misery, frustration and all their allied forms are *not* the ultimate reality of life.

They are true in so far as they exist and are 'real' in a relative context. Life consists of a pair of opposites: happiness-unhappiness, good-bad, virtue-vice, day-night, hot-cold, good times-bad times, . . . and so on. Once we know the 'reality' of unreality, i.e., the impermanent nature of world, there arises within the awakened mind a call to search for the permanent, the ever-lasting and unceasing reality. This turning away from the world signifies the turning towards to the eternal joy as well. Then enters peace in our life, and as the Gita says, 'Where is joy without peace?' True joy and peace go together.

Sri Ramakrishna taught that the joy that one seeks outside is actually within. He illustrated it thus:

A man woke up at midnight and desired to smoke. Therefore he wanted some fire, for which he went to a neighbour's house and knocked at the door. Someone opened the door and asked him what he wanted. The man said: 'I wish to smoke. Can you give me a little fire?' The neighbour replied: 'Bah! What is the matter with you? You have taken so much trouble to come and awaken us at this hour, while in your own hand you have a lighted lantern!' What man wants is already within him but he still wanders here and there searching for it.⁸

Sri Ramakrishna came to remind us that we are all children of immortality (*amritasya putrah*). He repeatedly emphasised, through his own example, through his small/big actions, through an never-ending smile playing on his lips that joy is our real nature. Life can be lived. Joy *is*. But this joy is not to be found in the world of senses or ego. It is to be found within. It is the joy of Self; seek, therefore, the joy within. 'When Divine bliss is attained,' Sri Ramakrishna would say, 'a person becomes quite intoxicated with it; even without drinking wine, he looks like one fully drunk.'⁹

Anyone who has ever had the chance to read Sri Ramakrishna's life knows that Sri Ramakrishna was an embodiment of this inner joy. Having undergone spiritual practices—a reading of which in itself is an extraordinary educative experience—he knew 'God alone is real,' and therefore he was neither attracted by anything worldly nor tormented by any temptations. He knew the value of money was only to bring creature comforts; it could never bring everlasting joy.

Conclusion

Sri Ramakrishna's message of inner joy is all the more relevant in today's world of increasing violence and unrest. When one looks around at the contemporary scenario, one encounters a dismal picture. What is the way out—according to Sri Ramakrishna—of this awful mess? Renounce! Yes, renunciation is what Sri Ramakrishna taught over and over again. His idea of renunciation is that of giving up the lower for the higher. But what is lower and what is higher is a relative question. What is 'lower' for someone may be 'higher' for someone else. Worldly enjoyments may be 'lower' for a monk but 'higher' to a man with desires. Sri Ramakrishna, the great master of living that he was, spoke of gradual path of enjoy-and-give-up to those who lack sharp discrimination (viveka) and an imme-

diately path of 'give-up' to those who were ready for it. By renunciation he meant renunciation of lust and greed, and development of an attitude of humility and service to others.

When one goes through the reminiscences of the people who personally knew or lived with Sri Ramakrishna, this message of inner joy through renunciation is one thing that is most easily discernable. Spirituality means finding this inner joy through renunciation and spiritual practices. This is what we need to understand and apply in life, if we seek lasting joy in life.



Keeping *inner joy* as the theme, this issue of The Vedanta Kesari, tries to explore various aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's personality and teachings. We are grateful to our valued contributors for enriching this volume by their writings. The year 2012 marks the conclusion of the 175th birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. It is a historic occasion and this Special Issue of the Vedanta Kesari is a modest attempt to mark it. It is celebrating an extraordinary phenomenon of our times, a man in whom 'man was all gone' and Divine alone remained! Looking at his amazing spiritual practices and astounding spiritual attainments, one can only join with countless devotees who sing every day: *Jai Sri Ramakrishna* or Hail Sri Ramakrishna! □



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As long as a man feels that God is 'there', he is ignorant. But he attains knowledge when he feels that God is 'here'. —Sri Ramakrishna

Simhâvalokanam

From the Archives of THE VEDANTA KESARI

(February, 2004, Pp. 51-52)

A Meditation on Sri Ramakrishna

BY SWAMI BHUTESHANANDA

[Excerpts from the Presidential Address delivered on 9th March 1989 by Revered Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj, the twelfth President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.]



Today is the holy birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna. We are gathered here in the holy precincts of Belur Math to spend sometime in contemplating his life. This contemplation is not just for today; it will go on for ages and through this process, all our lives will attain to fulfilment. . . I am using the word 'Sri Ramakrishna' in a comprehensive sense. It is the contemplation of the ideal life he has set before all of us. . .

This sport of man with God, or the sport of God with man, has been going on for ages. Though He is immanent in all. . . as an omnipresent being, He has hidden Himself in such a way that through the ages, man has been seeking Him, searching for Him. . . But for man, there can be no higher fulfilment than to spend birth after birth. . ., trying to realize Him. . .

Through his life and teachings, Sri Ramakrishna teaches us not to spend our lives in vain. . . If we look at the human aspect of his life, we see that it is centred on an ideal—truth, renunciation, love, purity, and above all, God-realization. He used to weep, 'Another day has passed, Mother; yet Thou hast not granted me Thy vision!'. . . We do not know when we will do so; but the eagerness, the zeal, the earnest seeking that Sri Ramakrishna has demonstrated is a great lesson for us. *Pratyayanti gatah punarna divasah*—'the days that are gone by do not return'. We have lost so many days. But can we not spend the days that are left in trying to follow the ideal set forth by Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna?

Sri Ramakrishna has said, 'I have made the mould. You cast yourself in this mould.' Again, this mould is so wonderful that we can each cast ourselves in it without losing our individual characteristics. This wondrous mould is suitable for all. Whatever one may be—householder, monk, youth, aged, Hindu, Muslim, Christian—Sri Ramakrishna offers a totally new mould, a new ideal; anybody can make his life worthwhile by following this ideal in the way most suited to him. We have to study deeply this uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna's life. Often we analyze his philosophy, various aspects of his life and glory, his contribution and so on. But the first thing that we should think about is how far we can utilize him in our lives. What we should especially realize is that it is not just for us he has come; it is for me. . . Sri Ramakrishna's life should have a practical impact on our lives in this way. That is to say, we should be able to apply it in our lives. □



Sri Ramakrishna

—photograph taken on the verandah of the Radhakanta temple at Dakshineswar

Sri Ramakrishna's Experience of God

SWAMI SMARANANANDA

God Can Be Experienced

Religion is a realization, not talk, not doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful all these may be. Religion is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging. It is not an intellectual assent, but one's whole nature becoming changed into it. Such is religion. . . this being and becoming is what is religion.¹

These succinct words of Swami Vivekananda aptly outline what constitutes religion. God is a Reality which has been experienced. It may be very rare, but if even *one* person experiences the Reality, then it is real; it proves God's existence.

How do we describe God? Our scriptures say that God is beyond all sense-perception, because He, by His own nature, transcends all relative phenomena. He is the Reality behind the ever-changing world.

As a young man Narendranath (the future Swami Vivekananda) approached many intellectuals of Calcutta of those days and asked them about the existence of God, but did not get a satisfying answer. However, when he met Sri Ramakrishna, an unlettered man, and asked him the question, he got a positive and convincing answer: 'Yes, I have seen Him and I can show Him to you'.²

If God is so real, then why do we not see Him? Sri Ramakrishna says:

You see many stars at night in the sky, but find them not when the sun rises. Can you therefore say that there are no stars?³

If we look back into recent history, we find that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were serious efforts to dispense with the very idea of God and religion. Many intellectuals and learned men of influence made all out efforts in that direction. And it looked as if it was going to happen. In India, the intellectuals of Calcutta, the capital of the British Empire at that time, were also influenced by the modern thoughts in Europe. There were also attempts to reform and modify Hinduism by putting it into a Christian mould! It was at this juncture Sri Ramakrishna appeared on the modern scene almost imperceptibly, throwing a challenge, as it were, to these thoughts, by living a God-centred life.

Sri Ramakrishna was uneducated in the conventional sense of the term. Yet this unlettered man, knowing nothing about the outside world, plunged into the depths of the Divine. He was only eighteen. But his hunger for seeing God, for realizing the transcendental Reality was so great that he astonished the people at the Dakshineswar Kali temple where he lived then. A study of his intense spiritual practices leaves one wondering whether such a thing is possible. He practised spiritual disciplines of not only Hinduism but also of other religions. His spiritual experiences were phenomenal and unprecedented in the spiritual history of the world. Nothing like what he practised and realized can be seen in the recorded history. He was truly a knower of

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God and proved by his own experiences that God can be realized.

'Knowing' God

Knowing God is quite different from knowledge gained by sensory experiences. It is an inner experience. It is connected with the deepest core of our being. This is what the spiritual literature of the world says. But where is the example? How to understand this without an authentic instance of such a realization? This is what the modern mind sought, and seeks. It is in this context that Sri Ramakrishna's words, 'Yes, I have seen Him, I have seen and experienced the Divine' become relevant and assume deep significance. God is experience-able; for He (or She) is within everyone, present within one's heart, *nihitam guhayam*⁴ as the Upanishads say.

Modern science and technology have revealed to us the secrets of external world. These 'secrets' of the material world are now open to all and the increasing usage of modern discoveries and inventions in our life has brought many comforts and conveniences. While this is true, we also know that we are still much ignorant about our own real nature, of life, and of the world. Where can we find answers to these? What about experiencing the internal world, the world behind the world of matter?

This was the field where Sri Ramakrishna researched. He was like a scientist of the inner world. It took him more than twelve long years, to dive deep into the divine depths and come out with the truth of our being. He perceived for himself the 'secrets' behind our mind, intellect and the ego, and came face to face with the Ultimate Reality. The scriptures, no doubt, indicate indirectly the Reality within and the process—the actual research within—by which one can realize It. But then there is

no recorded evidence to prove that man can discover the truth within him. Sri Ramakrishna realized both the macrocosmic (*samashiti*) and the microcosmic (*vyashti/Atman*—the individual) aspects of the Reality within him. He realized and re-authenticated the truth of Atman. The Atman is Pure Consciousness. It manifests itself at the macro-level, as well as the micro-level. It is the same Reality, the Atman, which is present behind the individual soul and the world of phenomena that we perceive. Sri Ramakrishna realized the Ultimate Reality or God at both the levels and also its various forms.

Illustrating this Sri Ramakrishna says,

God alone is the Master, and again, He is the Servant. This attitude indicates Perfect Knowledge. At first one discriminates, 'Not this, not this', and feels that God alone is real and all else is illusory. Afterwards the same person finds that it is God Himself who has become all this—the universe, maya, and the living beings. First negation and then affirmation. This is the view held by the Puranas. A Bilwa-fruit, for instance, includes flesh, seeds, and shell. You get the flesh by discarding the shell and seeds. But if you want to know the weight of the fruit, you cannot find it if you discard the shell and seeds. Just so, one should attain Satchidananda by negating the universe and its living beings. But after the attainment of Satchidananda one finds that Satchidananda Itself has become the universe and the living beings.⁵

He says elsewhere,

Do you know what I see right now? I see that it is God Himself who has become all this. It seems to me that men and other living beings are made of leather, and that it is God Himself who, dwelling inside these leather cases, moves the hands, the feet, the heads. I had a similar vision once before, when I saw houses, gardens, roads, men, cattle—all made of One Substance; it was as if they were all made of wax.⁶

Sri Ramakrishna was himself an example of this identification with the whole world. Swami Saradananda, an eminent disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, writes in Sri Ramakrishna's highly acclaimed biography, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*:

The Master said that when one day a man was walking upon a bed of grass, he was feeling very much hurt in his chest, as if it was on his chest that the man was walking. In fact, the blood in his chest coagulated to produce black marks, and he began to writhe in pain.⁷

One more similar incident is recorded thus:

One day the Master, while in Bhavasamadhi, was gazing towards the Ganga, standing at the spacious Ghat with an open portico. Two boats were at anchor at the Ghat and the boatmen were quarrelling over some matter. The quarrel became gradually bitter, and the stronger man gave a severe slap on the back of the weaker one. At that, the Master cried out suddenly in pain. Hriday heard it from the Kali temple, went there quickly, and saw that the Master's back had become red and swollen. Impatient with anger, Hriday said repeatedly, 'Uncle, show me the man who has beaten you; I'll tear off his head.' Afterwards, when the Master had calmed down a little, Hriday was astonished to hear of the event and thought, 'Is it ever possible?'⁸

Two Divine Experiences

Sri Ramakrishna had an extraordinary intensity in his spiritual quest. This divine madness, as it were, led to his experiencing many amazing things. As stated above, not only did he experience God through spiritual practices followed in the Hindu religion, but he also took up spiritual practices of other religions and arrived at the same realisation. We will cite here two such instances recorded in his biography.

About the first incident we wish to quote, here is what the biography of Sri Ramakrishna narrates:

An extraordinary vision and experience came to pass in the life of the Master when he practised the Dasya-bhakti. That vision and experience was so novel, so different from his previous ones that it was deeply imprinted on his mind and was always fresh in his memory. He said, 'One day at that time I was sitting under the Panchavati—not meditating, merely sitting—when an incomparable, effulgent female figure appeared before me illumining the whole place. It was not that figure alone that I saw then, but also the trees and plants of the Panchavati, the Ganga and all other objects. I saw that the figure was that of a woman; for, there were in her no signs of a goddess, such as the possession of three eyes, etc. But the extraordinary, spirited and solemn expression of that face, manifesting love, sorrow, compassion, and endurance, was not generally seen even in the figures, of goddesses. Looking graciously at me, that goddess woman was advancing from north to south towards me with a slow, grave gait. I wondered who she might be, when a black faced monkey came suddenly, nobody knew whence, and fell prostrate at her feet and someone within my mind exclaimed, 'Sita, Sita who was all sorrow all her life, Sita the daughter of King Janaka, Sita to whom Rama was her very life!' Saying 'Mother' repeatedly, I was then going to fling myself at her feet, when she came quickly and entered this (*showing his own body*). Overwhelmed with joy and wonder, I lost all consciousness and fell down. Before that, I had had no other vision in that manner without meditating or thinking. That was the first vision of its kind.'⁹

Sri Ramakrishna once visited a devotee's place and after seeing a picture of Jesus there, he had a vision of Jesus Christ, which is narrated by Swami Saradananda thus:

The garden house of Jadunath Mallick is situated to the south of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar; the Master used to go there now and then for a walk. Jadunath and his mother had great devotion to the Master from the time they first had seen him. Therefore, even if they were not present in the garden at the time of Master's walk there, the officers would open the door of the parlour and ask him to sit and rest there for some time. There were some good pictures hanging on the walls of the room. One of those pictures was that of the child Jesus in his mother's lap. The Master used to say that he sat one day in that parlour and was looking intently at this picture and thinking of the extraordinary life of Jesus, when he felt that the picture came to life, and effulgent rays of light, coming out from the bodies of the mother and the Child, entered into his heart and changed radically all the ideas of his mind! . . . a great faith in and reverence for Jesus and his religion occupied his mind, and began to show him Christian padres offering incense and light before the image of Jesus in the Church and to reveal to him the eagerness of their hearts as is seen in their earnest prayers. The Master came back to Dakshineswar temple and remained constantly absorbed in the meditation of those inner happenings. He forgot altogether to go to the temple of the Divine Mother and pay obeisance to Her. The waves of those ideas had a mastery over his mind in that manner for three days. At last, when the third day was about to close, the Master saw, while walking under the Panchavati, that a marvellous god-man of very fair complexion was coming towards him, looking steadfastly at him. As soon as the Master saw that person, he knew that he was a foreigner. He saw that his long eyes had produced a wonderful beauty to his face, and that the tip of his nose, though a little flat, did not at all impair that beauty. The Master was charmed to see the extraordinary divine expression of that handsome face, and wondered who he was. Very soon

the person approached him and from the bottom of the Master's pure heart came out with a ringing sound, the words, 'Jesus! Jesus the Christ! the great Yogi, the loving Son of God, one with the Father, who gave his heart's blood and put up with endless torture in order to deliver man from sorrow and misery!' Jesus, the god-man, then embraced the Master and disappeared into his body and the Master entered into ecstasy, lost normal consciousness and remained identified for some time with the omnipresent Brahman with attributes.¹⁰

Realising the Oneness

Thus, we find in Sri Ramakrishna's life a living example of God-experience. His experiences show that the microcosm and macrocosm are built on the same plane. And as one realizes God, he sees the same Substance pervading everything. Then one sees that Atman which is eternal (*nitya*), pure (*shuddha*), consciousness (*buddha*) and ever free (*mukta*). This Atman is the foundation on which the entire creation rests. This fact is true at the level of microcosm.

At the macrocosmic level, on the other hand, one gets identified with Brahman which is the substratum, pervading the whole existence. And Brahman is of the nature of Truth (*satyam*), Knowledge (*jnanam*) and Infinite (*anantam*).¹¹

The *Mundaka Upanishad*¹² says—*Brahmavid Brahmaiva Bhavati*—'a knower of Brahman becomes Brahman'. A knower of Brahman is a knower of the truth behind the microcosm and the macrocosm.

Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences transcend even what is mentioned in the scriptures. His experiences enveloped both the personal and impersonal and confirmed what is mentioned in the various religious traditions of Hinduism. He had also a fleeting vision of

Christian and Islamic ideas of God, as experienced by Christian saints of Europe in the Middle Ages and Sufi mystics of Islam. Rightly was he to say later:

There (in the ultimate state) all jackals howl alike (all men of knowledge speak of the same realization)¹³

Conclusion

In sum, Sri Ramakrishna's message is based on his direct experience of the Reality. It is not based on a secondary source such as reading and quoting from a book, for he did not read any books. Sri Ramakrishna's message may be summarized as follows:

1. God is real, in fact, the only Reality.
2. God can be realized and experienced—

Sri Ramakrishna's experience of God proves this in the context of the modern world, and Sri Ramakrishna's advent is of immense historic relevance.

3. Innumerable are the experiences of God, and all experiences of God attained through the various religions of the world lead to the same Reality, and this is possible only by transcending the Relative.

4. Sri Ramakrishna's experience of God makes religion a palpable living reality and reaffirms that to attain to God is the one noble quest of mankind.

5. Since God is all-pervading, interpenetrating everything in the universe, one can progress spiritually by serving others, particularly the suffering people.

Sri Ramakrishna experienced God and his message to mankind is based on this direct experience of God in His/Her various aspects. In today's shrinking world of science and technology, the spiritual basis for all existence, as illustrated by Sri Ramakrishna's life is the one thing urgently needed. Sri Ramakrishna's life is his greatest message. □

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Sri Ramakrishna's Intense Love for Mankind

The first part of my Master's life was spent in acquiring spirituality, and the remaining years in distributing it. . . Men came in crowds to hear him, and he would talk twenty hours in the twenty-four, and that not for one day, but for months and months, until at last the body broke down under the pressure of this tremendous strain. His intense love for mankind would not let him refuse to help even the humblest of the thousands who sought his aid. Gradually there developed a vital throat disorder, and yet he could not be persuaded to refrain from these exertions. As soon as he heard that people were asking to see him, he would insist upon having them admitted and would answer all their questions. When expostulated with, he replied, 'I do not care. I will give up twenty thousand such bodies to help one man. It is glorious to help even one man.'

—Swami Vivekananda, *CW*, 4: 184-185



Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna

In the Company of Sri Ramakrishna

SWAMI GAUTAMANANDA

In His Company

Constant thinking about a person brings that person, as it were, into our immediate presence. What else is company other than such a thinking? It is the company of Sri Ramakrishna that we will now attempt to invoke through contemplation of his glory in transforming the lives of so many persons, coming from different walks of life, most of them mired in impossible situations. Most of us, perhaps, will find our counterparts in someone or other of them in our own spiritual efforts.

Birth of Divine Child

Let us first of all think about Sri Ramakrishna's entering our world. His father Kshudiram, a man of pure character, had offered worship at Gaya to Lord Vishnu as Gadadhar, the holder of the mace (*gada*). In a distinct dream, the Lord, in all his resplendent beauty, said to him, 'Kshudiram, I shall be born as your son'. Immediately Kshudiram, like the humble devotee, begged to be spared of the great responsibility, saying, 'O Lord, how can I, a poor one, take care of you.' Pat came the reply from the Lord, 'Do not fear, Kshudiram. I shall relish whatever you give me to eat; let My desire be fulfilled'. Kshudiram had not the heart to say 'no'.

Thus was born Gadadhar, or future Sri Ramakrishna, on Wednesday, the 18th Feb-

ruary 1836, at the dawn (of a new spiritual age?). Two days earlier, Chandramani, the pious mother of Sri Ramakrishna, told her husband, 'Supposing the child is born just at the time of your daily worship, how would you manage?' Kshudiram, as a perfect devotee replied, 'Be sure, dear, never can the birth of our divine child, create any impediment to any worship.'

And so did it happen. In the wee hours of the morning, Sri Ramakrishna was born, thus causing no difficulty whatsoever for Kshudiram. It was, as if, right from the start, the Lord wanted to keep the faith of devotees intact. He would not let down the implicit faith of Chandramani in her husband's words or Kshudiram's unshakeable faith in God.

This child, who became the harmoniser of all sects and sections of Hinduism and of all religions of the world, had this harmony in his very birth. Before his birth, Kshudiram had the vision of Vishnu, the God of Bhakti and Bhaktas, and Chandramani had a vision of Shiva, the God of Jnana and the Jnanis. Thus the child was born, as it were, with the synthesis of Bhakti (love) and Jnana (rationality), which he further developed into a grand synthesis of Jnana, Bhakti, Karma, Yoga and Tantra in the Universal Religion of the Neo-Vedanta taught by him. Similarly, he also synthesised Islam, Christianity and Buddhism.



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The Birth of a Universal Religion

Now we come to his synthesis of the ancient Vedanta and the modern scientific outlook. Sri Ramakrishna found that religion consisted in making our mind pure, i.e., free from all selfish desires which, he said, mainly were lust for sensual pleasures and greed for wealth, name and fame. He experimented and established that the mind when freed from lust and greed surely experienced God. He, thus, 'discovered' a 'universal methodology' to realise God for the modern scientific man, who insists on 'experiencing God' before believing! Sri Ramakrishna thus made religion a 'science', a discipline of experiment and experience of the truth of God.

Thus, Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, based on his direct experience, have the power to bring together science and religion on a common quest for Ultimate Reality. He had experienced the conquest of lust and greed as the common grounds of all religions. He could, therefore, talk with authority of a universal religion as the experiencing of God by complete renunciation of lust and greed.

Sri Ramakrishna declared several times that he was Sri Krishna reborn. We read in Bhagavad Gita [9-32], Sri Krishna declaring, 'Even those of sinful birth, and they who are Vaishyas, women and Shudras, by worshipping me, undoubtedly attain the Supreme Goal'. Now, we shall see how some of his disciples' lives were transformed into extraordinary ones as indicated in the above verse.

A Businessman Blessed

Navagopal Ghosh of Calcutta was a Vaishya, a businessman. When he went to Sri Ramakrishna, the Master asked him to sing the God's name for three years and come to him. At the end of three years, even though Navagopal Ghosh had forgotten to report, Sri

Ramakrishna sent word for him. He then assured him saying, 'Come only three more times, that would be enough (for your attaining God)'. Who else other than God Himself can give such a promise! And what an extraordinary promise at that!

Navagopal, too, invited Sri Ramakrishna to his humble house. He told the Master, 'I am drowned in worldliness; tell me how I can get out of it'. The Master's reply was simple but startling. 'Remember Me once a day'. The devotee did it. As a result he saw the luminous form of Sri Ramakrishna one day. After a few years Navagopal passed away consciously, chanting Sri Ramakrishna's name! On his death-bed, Navagopal told his wife, 'Don't grieve, the Master will look after you.' Every word of this devotee came true as we shall presently see.

A Housewife Transformed

Let us now consider the case of Nistarini Devi, Navagopal Ghosh's wife. She was called by Sri Ramakrishna a partial incarnation of the ten forms of Divine Mother, *Dashamahavidyas*. Holy Mother said that she saw in a vision Nistarini fanning the idol of Radha Raman at Vrindaban (thus vouchsafing that Nistarini was an incarnation of Dashamahavidya).

Nistarini Devi used to chant the name of Hari (Krishna). Once she got a doubt whether it was right to only chant Hari's name without meditating on her Guru. She asked Sri Ramakrishna about it. He replied, 'Guru and Hari are the same.' That resolved her conflict.

She had vowed that if a son was born to her, she would dedicate him to Sri Ramakrishna. She did give birth to a son and named him Nirode. She went to Sri Ramakrishna and as vowed, she placed her new-born child at his feet and asked him to accept the child. The

Master smiled and said, 'He now belongs to me, but keep him with you and bring him up'. She did so. When the boy grew up, he took naturally to monastic life and later became a close attendant of Swami Brahmananda, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna. The Master had taken possession of his property at the right time!

Nistarini had to bear the brunt of her husband's death and lived 23 years after his passing away. She had no one to care for her but she luckily had her 'divorced' nun-like-daughter who took best care of her till her end, fulfilling Navagopal's assurance that 'Thakur would take care of her!'

Nistarini often challenged other devotees saying, 'Your real success lies in knowing how to die'. She herself demonstrated it. Before passing away, she hugged the picture of Sri Ramakrishna to her chest and, repeating his name, passed away in deep contemplation!

What a wonderful example of a housewife attaining fulfilment by taking refuge under Sri Ramakrishna!

His Inscrutable Grace

Now we come to another character in Sri Ramakrishna's life—Kalipada Ghosh. In fact, Kalipada Ghosh and Girish Chandra Ghosh, both bohemians, were highly devoted to Sri Ramakrishna. Through this devotion they became blessed ones, being accepted by Sri Ramakrishna himself as his 'Jagai-Madhai', a reference to the two notorious ruffians mentioned in the life of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. (Jagai-Madhai tormented the devotees of Hari, but were later transformed by Sri Chaitanya and became ardent devotees themselves!)

Kalipada was poor, his father being a small-scale jute merchant. Kalipada received his education till class eighth only. Then he was employed in a British paper firm. By his

sheer intelligence and hard work, Kalipada rose to prominence in his business.

Wealth, however, made him take to wine and women. With the result, his young wife, who had met Sri Ramakrishna much earlier than her husband, prayed to Sri Ramakrishna to save her husband from his bad ways. Sri Ramakrishna, the friend of the poor, the *deen-bandhu*, promised her that Kalipada would come to him because he belonged to him and would thus become free from his bad habits and take to higher life.

His words proved true. Kalipada, at his first meeting of Sri Ramakrishna, was not impressed and returned even without saluting him. But the charm of the Master had subtly mesmerised him. After some days, he felt an intense desire to meet Sri Ramakrishna. He reached Dakshineswar by a hired boat. He met Sri Ramakrishna and had just spent some time when Sri Ramakrishna expressed, 'I want to go to Calcutta.' Kalipada said, 'Well, please come. I shall take you in my boat'. On the boat Sri Ramakrishna initiated Kalipada by writing something on his tongue. At this time, Kalipada had got a promise from Sri Ramakrishna that he (Sri Ramakrishna) would lead him during his last moments by holding his right hand. When they reached the other shore, Kalipada asked the Master, 'Where do you want to go?' 'To your house only!' replied the Master. Such was the unsolicited grace of the Master. Through Master's blessings, Kalipada gradually gave up drinking and other habits completely.

Sri Ramakrishna on another day blessed him by saying, 'Be you enlightened.' He also said, 'He who has called on God sincerely must come here [*referring to himself*]!'

Once Kalipada took Sri Ramakrishna to his home. The Master, looking at the painting of various deities on the wall, started singing

in praise of them. They became, as Kalipada observed, alive, one by one!

Kalipada wrote many songs on Sri Ramakrishna, which came out as a book titled *Ramakrishna Sangeet* as early as 1893. Kalipada could play on violin, flute, etc., and Sri Ramakrishna would go into Samadhi while listening to this sincere devotee's music.

This dramatic transformation in Kalipada through the Master's grace was visible even after the Master's going away from the physical plane. Once both Kalipada and Girish Ghosh, were deeply engrossed in meditation. They cried to God, 'O, Lord, please reveal yourself!' Again, while at Navagopal's house during a spiritual congregation, they both were garlanded. They got into an ecstatic state and began dancing, chanting the name of God, even unaware of their clothing!

Again, just before his passing away, Kalipada saw Sri Ramakrishna coming and leading him by holding his raised right hand! Indeed the Master had kept up his promise given on the occasion of his initiation years ago.

In Kalipada's life we see how the unqualified love of Sri Ramakrishna redeems the devotees from their worst sins and degradation.

God Loves the Poor

Now we will see how a true devotee, very poor but sincere in his love for God, is saved by Him. We will discuss the case of Chunilal Basu. He was from a poor family. With great difficulty he could finish his schooling by the age of 22 and then got into a job in the Municipal Corporation. He had a wife and children. With all this entanglements in life, his mind was seeking some spiritual enlightenment. It was in that state of mind that he visited Sri Ramakrishna when he was 32 years old.

The first visit did not give him any peace. He then went on some pilgrimages only to find he had been fired from his job! With great difficulty he got back his post. Now he took another chance to visit Sri Ramakrishna. This time he found the Master with his rich devotee Balaram Bose. Sri Ramakrishna introduced Chunilal to Balaram Bose and requested Balaram to bring Chunilal with him in his boat. That was a great relief to the poor Chunilal. Balaram went further to help him during his sickness with financial and medical help which Chunilal badly needed. Sri Ramakrishna's introduction of Balaram Bose had made his spiritual life easier.

Chunilal was practicing pranayama without a Guru and consequently had developed breathing trouble and became asthmatic! One day Sri Ramakrishna, all of a sudden spoke to Chunilal about this ailment. 'You are a householder. Yoga practice is not for you. Have faith and love for God . . . You take three doses of medicine from one Gopal.' Chunilal obeyed the Master and was instantly cured of his Asthma! That gave a big boost to his faith in Sri Ramakrishna.

As a devotee Chunilal had his natural desire to serve holy men, but fate had made him too poor to do that. The All-Compassionate Sri Ramakrishna knew the heart of this devotee and gave him an opportunity to serve him. He told Chunilal, 'Can you buy me a glass tumbler for drinking water? I cannot touch metal tumblers nowadays.' Thus, Chunilal's heart's wish was fulfilled when he gifted a glass of a few penny's worth to the Master.

Chunilal was one of the Master's beloved devotees. The Master saw him in a vision as belonging to the special group who were devoted to God with forms as contrasted with ones like Narendra, who worshipped God without form.

On 1 January 1886, now called the Kalpataru Day, many devotees got the blessings of spiritual awakening from Sri Ramakrishna at Cossipore. But Chunilal came late, much after when the Master had retired to his room. With the kindness of Narendra, he could meet Sri Ramakrishna and get his blessings. The Master blessed him saying, 'Have love and faith in Me. You will achieve everything.'

Chunilal went through several trials in his long life of 87 years. In order to help Chunilal, Swami Vivekananda sent him money on several occasions while he was in America. In his last days, one of the Swamis of the Ramakrishna Order, Swami Bhagavatanda, nursed Chunilal. The devotee breathed his last with Sri Ramakrishna's name on his lips like other saints of yore. He attained the Master's abode, with the power of his faith and devotion.

God, Helper of the Helpless

We shall presently see the life of a very ordinary woman, a widow at that, bereaving the premature death of her only daughter. Many millions like her have gone unnoticed and unsung in the annals of time, but this lady's life has become etched in letters of gold, as it were, in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. She has been immortalised by his blessings.

Golap Sundari Devi, dearly called Golapma, felt forlorn, friendless and inconsolable after the premature death of Chandi, her beautiful, just-married daughter. Golapma's friend Yoginma, another widow, who was already acquainted with Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual power to console every sorrowing soul, took her to the Master. Golapma was ushered into the Master's presence. She unburdened her sorrow with tears and sobs. The Master, after patiently hearing, touched her head with the palm of his hand by way of

blessing and consoling. And instantly Golapma felt that all her sorrow was, once for all, lifted up from her heart. She felt from the depth of her heart that all her misery was a mere dramatic play, nothing more than that and hence she had no need to sorrow. She instantly started laughing with a joyful heart. The Master had dissolved her misery in a trice with his compassionate spiritual touch. He further consoled her that she was fortunate because she came to God (a reference to himself) who helps the helpless.

He introduced her to Holy Mother in Nahabat with a prophecy: 'Take care of this Brahmin girl. She will be your companion all your life.' Golapma did serve Holy Mother as her *gendarme* till her last. Golapma cooked, cleaned and supervised all household works and was ever-watchful and protective of Holy Mother who called her, 'My Vijaya' (the protective companion of Divine Mother mentioned in Puranas).

Golapma was well-built and thus could help Holy Mother get up and down from vehicle, boat, trains, etc. At times, she also cooked and served food to Sri Ramakrishna. On one such occasion, she saw the divine power Kundalini in the Master devouring all that he ate! At another time she also saw the Divine Mother Kali in Sri Ramakrishna. She did incessant Japa and attained spiritual enlightenment. Holy Mother told other devotees 'Golap has attained perfection through Japa.'

This perfection made her feel 'pure' even amidst physically unclean surroundings. She could clean unclean places, then, just change her wearing cloth, and attend to her duties in kitchen and shrine. Though other orthodox ladies did not approve of it, Holy Mother always praised her for being free from the obsession of physical cleanliness which the Holy Mother attributed to the lack of inner purity.

The Master once accepted to visit her poor house. When he visited, the joy of Golapma knew no limits! She could not control herself because of the immensity of the joy! She felt she would burst out of joy and die! She said again and again, 'This joy is greater than even the joy I felt at my daughter Chandi's visit'. She went on saying that she had attained all she had desired and that nothing else did she desire after the visit of the Master to her home!

The same evening, the Master heard from 'M' (the author of *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*) that she was like Mary in the episode of Jesus' visit to two sisters Mary and Martha. Sri Ramakrishna agreed it was truly so.

Not all appreciated, however, Golapma's role in protecting Holy Mother from intruders and undisciplined devotees. Sri Ramakrishna himself told her, she would admit, often appearing to her in dreams that so and so criticised her. It was perhaps both a warning to her to be polite and tactful in her dealing and at the same time an assurance that he was behind her in spite of others' criticism.

Golapma lived four years after Holy Mother's mahasamadhi. She had told Holy Mother once, 'I don't want liberation; I want you!' An ideal statement the Vijaya of Holy Mother could have made. Of course, Holy

Mother corrected her saying, 'Liberation is Sri Ramakrishna Himself!'

Golapma, as she crossed her eighties, developed heart trouble and other ailments. She said that Yoginma had passed away during the bright fortnight but she would do so during a dark fortnight which came out true.

A few days before her end, she said, 'This body will not last long because I see a saffron robed girl with a trident in her hand often comes out of this body and every time she does so, the body remains dead.' Evidently, the girl was her own soul which was eager to go to Holy Mother. She thus finally escaped from the cage of body to freedom, like a bird. That was how Swami Saradananda described her death to the attending doctor, adding that the bird had gone to Sri Ramakrishna to serve whom she had lived in that body for such a long period of more than 80 years!

Thus the magic touch of Sri Ramakrishna had transformed a grieving and helpless woman into an immortal saint to become part and parcel of the Divine play of the Greatest Incarnation of this age.

These are a few of the innumerable glorious lives which can fill our 'feast of contemplation'. Let us, however, first derive spiritual benefits of such contemplation. □



A Shining Pillar of Illumination

It is indeed a very difficult matter to be able to declare and believe a man with a body like ours to be God Himself. We may just go to the length of declaring him to be a 'perfected one', or a 'knower of Brahman'. Well, it matters nothing, whatever you may call him or think of him, a saint, or a knower of Brahman, or anything. But take it from me, never did come to this earth such an all-perfect man as Shri Ramakrishna! In the utter darkness of the world, this great man is like the shining pillar of illumination in this age! And by his light alone will man now cross the ocean of Samsara!

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 6: 480



Sri Ramakrishna
—*photograph taken at the studio of Bengal Photographers, Calcutta, 1881*

Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna in Eight Aphorisms

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

Sri Ramakrishna's Words of Wisdom

Lord Sri Krishna has declared in the *Gita*¹ that he will incarnate in the human form in every age to protect the good, decimate the evil ones and re-establish dharma or righteousness.

The speciality of Ramakrishna Incarnation is that he re-established dharma by *living* it first and then preaching it vigorously, gradually transforming even the evil ones, to be raised to higher spiritual levels. Girish Chandra Ghosh and Kalipada Ghosh, the first converts, were only the harbingers of Sri Ramakrishna's new power and method. That power, though subtle, is still working miraculously and wonderfully.

Throughout his life, Sri Ramakrishna laid the greatest emphasis upon God-realisation as the main purpose of human life. He also gave several modes of sadhana or spiritual practice, suitable to persons of various temperaments.

These teachings are spread over the voluminous work, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* [by 'M', published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai]. A modest attempt is made here to present the core of these teachings in the form of eight Sanskrit sutras which can be easily memorized.

First Sutra

ईश्वरोऽस्त्येवः स एव सत्यम्॥

1. *God verily exists. He alone is the Truth.*

A question that is commonly asked is: 'If God exists, why we cannot see him?' For this, Sri Ramakrishna's reply is simple: 'You cannot see God during the days of your ignorance, just as you cannot see the stars in the sky during day-time, even though they do exist.'

Not only does he exist he is the *only truth* that exists!

Does that mean that the world in which we live, move and have our being is unreal? It is unreal if *satya* or reality is defined as something which never changes, unaffected by three aspects of time past, present and future. Compared to that, this world is ephemeral, constantly changing, and hence unreal.

Good God! Then, how can we, or how should we, live?

Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Live like the maid-servant in her master's house. Though she apparently treats the children of her master as her own, she knows in her heart of hearts, that they are not. Her own children live in her ancestral village'.

Another example he gives is: 'The boat can be in the water, but, water should not be in the boat!'



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Live in the world in a detached manner, never allowing worldliness emotional attachment to overwhelm you.

Perform all your duties as best as you can, but leave the results to God.

Second Sutra

तं द्रष्टुं ज्ञातुं तेन सह आलापं कर्तुं च साध्यम्॥

2. *It is possible to see Him, to know him, nay, even to talk with Him.*

These are the direct words of a God-man.

From his life we understand that he was constantly in touch with the Divine Mother Kali.

When Narendra (future Vivekananda) asked him whether he had seen God, Sri Ramakrishna gave him this reply: 'Yes, I see Him just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense.'²

By the grace of Sri Ramakrishna, Narendra too had almost a similar experience in the Dakshineswar Kali temple.

In Sri Ramakrishna's words: 'Really, God can be seen, my boys. As we are sitting and talking together, in the very same way, God can be seen and conversed with. Truly and sincerely I say so'.³

However, he also declares that the physical body is transformed into a body of divine love, by which alone God is seen.⁴

Third Sutra

ईश्वरदर्शनं साक्षात्कारश्च जीवनस्य लक्ष्यम्॥

3. *To see Him, to realise Him, is the goal of life.*

The *Kenopnishad*⁵ declares that by realising God, there is fulfilment in human life. If not, the loss is great.

It also proclaims that by realising God, man transcends death.⁶

While placing the ideal of the four-fold purusharthas (ends or goals of life), the Hindu

scriptures have emphasized that moksha or liberation from transmigration is the final and the supreme—goal of life. This, in other words, is the same as God-realisation.

This is exactly what Sri Ramakrishna too has emphasized throughout his life.

He proclaims in unequivocal terms that one should first gain (or realise) God and *then only* try to gain wealth.⁷

The common people, who are addicted to the pleasures of life here and now, may ask what they will gain by God-realisation. This is answered by the next Sutra.

Fourth Sutra

तद्दर्शनेन साक्षात्कारेण च सर्वं कृतं सर्वं प्राप्तम् ॥

4. *By seeing him, by realizing him, everything is achieved, everything is gained.*

The *Taittiriyanopanishad*⁸ solemnly declares that one who realises Brahman or God will attain all desires. This is because whatever exists is verily Brahman.⁹

There is a popular hymn that echoes the same sentiment more explicitly: 'When he is pleased, the whole world is pleased'.

Sri Ramakrishna brings out the truth of the statement in his own inimitable way through a nice story:

Two friends chanced to see a nice mango garden. When they entered, one of them busied himself in counting the number of mango trees (and even the leaves!). The other went to the owner and made friends with him. The owner first offered him some sweet mangoes and then gave him all the details of garden.

Sri Ramakrishna, then, mockingly asks: 'Do you want to eat the mangoes or count the leaves?'

Hence we better see the 'owner of the garden' first! Instead of counting leaves, let us eat mangoes.

Fifth Sutra

तदर्थं गुरुणा भवितव्यम्॥

5. For this, a guru is necessary.

There is a humorous saying that even to steal, one needs the guidance of an expert thief; because, only he can teach how to steal without being caught!

If a guide is necessary even in such a heinous act, then, what to speak of the highest art and science of spiritual evolution?

Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this with the story of two farmers from a village who went to see the Kolkata city for the first time.

The first farmer, being egoistic by nature, went round the city all by himself. He ended up by seeing only a few slums. The second one first found a place for staying and then went out to see, with the help of a local guide. He was thus able to see all the important places in a short time.

Sri Ramakrishna asks: 'If to see a new place, a guide is necessary, is it not even more necessary to have one, when you venture into unknown avenues?'

In the story of two friends who were visiting a mango garden, the second one sought the help of the gardener to meet the master. Similarly, one should seek the help of a spiritual master to meet the supreme master of the world.

Though there are several methods of spiritual discipline, Sri Ramakrishna succinctly places before us three of them as necessary and sufficient. These methods are the essence of spiritual practices.

They are now described:

Sixth Sutra

कामकाञ्चनत्यागः प्रधानं साधनम्॥

6. Renunciation of lust and greed is the main discipline.

According to Vedanta, the main reason for our spiritual bondage is our total identification with the body-mind complex, forgetting that we are really the Atman or soul which is pure consciousness and which transcends this complex.

All the scriptures and god-men of Hinduism have unequivocally declared this.

For instance, the following six qualities of mind are called *arishadvarga* (the group of six enemies of mankind) and every spiritual aspirant is exhorted to eschew them: lust, anger, greed, delusion, arrogance and jealousy. Since lust and greed are the roots of other forms, Sri Ramakrishna has concentrated upon them in his teachings.

Since God and mammon cannot go together, mammon has to be given up to attain or retain God.

When the King Parikshith gave the boon to Kali (the Satan of the present age) that he can dwell in gold¹⁰ he was actually preparing the ground for Sri Ramakrishna's pet teaching!

Seventh Sutra

सत्यं च॥

7. And also truth.

All the scriptures of Hinduism have laid the greatest emphasis on Satya or truth. The *Taittiriyaopanishad*¹¹ goes to the extent of describing Brahman or God as Satya (truth), Jnana (Consciousness) and Ananta (infinite).

Sri Ramakrishna declares that for this Kaliyuga or Iron age, Satya or truth is the necessary and sufficient discipline.¹²

Satya has two aspects: *Satyavachana* (speaking the truth) and *Vachanasatya* (keeping up the word once given).

We find that both these aspects of satya had been fully manifested in his life.

At the end of his sadhanas or practice of spiritual disciplines, Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother offering all the pairs of opposites like knowledge and ignorance or purity and impurity. But he could not offer truth and untruth, because, there would then be nothing to hold on to in life!

Sri Ramakrishna was equally particular about keeping up the word once given.

One day he promised to visit the house of Jadumallick who lived next to the Dakshineswar temple complex, but totally forgot about it. When he remembered it at night, even though it was quite late, he went into the compound of his house, walked a few steps and then returned to his room, just to fulfil his promise! Of course being a gentleman he did not disturb anyone there.

Practising all these disciplines is rather difficult for the average persons. Is there no easy way or short-cut? There is, avers Sri Ramakrishna:

Eighth Sutra

व्याकुलतयैवाऽपि ईश्वरसाक्षात्कारः साध्यः॥

8. *God can be realised through intense longing also.*

Sri Ramakrishna elucidates this teaching through the example of a child playing with the toy and the mother cooking inside the kitchen.

Whereas the child is engrossed in its toy, the mother is all the while thinking of the child. However, not wishing to disturb the child since it is happy with the toy, all the same, she is also attentive to its needs.

When the child becomes tired of the toy and starts crying for the mother, she will instantly come running, even dropping the vessel she was about to keep on the oven.

Similarly, when we are busily engaged with the tinsels of worldly pleasures and have forgotten our Divine Mother, she keeps a watch over us without disturbing us in any way. Nevertheless, if we develop vairagya or detachment and turn towards her, she will immediately come to our rescue.

The scriptures of bhakti or devotion describe *prapatti* or total surrender to God as an easier method. The *Yoga-sutras*¹³ of Patanjali admits that by devotion to God one can get even samadhi or the highest superconscious state.

Lord Sri Krishna, in what is now known as the *charamasloka* [the ultimate verse] in the *Gita*¹⁴, has promised immediate deliverance if one can totally surrender to him.

It is thus seen that Sri Ramakrishna has given all the essentials of spiritual sadhanas in a nut-shell, which can be easily understood and followed. □



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Do not let worldly thoughts and anxieties disturb your mind. Do everything that is necessary in the proper time, and let your mind be always fixed on God. —Sri Ramakrishna

Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings on Meditation

SWAMI YOGESHANANDA

As is one's meditation, so is one's feeling of love.
As is one's feeling of love, so is one's gain; and
faith is the root of all.¹

In quoting this couplet from a song of Ramprasad, Sri Ramakrishna clearly shows us the ultimate purpose of our practice of meditation. It is to attain the feeling of love. To feel love for God, for something which seems so abstract to us, is not easy; Sri Ramakrishna, in his remarks and instructions about meditation, endeavours to make it easier and simpler for us. It reminds us of that famous expression of Swami Vivekananda: 'You, philosopher, come to tell us of His essences, His powers, His attributes—fool! We are here dying for a kiss of His lips.'

'It must be done daily,' says the Master. We in the West, lacking a meditation tradition, and only now attracted by the practice, fail to grasp how essential it is to begin by committing ourselves to a daily time and place. 'The heart is a splendid place,' Sri Ramakrishna replies, in answer to a question from Manilal Mallick, about how he should meditate. He gives this recommendation so many times; we must conclude that it is his basic teaching, at least to those making a start on the path. Moreover, we know that when a monk, a disciple of the Holy Mother, wrote to her of the severity of his headaches, she was dismayed to hear

that he had been meditating in the forehead chakra, and advised him to return at once to the heart.²

Again, we are told, 'It is easy to meditate on an Incarnation—God born as man. Yes, God in man.'³ This advice from one who was a World Teacher may, initially, offer some difficulty to Jews, Sikhs, Unitarians or others who may never have thought of God in this way.

Many Ways

Other easy ways are described: we may meditate on a flame. The Master did, thinking of the red part as gross reality, the white part as the subtle, and the wick as the causal plane of reality,⁴ '...the unflickering flame of a lamp, set in a windless place.' (See Bhagavad Gita, 6.19) Sri Ramakrishna discovered at a glance one's inner nature, and recommended accordingly the method of meditation: by meditating on God with form one soon acquires devotion; then one can meditate on the formless.⁵

One of the occasions which M. must have treasured in his heart was that on which the Master took him to the fish pond to demonstrate how to meditate on the Formless—'like fish in a bowl, cast into a lake.'⁶ Yet to one enamoured of the Formless, he gave the admonition, 'It is very difficult to achieve perfection in this form of meditation.'⁷



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And, of course, to one and all the Master prescribed meditating '*kone, bone, mone*'—in a corner, or in a wood, or in the mind. The following very appealing account of one of his own practices is encouragement to us all:⁸

Once I entered the wood near the pine grove, and was sitting there, when I had a vision of something like the hidden door of a chamber.

He tried to bore a hole in the door with a nail-knife, but could not do it; the earth kept falling and filling up the hole. But suddenly he made a very large opening!⁹

May it be so for us, one day.

Sri Ramakrishna has some surprises for us. 'Must one always meditate with eyes closed? . . . One can meditate even with eyes open. One can meditate even while talking,' he says, in one very interesting conversation, 'like one who has a toothache, that consciousness always in the background, one can go on doing one's duties.'¹⁰

It may be comforting to think how much like us he was, in saying that some days he feels inner awakening and some days feels nothing! To some, it may come as something of a shock, when he says that we can meditate only when God wills it.¹¹

That was not said, of course, to give excuse; it was spoken in a context of everything being the will of God.

Yoga or Devotion?

And that raises the question of path. To many minds, and heard on all sides, the way of the devotee is supposed to be easiest; but is it really? 'A devotee who sincerely yearns for God,' says Sri Ramakrishna, 'does not give up his meditation, even though he is invaded by atheistic ideas.'¹² It sometimes happens that even advanced devotees succumb to atheistic

ideas, as in the case of the elder brother of the saint Jnaneswar. Much strength is required on the part of the persisting devotee. A great teacher has remarked, 'Oh, what a pity it is, that those who want to meditate often find it difficult, while those who could meditate do not wish to.'

If we meditate on an ideal, says Sri Ramakrishna, we will acquire the nature of that: if on a child, one becomes like a child; if on God, one becomes divine, with God's nature—just as a doll made of salt dissolves in the ocean; this was one of his favourite similes.¹³

Are there occasions when we should not meditate? To the elderly Sham Basu he says, 'You will not be able to think of God and meditate on him in this confusion of the world,' and advises him to seek solitude. If that was so in those quieter days of the 19th century, how much more true must it be for us!¹⁴ On the other hand, when the young disciple Bhavanath complains that when he has a misunderstanding with someone, it upsets him, rendering him unable to love all, the Master replies,

Try at the outset to talk to him and establish a friendly relation with him. If you fail in spite of your efforts, then don't give it another thought. Take refuge in God. Meditate on Him. There is no use in giving up God and feeling depressed from thinking about others.¹⁵

Who can say how many times and in how many ways Sri Ramakrishna would assist his inquirers to meditate—in his room, in the Panchavati, in the temple—in silence, without words, just with his presence?

Raising Objection

In the spiritually 'sophisticated' milieu found in our western countries today, it

sometimes happens that persons acquainted with the Vedanta texts, now so easily available, sometimes come to us with finger pointing to those verses in the *Ashtavakra Samhita* (XV.20; XVIII.33) which advise 'give up even *dhyana*.' They choose to ignore the fact that the book was composed for a highly advanced adept, who was in the very last stages of Self-realisation; it has little relevance for those just putting their foot upon the path. 'Yoga' has become a craze in the United States, but the distinctions between hatha yoga and raja yoga, as applied in daily life, has commonly and unfortunately often been lost.

Results and Rewards of Meditating

We learn that through meditation we can escape the effects of *prarabdha karma*, that part of our karma which has already been set in motion, producing our present life status. In a conversation with one Dr. Sreenath, Sri Ramakrishna explains: 'No doubt one experiences a little of its effect, but much of it is cancelled by the power of God's name.' This truth has often been echoed by Sri Sarada Devi and the Master's disciples. If one chants the name of God, meditates on Him, and takes refuge in Him, one has nothing to fear.

We have the promise that through meditation we can feel, eventually, that every place is filled with Brahman-consciousness.¹⁶ If we have felt that meditation is indeed a labour, we will need to ponder this pronouncement: 'After attaining the vision of God, man's only activity is the repetition of his name and meditating on Him.'¹⁷

An additional sign of that complete absorption of the mind in its object will be that perhaps a bird may come and sit on one's head.¹⁸ Some may not aspire to that particular event, but the point is made. Meditation, as a very important step in the progress of spiritual

life, leads to ecstatic love—ritual worship, prayer, japa, meditation, then *bhava*.

While we may rejoice at the widespread appeal the practice has attained in recent times, thanks to several forces in the 1960s, very few have understood its true purpose as enunciated at the beginning of this article: the ardent love of God. Divine love is not like human love. It is always sweet, unlimited, unbroken, faithful, of undiminishing quality, distributive, freeing and all-fulfilling. Unless these characteristics appear in the lives and thought of 'meditators,' what are we to think of their meditation? Paraphrasing what Swami Bhavyananda writes, in his article, 'The Context of Meditation,'¹⁹

It is our hope that the ever-widening circle of those who are attracted to meditation will find these clear teachings of Sri Ramakrishna a compass and a beacon light.

Let us ask *why* it is, that 'as is one's meditation, so is one's feeling of love,' as Ramprasad sang; what is the connection? It is this: at the utmost depths (or heights) of meditation only one entity reveals Itself. It is *sat-chit-ananda*. We are not Samkhyans, we are Vedantins; Being and Consciousness do not suffice for us—we want Bliss. And once having known the bliss of the Infinite, Eternal and All-pervading, we naturally feel love for all men, all beings, for the whole world.

If Sri Ramakrishna is accepted as an avatar, or divine Incarnation, then we can know that just by his advent here, by his coming to the plane of our lives, he has made meditation easier for us—as Swamiji says, '*yoga sahay*'—he has raised the level of awareness of the entire planet. But his ultimate revelation to us of the meaning of meditation, will be when he reveals himself in our hearts as no human form, but rather, that Infinite and Eternal Itself, in all its immensity. □

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Essentials of Living a Spiritual Life

Sri Ramakrishna: 'You were talking of worshipping the clay image. Even if the image is made of clay, there is need for that sort of worship. God Himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the Universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge. . .

M. (*humbly*): 'Yes, sir. How, sir, may we fix our minds on God?'

Sri Ramakrishna: 'Repeat God's name and sing His glories, and keep holy company; and now and then visit God's devotees and holy men. The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities; it is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God. To fix the mind on God is very difficult, in the beginning, unless one practises meditation in solitude. When a tree is young it should be fenced all around; otherwise it may be destroyed by cattle.

'To meditate, you should withdraw within yourself or retire to a secluded corner or to the forest. And you should always discriminate between the Real and the unreal. God alone is real, the Eternal Substance; all else is unreal, that is, impermanent. By discriminating thus, one should shake off impermanent objects from the mind.'

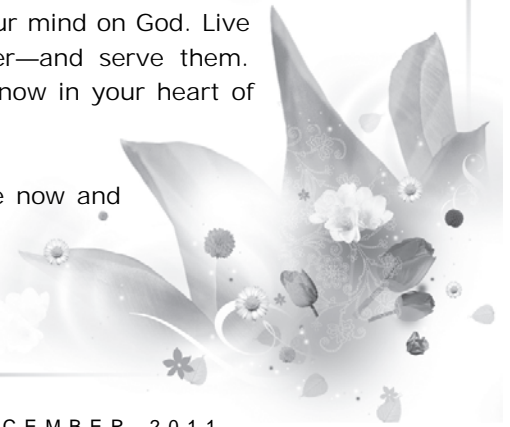
M. (*humbly*): 'How ought we to live in the world?'

Sri Ramakrishna: 'Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all—with wife and children, father and mother—and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you. . . .

M. Is it possible to *see* God?

Sri Ramakrishna: Yes, certainly. Living in solitude now and then, repeating God's name and singing His glories, and discriminating between the Real and the unreal—these are the means to employ to see him.

—The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Pp.81-83





The image of the Divine Mother Bhavatarini at Dakshineswar Temple which Sri Ramakrishna worshipped

Sri Ramakrishna's Joy of Illumination

SWAMI BUDHANANDA

In Sri Ramakrishna's life what a magnificent manifestation of the joy of spiritual illumination we find!

For twelve long years and more Sri Ramakrishna practised one set of spiritual discipline after another and reached their goals. The vastness and scope of his spiritual undertaking made his agonies so intense, that even the reading of their accounts is painful.

Now when one struggle after another were over, bringing into him one joy of enlightenment after another, at the end of his spiritual struggles and striving and fulfilments, Sri Ramakrishna became a veritable confluence of many mighty streams of joys of enlightenment.

There was a time when Sri Ramakrishna would rub his face on the ground while crying that another day had gone and still he had not seen God. But after his realizations were complete, and he was overflowing with joy and bliss, he was seized with another agony as intense as the former one.

Then a time came, when the vesper bell would ring in the temple, he would go to the terrace of a room in the temple garden and cry his heart out and fill the firmament saying: 'Come, my boys! Oh, where are you? I cannot bear to live without you!'

In response to this fervent call of the blissful enlightenment, people began to pour into Dakshineswar.

And transfigured to pour into Dakshineswar.

And what did they see there?

A transfigured person immersed in God, ever blissful, melting in unreasoned love, waiting anxiously to remove all pains and sufferings of the people and transmit to them all his joy, peace, bliss, and enlightenment.

So Dakshineswar became a veritable mart of joy, where went on constant worship of God, in various ways, now through singing, now dancing, and now through talks that welled forth from the depths of his endless divine experience. There was merriment, there was laughter, there were gushing tears of joy and sudden stillness in the over-powering absorption of bliss.

What a drama it was!

People scorched and battered by the world, people bereaved, confounded and lost in the ways of not-knowing, *ajnana*, came to him as if drawn by an invisible force. The first thing that impressed people when they came near him was his scintillating joy, a joy uncompounded with the slightest trace of world's worries and miseries, and his supreme compassion for all that breathed and suffered.

Sri Ramakrishna did not psycho-analyse, did not theorize how miseries of people could be removed. One came near him and under



A former editor of Vedanta Kesari, the author was a deep thinker and facile writer. The above has been taken from his book *The Saving Challenge of Religion*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 1980, Pp.234-237. □

the impact of his joy and compassion, all his sufferings were at least temporarily destroyed, as the talk on God spontaneously streamed forth from his lips.

Seekers of God came to him and were at once able to taste in his presence divine bliss, which they had never known before.

Swami Turiyananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, said reminiscing his experiences:

An hour of congregational singing in the company of the Master used to fill us with such an exuberant joy that we would feel transported, as it were, into an ethereal region. But now even meditation fails to evoke that celestial bliss, or even a semblance of it. That bliss would abide in us for a week continually. We used to feel intoxicated, though we did not know why or how of it. Who will believe it? It is difficult to convince any one.¹

Swami Vijnanananda, another direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, says of the Master:

One who can detach his mind from material things will see the light of God and His presence in everything. Worldly attachments draw people away from God and scorch them in the wild fire of the world. The Master was all the time immersed in thoughts of the Divine Mother, and therefore, worldly sufferings had no effect on him. He often used to regret that he could not share with others the sublime and ineffable joy that he derived from constant communion with God—the joy that suffused his entire being and kept him floating on an ocean of divine ecstasy. He was always eager to impart this joy to others. Compared to that heavenly delight, all these worldly occupations, even the studies, are as worthless as dust. He would always see only the light of Brahman, while we see only material things.²

Even while suffering from excruciating pain of cancer in the throat, there was no cessation of his ecstasy of divine bliss. 'M'

the writer of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* says:

Such suffering in the body (due to cancer) but he was always full of joy. Always in ecstasy, with the name of the Divine Mother always on his lips. His face was like a blooming lotus.³

Once a devotee asked Sri Ramakrishna: Why has God put us in the World? Sri Ramakrishna:

To perpetuate his creation. It is His will, His Maya. He has deluded man with 'women and gold'.

Devotee: Why has He deluded us? Why has He so willed?

Sri Ramakrishna: If but once He should give man a taste of Divine joy, then man would not care to lead a worldly life. The creation would come to an end. The grain-dealer stores rice in huge bags in his warehouse. Near them he puts some puffed rice in a tray. This is to keep the rats away. The puffed rice tastes sweet to the rats and they nibble at it all night; they do not seek the rice itself. But just think! One seer of rice yields fourteen seers of puffed rice. How infinitely superior is the joy of God to the pleasure of "women and gold"! To one who thinks of the beauty of God, the beauty of even Tilottama and Rambha (celestial nymphs of exquisite beauty) appears as but the ashes of funeral pyre.⁴

Elsewhere says Sri Ramakrishna:

Ananda or perfect bliss within is one of the signs of God-vision. The waves roll on the surface of the ocean but the deep expanse of water lies unruffled beneath.⁵

When once asked, 'what is the state of one's mind in Samadhi?' Sri Ramakrishna said: 'It is like the state of bliss that is experienced by a live fish which after being kept out of water for some time is again put into it.'⁶ □

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Sri Ramakrishna—A Man of God

Freedom is the source of happiness. Freedom makes a person all powerful. Sri Ramakrishna never lost his freedom. No ties could bind him. Moreover, his heart was as broad as the infinite space, and that his why he could appreciate all the religions of the world. He used to say: 'Never say that God is this or that. No one has yet been able to know God as He really is, and no one ever will. He is the ocean of consciousness. Sages like Shuka, Sanaka, and Narada drank a drop of that ocean and became God-intoxicated. I have experienced God as with form, without form, and again beyond both. But what He really is I do not know. All religions of the world are but different paths to reach him. Follow sincerely that path laid down by the religion you were born in and you will in time reach that abode of Eternal Bliss.'

There was not the least trace of egotism in Sri Ramakrishna. He could not say the words 'I' and 'mine'. Instead of using the word mine, he used to say 'of this place' and point to himself with his finger. For example, when he wanted to say that something was not his opinion, he would say. 'It is not the opinion of this place.' Because there was no ego-consciousness in him, the Cosmic Ego of the Divine Mother worked through him. The playful Kali, the Mother of the Universe, incarnated herself in the form of Sri Ramakrishna to give her innumerable children knowledge and devotion.

—Swami Ramakrishnananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna
[*Ramakrishna As We Saw Him*, p. 144]



Sri Ramakrishna and the Common Person

SWAMI TATHAGATANANDA

Incarnation of Love

The Avatara is God in human form. Sri Ramakrishna, the Avatara of the modern age, is the Incarnation of Love. Swami Vivekananda said,

He [Sri Ramakrishna] was the Saviour of women, Saviour of the masses, Saviour of all, high and low.¹

Ramakrishna's remark, 'Where the human soul is, there the Divine is' and his words, 'Let me be condemned to be born over and over again, even in the form of a dog, if so I can be of help to a single soul!' resound in our mind.²

Service to All

Bhagavati, the elderly maidservant of the temple at Dakshineswar, had led an immoral life in her youth and suffered from a proud ego. Sri Ramakrishna had known her for many years and was very compassionate towards her.

In an early chapter of *The Gospel* we find her speaking intimately and proudly with the Master in his room at Dakshineswar (June 4, 1883) in the presence of M. and Rakhhal Maharaj. Bhagavati took full advantage of the Master's mercy and touched his holy feet. 'Like a man stung by a scorpion, Sri Ramakrishna stood up and cried out, "Govinda! Govinda!" A big jar of Ganges water stood in a corner of

the room. He hurried there, panting, and washed with the holy water the spot the maidservant had touched. The devotees in the room were amazed to see this incident. Bhagavati sat as if struck dead.' Sri Ramakrishna did not reprimand her and said gently, 'You should salute me from a distance'³ and then sang three songs about the Divine Mother to console her. Bhagavati later fulfilled two requests of the Master that day: she went on several pilgrimages and gave her money to charity.

Special Reverence for Women

Sri Ramakrishna saw only the Divine Mother in all women; he could not bear to see his Mother undergo difficulties. We read in *The Gospel* of two young mothers, the wives of two brothers, who fasted before visiting the Master. After showing them his deep affection, Ramakrishna said, 'Why have you fasted? You should take your meal before you come here. Women are but so many forms of my Divine Mother. I cannot bear to see them suffer. You are all images of the Mother of the Universe. Come here after you have eaten, and you will feel happy.'⁴

Then the Master asked Rakhhal to feed them from the various temple offerings of food, fruit, sweets and drinks. Ramakrishna was greatly relieved: 'You have eaten some-



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thing. Now my mind is at peace. I cannot bear to see women fast.⁵

One day, the Master invited Dr. Mahendra Pal and Burogopal (Swami Advaitananda) to walk with him on the western garden path outside his room. A strong stench filled the air. A sweeper woman was approaching with a pitcher on her head—filled with excrement she had collected from the privies at Dakshineswar. The sight of this woman fully aroused Sri Ramakrishna's love for the Divine Mother. 'Mother,' he said, 'who can do this work except you?' He prostrated fully before the sweeper-woman. Dr. Pal's narration of this incident to Swami Arupananda is found in Gurudas Gupta's Diary.

Although the educated people of Bengal did not approve of prostitutes performing in the theatre, Sri Ramakrishna went several times to see theatrical performances such as *Chaitanyalila* and blessed the actresses. Binodini was one of them.

Love For the Poor, Lowly, and Humble

In 1868, Mathur Nath Biswas accompanied Sri Ramakrishna on a pilgrimage to Varanasi and other places in North India. They stopped for a few days at Deoghar [now in Jharkhand] to visit the famous Shiva temple.

The extreme poverty of the village people pained the Master. He wept and told Mathur, 'You are but a manager of Mother's estate. Give these people sufficient oil to cool their heads and each a piece of cloth to wear and feed them to their fill once.' Mathur replied, 'Father, the pilgrimage will require much money, and the poor are too many. I may later be in want of money if I begin to do all that. What do you advise under these circumstances?'

Ramakrishna cried out in anguish, 'You rascal! I will not go to your Kashi. I will remain

here with them; they have none to call their own; I will not leave them behind and go.'⁶ Ramakrishna sat down among the villagers. Only after Mathur fulfilled the Master's wish, did Ramakrishna proceed with him to Kashi. Another time, the poverty of Mathur's tenants pained the Master when he visited Mathur's native village, Ranaghat. He told Mathur to give them food, oil for bathing and new cloths, and to stop taxing them. Again, Mathur reluctantly obeyed.

Rasik, the Dakshineswar Temple sweeper, longed for God. He craved to approach Sri Ramakrishna whom he called 'father' but suffered under the restrictions of his caste and lowly status. He wept much for the Master's grace. One day he prostrated himself before the Master who was returning from the Panchavati, absorbed in a spiritual mood. 'What will happen to me?' Rasik cried. The Master said, 'You will see me at the time of death.' Two years after the Master's demise,



Photograph of a painting giving an artist's view of Rasik prostrating to Sri Ramakrishna in Panchavati

Rasik became gravely ill. He rejected all medicines and drank only sanctified water (*Charanamrita*). He spent his waking hours chanting God's name and praying earnestly

for His grace. Lying on a mat in his tulsi grove, his rosary in hand, Rasik died with full consciousness visualizing the presence of the Master.

Bhartabhari, the illiterate temple gardener, was loved by Ramakrishna for his simplicity and goodness. One night when the Master was meditating under the bel tree, Bhartabhari saw a bright radiance flowing from his body and left in fear. The next morning he fell at the Master's feet in tears and said, 'Master, please bless me.' Ramakrishna raised him up gently and said, 'Meditate on the form that you saw last night. Clean this path that leads to the Panchavati. Many devotees will come here in the future.'⁷ Obedience to the Master's instruction was all that was needed for Bhartabhari's mukti.

Compassion for the Incurable

Chandra Haldar, a priest of the Kali temple at Kalighat and Mathur's family priest, envied Mathur's steadfast loyalty to the Master. He was convinced that the Master had cast a secret spell over Mathur and asked Sri Ramakrishna to teach it to him. The Master repeatedly told Haldar that all devotees came due to the grace of the Divine Mother, not through a magic formula. Haldar's failure to extract a magic formula from Sri Ramakrishna festered long in his mind. On one of his many visits to Mathur's Janbazar house, he found the Master alone, lying on the floor in an ecstatic mood. Haldar thought the Master was pretending to be in a state of Samadhi and kicked him several times. His boots left black marks on the Master's body. One day at Shyampukur, Doctor Sarkar asked the Master about it. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Everybody wanted to tell Mathur Babu about it, but I forbade them.'⁸ The Master never reported the matter because he knew that Mathur might punish the priest harshly.

Swami Shivananda explains:

You see, our Lord had different moods. With respect to Haldar he was not in the mood of the Guru transforming the disciple; in relation to him he was like an ordinary devotee, who must see the Lord in the ignorant, in the wicked.

When Sri Ramakrishna was staying at Shyampukur during his final illness, the son of a man who had long vilified the Master became gravely ill. With his last hope, the father went to the home of Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar, who ignored his appeal for help as he was just leaving to treat the Master. The father ran after the carriage but was unable to catch up with it. When this man reached Shyampukur, the Master was surrounded by his devotees. Taking full account of his prior abusive behavior towards the Master, he stood before the Master, trembling with shame and fear. The Master was told of the son's grave condition. 'I am old and have an ordinary pain in my throat,' the Master said tearfully. 'I can imagine how painful is the suffering of your young child.' He told Dr. Sarkar to treat the man's child first, then return to him. The man begged the Master repeatedly to forgive him.⁹

Compassion for Bohemians

Girish Chandra Ghosh was a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. One evening he was drinking heavily with friends and took them to the Master after midnight. They found Sri Ramakrishna in a state of ecstasy. Staggering in, they bowed low before him. The Master took hold of their hands and began to dance and sing, drawing them nearer and nearer to God:

I drink no ordinary wine, but Wine of Everlasting Bliss;

As I repeat my Mother Kali's name, it so intoxicates my mind that people take me to be drunk!

Two hours passed in this way, from which Girish emerged sober. One particularly hot afternoon he visited Sri Ramakrishna in the Cossipore Garden House. The Master was so sick that he could not turn over on his side without help, so he asked Latu to give Girish some snacks and said, 'There is some nice water here.' Sri Ramakrishna crawled painfully across the floor to an earthen jug in the southeastern corner of his room to offer Girish water from his own hand.¹⁰

His Transforming Touch

Manmatha, the notorious powerful wrestler and ruffian, lived in Gosainpara, near Baghbazar. He had given up his sacred thread and was leading a bohemian lifestyle. Yogin-Ma lived nearby in Nebubagan. She liked to visit Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar but her brother Hiralal strongly disapproved. When Yogin-Ma invited the Master to her house, Hiralal hired Manmatha to intimidate the Master. Swami Akhandananda writes about Manmatha's first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna:

After Manmatha saw the Master and heard a few words from him, he fell at his feet and said to him weeping, 'My Lord, I am guilty. Please forgive me.'

The Master replied: 'All right. Come one day to Dakshineswar.'

Manmatha requested Swami Akhandananda to take him to the Master and the Swami agreed. They went a few days later with some *rashagollas* for the Master. Swami Akhandananda writes:

When I took Manmatha to Sri Ramakrishna, he endearingly received him and began to talk with him. I told him, 'Sir, this man is a notorious ruffian and even the gangs of strong boys are frightened of him. Sometimes he is hired by a big fighting gang.' At this, Thakur

[Sri Ramakrishna] touched his body with the second finger and said: 'Hello! Is it a fact? Oh, how hard your body is!' The Master told him to wear the sacred thread and led him to a solitary place on the devotional path circling round the Kali temple. There, he blessed him and said, 'Come again any Saturday.'

Manmatha spoke to no one about the Master's touch. He responded to the Master's invitation and went again with Swami Akhandananda. This time also, they brought *rashagollas* for the Master, and the Master spoke again with Manmatha. This concluded Manmatha's visits to Sri Ramakrishna. He visited the Master only twice. Inwardly, Manmatha had received the grace of the Master. In due course, the Master's touch completely transformed him.

Swami Akhandananda writes about the 'unthinkable change' in Manmatha reported to him by Swami Shivananda:

Manmatha used to stay at his maternal uncle's house, near the Siddheswari temple in Baghbazar. While passing through that street, we would stop a while, hearing his cry, 'Mother, Mother'.

Swami Akhandananda writes that upon his return to the Baranagore Monastery in 1890 after several years in Tibet, Manmatha appeared there one afternoon when he and other monks were singing devotional songs with Swamiji and talking about the Master. They were astonished to behold Manmatha, 'bare-footed, wearing a piece of cloth, and crying with folded hands, 'Priyanath!, Priyanath!'—'O, my Beloved One! O, my Beloved One!' In course of time, he became completely detached from the world before dying peacefully.

Love for Dumb Creatures

Sri Ramakrishna once showed his love for one of the dumb creatures in the simple

village of his birth. It is related by Holy Mother:

Once in the rainy season it rained so much in Kamarpukur that all the fields got flooded. Thakur was going through the flooded road of Kuli near [the] Dom neighbourhood to answer nature's call. Floodwater brought many catfish on the fields and people were hitting them with a stick to catch [them]. One of the fishes hung close to Thakur's feet. Thakur felt compassion for it and asked the people, 'Please don't hit this fish, this one took refuge in me. If you can, take it to Haldar pond.' Then he pushed the fish by his feet up to the pond of the Lahas. Returning home he said, 'Aha! If anyone takes refuge like this, he or she must be saved.'

Sri Ramakrishna often visited his devotees in a horse carriage. If the horses were undernourished, he was painfully aware of their heavy burden. If the coachman whipped the horses to spur them on, he felt the sting of the lash on his own body. For this reason, the Master usually called upon his devotee Beni Pal, who always provided a carriage with strong, healthy horses, whenever Sri Ramakrishna needed this service from him.

Conclusion

Sri Ramakrishna left a rich legacy of his compassionate heart through his untiring services to the distressed people. Romain Roll-

and summarizes this profound aspect of the Master's life:

An ever-shifting crowd of all classes and all castes inundated him with its restless movement. They came jumbled together, Maharajahs and beggars, journalists and pundits, artists and devotees, Brahmos, Christians and Mohammedans, men of faith, men of action and business, old men, women and children. Often they journeyed from afar to question him, and there was no rest for him day or night. For twenty hours out of the twenty-four he replied to all comers.

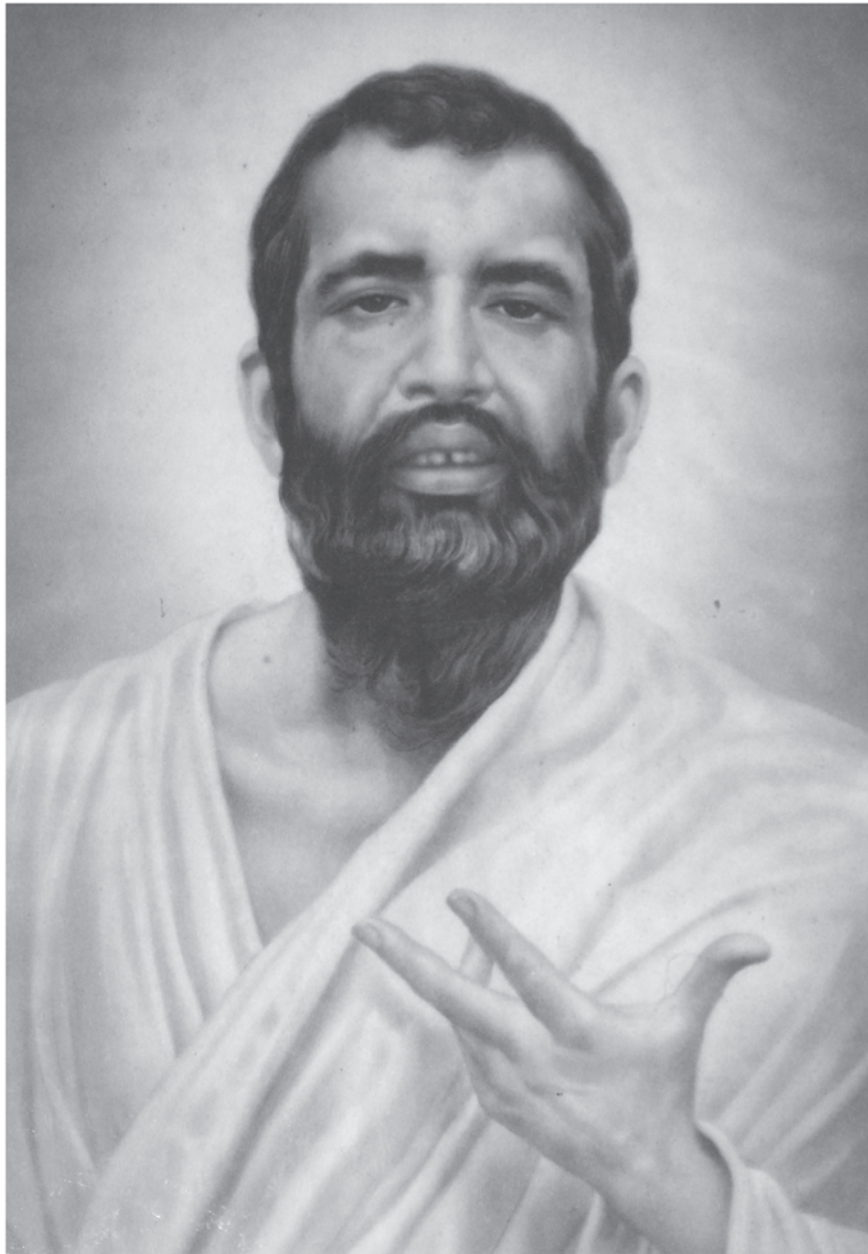
Although his weakened health failed under the strain, he refused nobody, but gave out to all alike his sympathy, his enlightenment, and that strange power of soul, which, even if he did not speak a word, gripped the hearts of his visitors and left them transformed for days. He won the respect of all sincere believers, and gladly received men of different faiths so that they might discuss their diversities before him and he might reconcile them.¹¹

The words of Sri Ramakrishna have a consummate, lasting effect in the formation of our spiritual character. His words in *The Gospel* give us a taste of spiritual bliss. Our humble acknowledgment and highest form of charity is to make them known to the world so that all may receive their redeeming benefit. □



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4. *Gospel*, p.432
5. *Ibid*, p.432
6. *The Great Master*, Pp.531-32
7. *Satprasanga Sivananda (Bengali)*, 2; 134
8. *Gospel*, p.885
9. c.f., *Ramakrishna Punthi (Bengali)* by Akshay Kumar Sen
10. *Gospel*, Pp.955-6
11. *The Life of Ramakrishna* by Romain Rolland, p.139



*A photo of the painting by Frank Dvorak, the well-known Austrian artist,
after he had seen him in a vision*

The West and the Joyous Light of Sri Ramakrishna

SWAMI ATMARUPANANDA

Meanings of Joy

What is joy? According to modern Western thought it is a positive mental state characterized by heightened wellbeing and positive emotions like elation.

Typical of Western thought, joy is considered complex and associated with process: that is, it may be a state, but that state has complex components and arises from dynamic processes, physiological and psychological. The school of Positive Psychology, for instance, says that joy can arise from positive engagement and absorption in a valued and meaningful activity. Dr. Martin Seligman defines happiness as *'both positive feelings (such as ecstasy and comfort) and positive activities that have no feeling component at all (such as absorption and engagement).'*¹

This is typical because, as with Buddhism, modern Western thought has not been friendly to ontology, which is one of the reasons that Buddhism has appealed to many Westerner thinkers. Similar to the case of joy, 'consciousness' refers in the West to conscious mental processes, not to the light of consciousness (*chit*) which is a reality in itself. So with existence: things 'exist' as dynamic processes, but 'existence' has no meaning except as an empty abstraction of thought. It is in this context that we have to understand

Western thinking about joy: it is a complex, dynamic state resulting from a sense of purposeful engagement, or from satisfaction of a desire, or from anticipation of imminent satisfaction of a desire, etc.

Going further, scientific materialism reduces joy to brain chemistry.² Not all of Western thought is circumscribed by scientific materialism, certainly, but the latter has gained such importance that it has influenced other ways of thinking. A materialist might say that joy is nothing but brain chemistry, but much of modern Western thought would at least consider the brain chemistry to be an essential component of joy.

Also typical of Western thought, joy is defined from the outside, from the standpoint of the observer, not from the standpoint of the one experiencing joy. A Westerner would tend to define joy by what is observable about the joyful person: what he or she is doing or what is happening in the brain or what triggers the person's experience of joy. Subjective experience has rarely been valued in Western civilization. It is considered private and therefore less real, subject to imagination, insubstantial, unprovable, whereas external experience is shared, and validated by others. The external world is considered more real than the internal world.



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The Vedantic view of joy is quite different. If I see a long-lost friend and feel great joy, where does the joy come from? A modern physiological explanation is that the meeting causes chemical and electromagnetic changes in the brain which give a sense of elation, and that is experienced as joy. Vedanta need not deny the chemical and electro-magnetic changes that take place—that would be foolish—but joy is seen as a reality in itself. It is Reality itself. When I see the long-lost friend, my mind is sufficiently calmed and clarified (made *sattvika*) that a ray of the joy inherent to my very being is experienced. The joy didn't jump from the friend into me, obviously, but neither did the joy result from the chemical changes in the brain.

What, then, about the chemical and electromagnetic changes? Yes, the very presence of those changes may explain—at least partially—the great difference between spiritual joy and ordinary happiness. A person who has experienced a spiritual state knows the quantum-leap difference between the ordinary happiness that comes from going to a party and the joy that comes from spiritual experience.³ The spiritual aspirant can see a connection between this higher joy and the lower happiness that comes from desire fulfilment, but the two experiences are also very different.⁴ One is highly refined, the other is comparatively gross. One is unaffected by the external world, the other highly dependent on external circumstances. One is highly tranquil, the other has a dominant element of excitation (*rajas*) about it. One is experienced within consciousness itself, as inherent to one's own being, the other has a strong physical component and does not seem to proceed from one's own inherent being: it seems more like a temporary psychological state. One is experienced as enduring, present even when one

can't access it due to the grossness of the mind, the other is temporary and, again, dependent on outer circumstances.

This Vedantic understanding of joy is a medicine for many of the ills of modern Western civilization.

How?

Spiritual Dimension of Joy

To know that joy is my own nature corrects the compulsion to seek happiness and security in external things and experiences. Not immediately. Not even in one lifetime for most people. But it takes away the frenetic, desperate rush toward possession and enjoyment that has behind it not just desire and attachment, but the full expectation that this is going to give ultimate fulfilment, this is going to give joy, this is 'what it's all about.'

Modern society—through television, movies, books, advertising, public heroes, through countless daily messages—tells us that we should be 'high on life'. That is, life should be exciting, fulfilling, joy-giving, a continuous adventure in new experiences, *external* experiences. People internalize this message. How many people come to religious teachers and psychological counsellors to say with deep sadness, 'I am trying to do everything right, think the right thoughts, do the right things, but I'm just not happy. Why? What am I doing wrong?' It turns out that their expectations of life are skewed. Most of life is unexciting, humdrum. Happiness and sadness are two poles of the same phenomenon: one can not be had without the other. Moreover, over-indulgence in anything dulls the mind and senses so that it no longer gives joy: the impulsion toward enjoyment is still insistent, but the return is no longer there.

This message of modern society, that life should be exciting, is cruel. People are led

toward an empty promise, and then they wonder what's wrong with them, why the promise is denied them. They try harder, and come up even shorter. Their efforts become more desperate until they give up and resign themselves to unhappiness, not because they have learned better but because they no longer have the strength or faith to try. This is the tyranny of false expectations given by society today.

Look at the richest and most powerful: their lives are miserable, empty, *unless* they are spiritually minded, or at least service-minded, in which case their lives have meaning and joy, not because of their wealth and power, but because of their spirituality or service. Without spirituality and a spirit of service, wealth and power lead to dreadful emptiness.

Once one understands that joy is inside, that it is one's own nature, desire does not stop, ambition does not stop: that takes many years of intense spiritual practice. But one no longer invests oneself fully in this desperate search for what can never be had. One satisfies one's legitimate desires as a natural process, all the while knowing that eventually lasting joy is to be found within, through a calm and self-controlled mind. And as one is able, one begins to move in that direction. Life then has meaning, a meaning that is based on truth, experiential truth, truth open to everyone.

Further, this idea—this realizable fact, rather—that joy is within and is my own nature, negates the belief in man's sinful nature. Traditional Christianity teaches that man is born in sin. Buddhism teaches that life is suffering. While Vedanta can understand both positions as having some truth, it proclaims that the higher truth is, 'From joy alone all beings are born; once born, they live by joy; and on departing they enter into joy.'⁵

'Who indeed would breathe, who would live, were it not for this bliss ... ?'⁶

If joy is the nature of Reality itself, then I begin to open myself to this higher joy which is accessible to the purified mind, and which is pervasive. Existence, consciousness, joy, all begin—even long before great states of enlightenment—to become realities, to become aspects of the one Reality. The search for Existence itself is the search for Consciousness, which is the search for Joy, and these are realities. They are Reality itself. As Vedanta spreads, a new ontology will spread with it, not an ontology of concepts and abstractions—the very emptiness of which has led to the death of philosophy in the modern West—but a living ontology of experience. What is Isness? What is consciousness? What is joy? What is love? The search for these realities will become a living search in everyday experience, because that is where they are found.

If deeper, lasting joy is experienced in the tranquil, purified mind, then one realizes that true joy cannot be had through unrestricted enjoyment. Self-control becomes a value, not dissipation. A higher, alert tranquillity of mind becomes a value—not hyperactivity nor a drugged stupor. When joy is sought within as one's own deepest nature, then our own inner experience becomes the source of knowledge, understanding, truth, no matter what scientific materialists argue. A refined subjectivity of the purified mind then reorients our whole relationship to self, God, universe, Reality.

As mentioned before, this medicine is not fast-acting, nor easily taken. Spiritual growth is slow. At present the disease of extreme worldliness is raging, and has been raging for so long that it has become accepted as natural, the self-evident goal of life. But if these spiritual values gradually take root in society,

they will become the new basis of social life. That is, they won't be a difficult medicine which is taken to counter a raging disease which has continued so long that it is considered normal, but they will become a natural part of cultural understanding. Those who want to enjoy the world should be allowed to do so, as Swami Vivekananda insisted, but when they tire of that, they will know why they are tired of it, and will know what to do about it.

The Incarnation of Joy

Where does Sri Ramakrishna come into this picture? He is the living centre of it, for he is the very Incarnation of Joy. His image is the image of Joy. God has come this time, not as a king or king-maker, not as a slayer of demons or destroyer of the unrighteous, not as the founder of a new religion in opposition to the old religion, not as a Crucified Saviour, not as the teacher of a particular path dedicated to only one aspect of God, however great those Teachers of the past were. This time he has come as an Incarnation of Joy.

Where can we find another scripture like the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, where one moment he is joking and laughing, another moment singing and dancing in ecstasy, another moment absorbed in transcendent, silent Joy?

God to Sri Ramakrishna was *anandamayī*—the all-blissful Mother who could take on infinite forms. He entered ecstatic states every day, multiple times a day. He said over and over that this world is a mart of joy. Can we see the world as a mart of joy? Not yet, not in our present state. But that was his natural experience. The words of the Taittiriya Upanishad quoted before were his constant experience: 'From joy alone all beings are born; once born, they live by joy; and on departing they enter into joy.'

All three photographs of Sri Ramakrishna are images of joy. In the two photographs where he is standing, his ecstasy is visible to anyone. Even his meditation picture, however, so strange looking at first (even stranger to a Westerner than to an Indian), is an image of joy. Those unseeing eyes—that abstracted look—are rarely seen as attractive at first sight. Was he in a weird hypnotic trance? It looks as though 'no one is home'. But after we know more and begin to feel attracted toward Sri Ramakrishna, how different that meditation photo looks to us! It begins to radiate beauty, and love, and joy. Yes, joy, because we begin to see that he is not in a hypnotic trance, he is not unconscious, he is superconscious, one with the blissful Mother, who Herself is everywhere. His identity with the body is gone, visibly gone in the photo, as he is identified with Reality itself in an ecstasy of joy.

What an extraordinary vision Vaikunthanath Sanyal had during the lifetime of Sri Ramakrishna, as a result of Sri Ramakrishna's blessing! As Vaikunthanath said:

A wonderful change came [over] my mind. I began to see [Sri Ramakrishna's] gracious, smiling, and luminous form in the sky, the houses, the trees, all human beings, and in everything else I saw in all directions. I was overwhelmed with extreme bliss . . . I was amazed and spellbound by seeing the blessed Master in all things. This experience remained whether I went to the office or elsewhere on business.⁷

There, at the heart of the universe, shines the blissful form of Sri Ramakrishna, and through the eyes of his meditation form shines the indescribable profundity of the transcendent Reality, untouched by words or concepts, and yet calling us into that which blissfully IS. □

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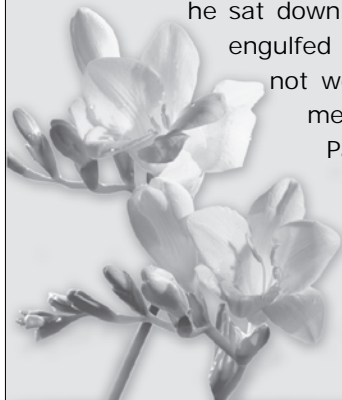
1. <http://www.happylifeu.com/definition-of-happiness.html>. Emphasis in the original. Dr. Seligman is one of the founders of Positive Psychology.
2. I am using 'chemistry' loosely to include electromagnetic phenomena like brain waves as well.
3. The author recognizes that there are different degrees of spiritual joy as well. The simple point here is to recognize the distinction between ordinary happiness and the joy experienced in even the first spiritual states.
4. Similar is the case of the experiences induced by psychotropic drugs compared with spiritual experiences: one can see a connection, and yet a great difference as well. Certain drugs can produce extraordinary experiences normally revealed only in spiritual states, such as loss of body consciousness or sublation of the ego. But the quality of the experiences are quite different, and the effects of the experiences are totally different.
5. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, III.6.1
6. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, II.7.1
7. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. by Swami Chetanananda (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003), p. 929.

Meeting With Sri Ramakrishna

Sri Ramakrishna was conversing with the devotees seated on his small cot. In physical appearance he was like any other man, but his smile was something divine . . . When he smiled, a wave of bliss rolled out not only over his face but over his whole body. And that blissful smile would wipe out the worries and troubles of those who looked at him. His voice was so sweet and melodious the one never tired of hearing it. His eyes were keen and bright, and when he looked at a person, it seemed that he was seeing everything inside him.

I don't recall what he said, but I experienced tremendous joy within. Sri Ramakrishna came closer, smiling. He caught hold of my arms and began to shove me, but I was a strong, muscular young man and I pushed him back to the wall. He was still smiling and held me with a strong grip. Gradually I felt a sort of electric current coming out of his hands and entering into me. That touch made me completely helpless. I lost all my physical strength. I went into ecstasy, and the hair of my body stood on end. Releasing me, the Master said with a smile, 'Well, you are the winner.' With those words, he sat down on his cot again. I was speechless. Wave after wave of bliss engulfed my whole being. I was pondering the fact that the Master had not won physically but his spiritual power had completely subdued me. Some time passed. Then the Master got up from his seat. Patting me gently on the back, he said, 'Come here often. It is not enough to come once'. Then he offered me some sweets as Prasad, and I returned to Calcutta. For days the spell of that intoxicating joy lingered, and I realised that he had transmitted spiritual power to me.

—**Swami Vijnanananda**, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna
[*Ramakrishna As We Saw Him*, p.246-247]



Ramakrishna—the Prophet of Inner Joy

SWAMI BRAHMESHANANDA

1

Whenever there is decline of righteousness and an upsurge of unrighteousness, O Arjuna, I manifest myself. For the protection of the virtuous, for the destruction of the wicked, and to establish righteousness, I manifest myself in every age.¹

It is a recognized fact that from time to time messengers and incarnations of God are born on earth to shed the light of righteousness and to dispel the darkness of evil and injustice. They also transmit pure, unselfish, divine love to man and give a taste of the unadulterated nectar of heavenly bliss to the arid souls scorched by the fire of worldliness.

It is indeed strange that the human soul, by nature divine and full of infinite peace and bliss, should suffer such misery in the world. Scriptures say that this is due to Maya or ignorance of the three characteristics of the soul, viz. existence (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and bliss (*ananda*). Maya, they say, conceals the potential bliss, in particular. The existence aspect is manifest in all objects and creatures. In human beings the modifications of thought-waves or *chitta-vrittis* determine which of the other two aspects will manifest itself or remain concealed. This is explained through the example of the transmission of heat and light of fire in various objects. In heated water there is transmission of heat only, and not of light.

Similarly in a mind where *tamasika* [related to dullness] and *rajasika* [related to

activity] *vrittis* predominate, only consciousness is manifested. But an inflammable wood while burning transmits both heat and light. Similarly, the light of bliss flashes forth together with the warmth of consciousness from persons with *sattvika* [related to serenity] *vrittis*. It expresses itself in human being as *priyatva* i.e. love, attraction, charm and *beauty*; and as *ananda* i.e., peace, contentment, joy and bliss. Saints and sages enjoy more bliss and display greater love and attraction since they possess *sattva guna* in much greater amount than the ordinary human being.

Sri Ramakrishna is considered an incarnation with preponderance of *sattva*. Hence these two qualities radiated from his personality in the highest degree. While the Buddha can be considered a prophet of compassion, Acharya Shankara that of knowledge and Sri Chaitanya that of divine love, Sri Ramakrishna may be considered a prophet of inner joy and bliss.

2

Joy, happiness, bliss, enjoyment and pleasure are some of the words often used interchangeably to express a favourable feeling. Satisfaction, peace and contentment are a few more words with almost similar import. Their opposites are suffering, misery, sorrow, pain, dissatisfaction, discontent and so on. Thus although we have used the word joy, this word may not be exactly appropriate for

□ A former editor of THE VEDANTA KESARI, the author is the Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh.

what all human beings are aspiring for. This is because joy has its opposite in sorrow, and the two always go together.

To seek happiness without misery is futile and it can never happen. What one actually must strive for is a state beyond both joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain—a state of undisturbed peace and tranquillity, a state of bliss beyond the opposite pairs of joy and sorrow. This state is called *ananda* in Sanskrit. It is a quality and a characteristic of a pure and tranquil mind—a *sattvika* mind. The attainment of this state of unalloyed, superlative bliss—*niratishaya ananda*—has been the search of humanity through eternity, and has often formed the central theme of the Hindu scriptures. In the Gita too, this subject of bliss has been discussed quite comprehensively, though briefly. According to Sri Krishna, there are three kinds of pleasure.

That pleasure is said to be of the nature of *sattva* which is gained by long practice of discipline, which puts an end to all sorrows, which is like poison in the beginning but nectar-like at the end, and which springs from the serenity arising from the consciousness of the Atman.

That pleasure is of the nature of *rajas* which is born of the union of the senses with their objects, which seems nectar-like in the beginning but turns out to be like poison in the end. The *tamasika* pleasure springs from sleepiness, sloth and heedlessness and is delusive in its effect on the spirit from beginning to end.²

The best, of course, is the bliss obtained by the practice of the concentration of mind:

That state in which the mind, controlled by the practice of concentration, gets settled; in which seeing the Self by the (purified) mind one is satisfied with the self; in which one realizes the absolute, transcendent bliss which is experienced through the intellect; established in which one does not waver from the Truth; attaining which

one thinks of no other acquisition as greater than that; and established in which, one is not perturbed even by great pain; that yoga should be practiced with conviction and without depression of spirits.³

Concentration of mind, again, is the quality of a *sattvika* state of mind, and if by spiritual practice the mind can be made pure and free from desire it will experience greater joy and bliss. As a matter of fact, sense objects do not possess joy in themselves. When a desire arises in the mind it makes it restless. As soon it is fulfilled, the mind becomes calm for a moment. In this calm, peaceful mind, the inner joy of the Atman is reflected. It cannot be reflected in a disturbed mind. This is the psychology of the experience of pleasure, joy or bliss which we get during sense-enjoyments. Joy belongs to the Atman alone but we erroneously think that it is in the objects. A mind free from desires is a totally undisturbed mind. It is therefore said that a person who has absolutely no desires is the happiest:

The worldly sex-enjoyment and the celestial pleasures in heavenly abodes are not even one-sixteenth part of the happiness obtained by the destruction of all desires.⁴

All of us experience great inner joy in deep sleep. Why? In sense-enjoyments there is a subject-object dichotomy and the triad of the enjoyer, the enjoyment and the object of enjoyment persists. The mind moves from one to the other in quick succession which tires it. However much a person may enjoy the waking state, ultimately the subject-object dichotomy tires him out and he finally longs to go beyond it. In sleep there is no dichotomy, no duality. There is only one undivided unity; the Subject alone remains, covered with ignorance. According to Advaita Vedanta, in deep sleep we experience the inner joy of the unlimited, undivided Brahman, the one

without second, although it is covered with ignorance.

But none wishes to remain sleeping forever. Well, can we not experience the undivided unadulterated inner joy like that of deep sleep in the waking state? Yes, this is what is called samadhi. In samadhi there are no mental modifications, just as in deep sleep and yet the mind is not steeped in ignorance. This blessed state of samadhi and the superlative joy experienced in that state cannot be compared with any of the worldly enjoyments be that of an emperor, of an innocent child or of a learned scholar. For Sri Ramakrishna this state of Samadhi was most natural, and he urged all who came to him to struggle hard to experience it.

3

Being inseparably united with the Supreme Spirit, which is nothing but Bliss Absolute, Sri Ramakrishna was the very embodiment of inner divine joy. Whether in health or in disease, whether in normal consciousness or in a state of ecstasy, he was always cheerful. He did not like people to consider the world a frame-work of illusion. Instead he preferred to call it a mansion of mirth.⁵ If one were to hold on to God then the world would indeed appear to be a mart of joy, he would say. The Holy Mother, who lived with him for a long period of twelve years, said that she never saw him in a depressed mood.

Even while he was suffering from cancer of the throat, the devotees who served him never got the impression that he was in pain. Swami Turiyananda, then Hari, actually told Sri Ramakrishna that to his mind the Master was ever blissful, in spite of the cancerous, painful disease. He held this view even when Sri Ramakrishna protested to the contrary.

Finally Sri Ramakrishna did confirm Hari's observation. During this period, Narendra with two other brother-disciples went to Bodha Gaya for austerities. Had Sri Ramakrishna been in pain, they would not have had the heart to leave him even for a day.

Sri Ramakrishna transmitted this inner joy to the world in various ways. First of all, his very presence radiated bliss and created a blissful atmosphere. There used to be continuous fun and frolic, singing and dancing, lively discussions on spiritual matters in his room day and night. Festivities, picnics and parties took place all round the year. Young and old, worldly-minded or devout, people afflicted with sorrow and anxiety or otherwise, all alike used to feel relaxed and happy the moment they came within his enchanting circle.

Secondly, Sri Ramakrishna actively endeavoured to remove the sorrow of people. He was extremely sensitive to their suffering and could deeply sympathize with them in their woes. He alone could assuage the agony of a bereaved father who had lost his grown-up son. This he did in his unique way, first by feeling the grief deeply, then by singing a song in a heroic mood of a devotee preparing to fight death, and finally by an amiable conversation on the unreality of the world, the transitoriness of life and the need for dependence on God.

Sri Ramakrishna could not see anyone weeping. Touching incidents are on record of how out of compassion he would go beyond limits to console others. Yogin Ma, one of the close companions of the Holy Mother, was so much attached to her that she could not bear her separation. Once when the Holy Mother had to go to her native village from Calcutta, Yogin Ma broke down. When Sri Ramakrishna saw her weeping, he called her to his room and tactfully diverted her mind by narrating

incidents of his period of sadhana, and thus calmed down her mind. On another occasion, he cajoled a small girl of five who was crying, being shocked to see sharp thorns along with a beautiful rose.

Sri Ramakrishna was careful not to hurt anyone even by mistake. His embarrassment and sense of guilt at inadvertently addressing the Holy Mother as 'thou' is too well-known to be retold. But a touching incident demonstrates how he behaved with Bhagwati Dasi, an old maid of the temple. Once Sri Ramakrishna was amiably talking to Bhagwati Dasi. Encouraged by this, the lady saluted Sri Ramakrishna by touching his feet. He started up in pain, since he could not bear the touch of impure persons. Poor Bhagwati Dasi was dumbfounded with guilt and shame. Sri Ramakrishna noticed this and felt sorry that he had inadvertently caused pain to the lady. He therefore sang a few songs in his sweet voice to console and cheer her up.

Sri Ramakrishna taught and demonstrated through his life the path to inner joy to all who came to him for help and guidance. He used to classify bliss or *ananda* into - three types: *vishayananda*, *bhajananda*, and *brahmananda*. The first is the bliss derived from sense-objects. It is transitory, debasing and leads to bondage and sorrow. The next is the joy of singing the glories of God and remembering him, renouncing sense-pleasures. Through this transformation one ultimately attains the third and the highest form of bliss, when the aspirant achieves union with God who is the very embodiment of bliss, and enjoys unadulterated eternal bliss.

One of the most effective techniques demonstrated and advocated in the present age by Sri Ramakrishna to enjoy inner divine joy, is to become a child of the Divine Mother. Even an ordinary child enjoys the pure joy.

He has no worries or anxieties for the future, nor is he burdened by the haunting guilt of evil deeds committed in the past. He has neither love nor hatred nor attachment nor aversion. His needs are few and he revels in his own self. But unfortunately he is helplessly dependent on others and as he grows he becomes more and more aware of his utter helplessness, limitations and insecurity and develops consequent worldly cleverness. If one can, like a child, become free from aversion and attachment, likes and dislikes and be free from the bonds of the three gunas, without the feeling of helplessness, one can attain supreme bliss. Let us try to think that we are the children of God, fully dependent on him. He is our Mother and Father, and we have nothing to worry. Sri Ramakrishna was the Child of the Divine Mother and always remained so.

The present age is one of hedonism and consumerism. Although there is a bombardment of information, it is being used for acquiring wealth and objects of sense enjoyment, in a futile bid for lasting happiness. Sri Ramakrishna has demonstrated more than a century ago in no uncertain terms that joy, happiness or bliss cannot be had without renunciation. He had nothing—no wealth, no learning, no social status—and yet he was always immersed, as it were, in an ocean of inner joy, testifying to the statement of the Upanishads that immortality and bliss cannot be obtained by wealth or progeny, but by renunciation alone. This truth he taught by precept and practice to the world in general and to the group of his inner disciples in particular. Some like to consider Sri Ramakrishna a prophet of harmony, since no one had in the past *practically* demonstrated the harmony of all religions as has been done by Sri Ramakrishna. Yet the Holy Mother had

emphatically stated that renunciation was most natural for Sri Ramakrishna.

One of the best ways of obtaining bliss is to love and serve others. The scriptures say: That which is limitless is bliss; there is no happiness in the little, in the limited.⁶ It is a common experience that a single, isolated and alienated person is never happy. When Swami Vivekananda, then Narendranath, expressed his desire to remain merged in Nirvikalpa Samadhi, Sri Ramakrishna rebuked him and said that there was a much higher state when one identifies with all the creatures of the world—becomes limitless.

Swami Vivekananda conveyed the same message to us when he said, 'Expansion is life, contraction is death'. By service, we identify with others. It breaks our egoistic limitations and makes us expand. We find ourselves among our own people everywhere. To make others our own through love, service

and help, is the method taught by the Holy Mother to attain peace, happiness and bliss. The day we would actually realize that no one is a stranger, and all are our own, that day we shall be the happiest. He indeed is the happiest person who actually feels that none is a stranger, none is an enemy and that all are his own.

Conclusion

The uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna lies in that he manifests the fullest amount of inner joy and at the same time is so utterly human. No other incarnation came so close to humanity in his earthly existence as Sri Ramakrishna did. He lived and moved among us like an ordinary human being so that he may be easily approached. Through his charming humanity and deep sympathy he is drawing all towards him, and is beckoning all to enter the kingdom of eternal inner joy. □

References

1. *Gita*, IV. 7-8
2. *Ibid.*, XVIII, 36-39
3. *Ibid.*, VI, 20-23
4. *Mahabharata*, Shanti Parva, 174, 46; 177, 51
5. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 139
6. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 7.23.1

'The Joy the Master Poured into My Heart'

One morning Sri Ramakrishna took me to the Kali Temple. Whenever I went there alone I stood outside the threshold, but on this occasion the Master took me into the sanctum sanctorum and showed me the face of Lord Shiva, who was of course lying on his back while Kali stood over Him. His face was not visible from outside the shrine, where one could only see the top of His head. The Master said, 'Look, here is the living Shiva.' I felt that Lord Shiva was conscious and breathing. I was astonished. How potent were the Master's words! Up to that time I had thought that this image was just like all the other Shiva images I had seen.

Sri Ramakrishna then gently pulled Mother Kali's cloth and placed Her ornaments properly. When we left the temple he was reeling like a drunkard. He was escorted to his room with difficulty and remained for some time in samadhi. I cannot describe the details of that day — the joy the Master poured into my heart cannot be communicated. After coming down from samadhi the Master sang many songs in an ecstatic mood.

—Swami Akhandananda, *God Lived With Them*, p.563



Swami Vivekananda—the chief disciple of Sri Ramakrishna

Sri Ramakrishna: The Embodiment of Indian Culture

PREMA NANDAKUMAR

Uniqueness of Indian Culture

The unique nature of Indian culture is a turn towards the spiritual, says Sri Aurobindo. Nowhere else in this world do we come across a culture that has given such a high place to religion and spirituality as the agents of culturing man from the animal to the divine. The remarkable virtue of Indian religion is its capacity to renew itself and adapt the ancient truths to the changed circumstances of a new age without missing any of its vital and truth-bearing components. This is the reason why its findings in the realm of spirituality (the Upanishads, Buddhism, etc.) have been welcomed by the West.

Swami Tathagatananda's *Journey of the Upanishads to the West* reveals how steadily the wisdom of the East had percolated into the West even from the days of ancient Greece. The Rock Edicts of Ashoka have extended references to the Hellenic kings of his time like Antiochus (Amtiyoka), Ptolemy (Turamaya) and Alikasundara (Alexander). The doors of India have always been kept open in the matter of knowledge-giving (*vidyaa-daana*): Schelling, Schopenhauer, Sir Monier-Williams . . . the list grows long. Thus says Archibald E. Gough:

The Upanishads are the loftiest utterances of Indian intelligence. Whatever value the reader may assign to the ideas they represent, they are

the highest product of the ancient Indian mind, and almost the only elements of interest in Indian literature which is at every stage replete with them to saturation. . . The Upanishads have been justly characterized. . . as the basis of the enlightened faith of India.¹

Streams of Indian Thoughts

Around two thousand years ago, two strong streams had emerged from Indian culture: the Vedantic and the Shramanic. The former streamed from the Vedas. The latter rose as a protestant religion, decrying both the Purva Mimamsa which saw the Vedas as one of ritualism that led to liberation, and Uttara Mimamsa which preferred Jnana Yoga or Knowledge as leading to liberation. Faith in gods or the Supreme Brahman was set aside by Shramanic religions like Buddhism and Jainism. The most prominent leaders among the latter were Gautama Buddha and Vardhamana Mahavira. While Jainism had a long line of philosophers beginning with Kundakunda and Samantabhadra, Buddhism was theorized by eminent philosophers like Sangabhadra and Nagarjuna.

Of the philosophers of the Vedic stream who gave rise to Vedanta, Gaudapada was certainly one of the earliest. Gaudapada's close study of Buddhist philosophers like Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu helped him formulate his



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philosophy of Non-Dualism (*advaita*). In course of time Vedanta was enriched by Adi Shankara (Advaita), Ramanujacharya (Vishishtadvaita), Madhvacharya (Dvaita) and a host of great seers. The contours of bhakti yoga were enhanced by hymnology in Sanskrit, Tamil and other Indian languages.

Indian religion and spirituality thus continued to enrich the lives of the common man as well as the intellectuals and those whose thoughts were set on liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Unfortunately, foreign invasions created problems. But the genius of India had opted for a life based on the concept of Sanatana Dharma that was never exclusive. The Upanishadic seer who spoke of the all-pervading Brahman would not distinguish between people belonging to different religions. Thus the all-inclusive Sanatana Dharma found no problem in accommodating foreign religions like Islam and Christianity, and giving refuge to persecuted people like the Jews and the Parsis. This was due to the Vedantic concept of *ekam sat viprah bahuda-vadanti* ('Truth is One, sages call it differently').

Unfortunately this accommodative spirit and the brotherhood of man in the Upanishadic faith of Brahman consciousness was lost with the import of information regarding Crusades, Jehads and Reconquista. Religious exclusivism was the result. The English-educated Indian turned away from his life-giving sources that showed him right conduct, right thoughts and faith and right action. Even the twin epics that had given us the superb concept of Dharma that regulated the secular and religious life of Indians were set aside and the Puranas were decried as puerile. Will Durant has analyzed the situation in his book *The Case for India* (published in 1930), where he says: 'The East is drunk with the wine of

the West, with the lust for liberty, luxury and power.'

Indian Cultural Renaissance

Fortunately, India's Sanatana Dharma stood the test well. By making use of the same English education as an incisive instrument to probe his own past the Indian could remove some of the vile encrustations that had rendered the clear Vedic stream murky. With Raja Rammohun Roy founding the Brahmo Samaj, and with Ramakrishna Paramahansa discovering Swami Vivekananda, the next future was unfolded. A neo-Vedantic approach was in the offing with eminent personalities like Debendranath Tagore giving deep thought to the problem of Vedantic enquiry and idol worship. Keshab Chander Sen experimented endlessly, in his search for a universal dispensation.

Then came 1893. At the World Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda went up the rostrum in Chicago, and began in his stirring words: 'Sisters and Brothers of America. . .' The Age of Neo-Vedanta had begun.

Swami Vivekananda's instant appeal came from the spiritual reserves of being the earnest disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. As the post-1857 generation floundered for a new light in the wake of a seemingly heavier political oppression and young men taking to the Western ways, and Dharma was in the danger of losing its presence in our motherland, the Supreme incarnated as a Guru in Sri Ramakrishna. Because of his presence in the physical, his taking on the life of the commoner (just a priest of the Kali Temple!), his years of gathering experience in various religions through *bhava*, his refusal to reject any Godward path as insignificant, he demonstrated what it was to *live* as a Universal Man.

The ritualistic approach to the Divine, for instance. He showed us that this was the easiest way for the aspirant to gain liberation. The aspirant who takes to this path finds the entire world pulsating with the Divine. A realised soul, yet Sri Ramakrishna became the priest of Goddess Bhavatarini in Dakshineswar, six kilometres to the north of Calcutta, and involved himself in all the sacramental procedures with total commitment. To him, Bhavatarini was no idol but the Mother Herself. We know how he used to be self-lost in Her presence, especially when listening to hymns on the Mother:

O Mother, grant unto me but to die
With thy Sacred Name on my lips;
Then, O good Mother shall it be seen
Whether or not Thou savest this poor helpless
child of Thine.

This Yoga of Divine Love was the first of his sadhanas which gave him a vision of Sita, a vision of love and sorrow, grace, patience and austerity. From now onwards his life became one of all-embracing sadhana and no religion or path of life was alien to him. Thus did Sri Ramakrishna prove again the central truth of the Vedic heritage which rejects no religious or spiritual experience and always looks towards universal prosperity and harmony.

By making himself a burning brazier of spiritual experimentation, he inaugurated a renaissance, a re-flowering of the Indian spirit. He rejected casteist distinctions which sound cantankerous in a tradition where Jabala's son Satyakama and the Shudra Janashruti and the cart-puller Raikwa could become teachers. This approach helped Swami Vivekananda formulate the principles of the Ramakrishna Movement. Once caste (and with it class) distinctions were rejected, there was no looking back for the Movement which became the leader of the

Neo-Vedantic Movement. The Rishi ideal was tuned to the Shramanic engagement with Sannyasa. Sri Ramakrishna's inspiration rejected neither the life of the householder nor that of a sannyasin.

The Advent of Sri Ramakrishna

Outwardly Sri Ramakrishna may have been a priest of Kali given to ecstasies and the stillness of Samadhi. But he was certainly a power-house of the spirit for long after his leaving the physical body, he not only guided Swami Vivekananda and others who had come to him, but also others who had dedicated themselves to the service of Mother India. We know from Sri Aurobindo's life that Sri Ramakrishna was an influence at vital moments in his career, both political and yogic. The two had never met in life but apparently the guru took care of Sri Aurobindo in the occult planes as he has documented in his *Record of Yoga*.

When Sri Aurobindo was engaged in the independence movement in the first decade of 20th century, he received a sign with the distinct message, 'Aurobinda, *Mandir Gado, Mandir Gado*.' ['Aurobindo, build a temple, build a temple']. This appears to have given rise to the Bhawani Mandir Scheme for training young men for revolution during the Bande Mataram Movement one hundred years ago. The blueprint prepared by Sri Aurobindo opens with the words:

Om Namas Chandikayai. A temple is to be erected and consecrated to Bhawani, the Mother, among the hills. To all the children of the Mother the call is sent forth to help in the sacred work.

Later on Sri Aurobindo says:

It was to initiate this great work, the greatest and most wonderful work ever given to a race that Bhagawan Ramakrishna came and Vivekananda preached.

From this one can see what a complete spiritual force Sri Ramakrishna has been though he had chosen to withdraw from the physical frame in 1886.

The great Bande Mataram Movement that was initiated by Bala Gangadhar Tilak, Sri Aurobindo and others under such strong inspiration helped the entire nation to wake up and work for India's independence. For Sri Aurobindo the inner significance of Sri Ramakrishna's message came later. He realised that he had been asked to construct a temple within and thus took to a life of yoga. That is why he told Motilal Roy that 'it was Ramakrishna who personally came and first turned me to this Yoga.'

So how can we think of Sri Ramakrishna as just a priest of Kali ringing the bell, waving the arati and distributing prasada? He was always improving himself through sadhana of various kinds and yet there was no *apaswara* [jarring note] in his life or speech. The similes and parables flowed like a limpid stream, so simple and easily decipherable, educating his hearers:

The world is the place of action, where you have been brought to work, even as a man comes on business from his country home to Calcutta. You must take some pains by way of Sadhana; the Karmas must be speedily worked out. When the smiths melt gold, they begin to blow with bellows, fan and pipe all together to make the fire burn ablaze; and only when the gold has been dissolved, they ask for a smoke. All this time they have been sweating in the brow, but they can get a chance to smoke only after they have done. You must be very firm in your determination, if you want to practice Sadhana—you must make a strong resolve!²

Though living at a time when the position of woman was kept low through illiteracy and paternalist attitudes, Sri Ramakrishna

showed Indians how a woman should be treated. His own first vision was that of Sita; his *aradhana* goddess was Bhavatarini; and his guardianship of his wife Saradamani Devi is a golden page in our spiritual history. He had been seized by non-attachment and yet this young girl had walked all the way to Dakshineswar to escape the idle gossip of her village. He considered the coming of Sarada Devi to be the Divine's work. The gentle manner in which he educated her and corrected her is a beautiful experience indeed. Her coming had been a sign from the Supreme that the time had come for him to conclude his sadhanas. He did this with a significant Shodashi Puja, by worshipping his wife, according to age-old rituals. Sarada Devi understood the message. So they began their life divine together.

Sri Ramakrishna believed that the God-lover, who has realised God, automatically becomes the lover of humanity and proceeds to alleviate the ills of the mass of people. It is no use croaking about social service, when one has not realised God. This realization is the instinctive feeling of universal brotherhood. Once when walking in the Panchavati with his disciples including Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna said:

If you seek the gems lying at the bottom of the sea you must first take a plunge to the bottom, giving up all other works. First set up the Image of God; then talk of blowing the conch-shell. First see God and then talk of lectures and social reforms.

Reviving the Guru Tradition

It is most difficult task—that of teaching others. 'He who sees God receives His Commandment. He alone who receives the Lord's commandment is competent to teach others.'³

The Guru tradition in India is as ancient as the Vedas. It is the Guru who ministers to

the soul, cleans the mind and places the disciple on the right track. Guru is actually hailed as Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara by Indians. Why, he is *sakshaat Parabrahman* [the personification of Highest Truth]! Sri Ramakrishna was indeed all these for his disciples and each one of them became a blazing flame of action, tapasya and sannyasa. So, how can we exhaust the depths of Sri Ramakrishna's avatar that has transformed the religious and Vedantic history of India?

One can only bow deeply and meditate upon what Pujyasri Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati, explains the guru idea, and invoke Sri Ramakrishna again and again:

First and foremost, Isvara is not seen by us. All that we can do is to imagine what he is like from the descriptions of him by great men. As for the guru, he is present before our eyes. We can be in contact with him and speak to him directly. What we require of Isvara—the destruction of karma and the attainment of jnana we obtain from the guru himself. . . Being a man of self-sacrifice and being anxious to help others, he may even take upon himself a part of our karma so as to make our burden lighter.⁴

The Sage of Dakshineswar re-established Dharma and was an image of all dharma. An incarnation splendid; to Sri Ramakrishna, our salutations. □

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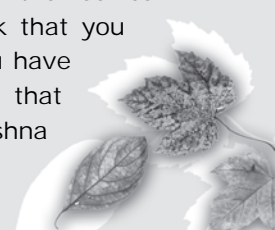
1. Quoted in *Journey of the Upanishads to the West*, Advaita Ashrama, Mayawati. 2002, p. 263
2. *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* Volume II, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras. 1922, p. 147.
3. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* Part I, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, p. 269
4. *The Guru Tradition*, Pp.210-211

It is Character that leads the Way

Every new religious wave requires a new centre. The old religion can only be revived by a new centre. Hang your dogmas or doctrines, they never pay. It is a character, a life, a centre, a God-man that must lead the way, that must be the centre round which all other elements will gather themselves and then fall like a tidal wave upon the society, carrying all before it, washing away all impurities.

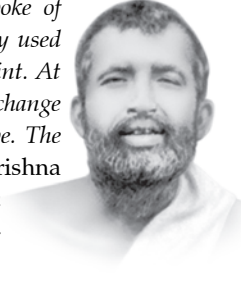
Again, a piece of wood can only easily be cut along the grain. So the old Hinduism can only be reformed through Hinduism, and not through the new-fangled reform movements. At the same time the reformers must be able to unite in themselves the culture of both the East and the West. Now do you not think that you have already seen the nucleus of such a great movement, that you have heard the low rumblings of the coming tidal wave? That centre, that God-man to lead was born in India. He was the great Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

—Swami Vivekananda



Sri Ramakrishna Tells Stories

Sri Ramakrishna was a master-story teller. While he spoke of profound spiritual truths and mystery of human life, he amply used stories, anecdotes, examples and analogies to drive home his point. At times, while narrating a story, he would even make gestures and change the tone of his voice to bring in a lively element in his narrative. The following stories, mainly culled from the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai) are an attempt to present before the readers Sri Ramakrishna's rich storehouse of stories which are both illuminating and simple.



13

Deceptive Piety

At a certain place there is a goldsmith's shop. The workers there are known as pious Vaishnavas: they have strings of beads around their necks, religious marks on their foreheads, and bags containing rosaries in their hands. They repeat the names of God aloud. One can almost call them sadhus; only they have to work as goldsmiths to earn their bread and support their wives and children.

Many customers, hearing of their piety, come to the shop because they believe that in that shop there will be no trickery with their gold or silver. When the customers enter the shop, they see the workers repeating the name of Hari with their tongues and doing their work with their hands.

No sooner do the customers take seats in the shop than one of the workers cries out, 'Kesava! Kesava! Kesava!' A few minutes later another says, 'Gopal! Gopal! Gopal!' After they talk a little while, the third man cries out, 'Hari! Hari! Hari!' In the mean time the customers have almost finished their transactions. Then the fourth exclaims, 'Hara! Hara! Hara!' The customers are very much impressed with the devotion and fervour of the owners and feel themselves quite secure in handing them the money. They are sure they won't be cheated.

But do you know what lies behind all this? The man who says 'Kesava! Kesava!' after the arrival of the customers means, 'Who are they?' In other words, he wants to know how intelligent they are. The man who says 'Gopal! Gopal!' means to say he finds them no better than a herd of cows. The man saying 'Hari! Hari!' means, 'May I rob them?'; he suggests that since they are like a herd of cows they can be robbed. And the last man, who says 'Hara! Hara!', replies, 'Yes, rob them.' He means that since the customers are like a herd of cows, they can certainly be robbed.

Here, too, you see a group of pious men, very much devoted to God! (p.675)

Man and His Hut

A man had built a house on a hill. It was only a mud hut, but he had built it with great labour. A few days after, there came a violent storm and the hut began to rock. The man became very anxious to save it and prayed to the god of the winds, 'O god of the winds, please don't wreck the house!' But the god of the winds paid no heed to his prayer. The house was about to crash.

Then he thought of a trick. He remembered that Hanuman was the son of the god of the winds. At once he cried out with great earnestness: 'O revered sir, please don't pull

down the house. It belongs to Hanuman. I beseech you to protect it.' But still the house continued to shake violently. Nobody seemed to listen to his prayer. He repeated many times, 'Oh, this house belongs to Hanuman!' But the fury of the wind did not abate.

Then he remembered that Hanuman was the devoted servant of Rama, whose younger brother was Lakshmana. Desperately the man prayed, crying aloud, 'Oh, this house belongs to Lakshmana!' But that also failed to help matters.

So the man cried out as a last resort: 'This is Rama's house. Don't break it down, O god of the winds! I beseech you most humbly.' But this too proved futile, and the house began to crash down. Whereupon the man, who now had to save his own life, rushed out of it with the curse: 'Let it go! This is the devil's own hut!' (p. 455)

Jackal and Bullock

Flatterers think that the rich man will loosen his purse-strings for them. But it is very difficult to get anything from him. Once a jackal saw a bullock and would not give up his company. The bullock roamed about and the jackal followed him. The jackal thought: 'There hang the bullock's testicles. Some time or other they will drop to the ground and I shall eat them.' When the bullock slept on the ground, the jackal lay down too, and when the bullock moved about, the jackal followed him. Many days passed in this way, but the bullock's testicles still clung to his body. The jackal went away disappointed. That also happens to flatterers. (p.339)

Ghost Seeking a Companion

A ghost sought a companion. One becomes a ghost if one dies from an accident on a Saturday or a Tuesday. So whenever the

ghost found someone who seemed to be dying from an accident on either of these days, he would run to him. He would say to himself that at last he had found his companion. But no sooner would he run to the man than he would see the man getting up. The man, perhaps, had fallen from a roof and after a few moments regained consciousness. (p.770)

Narayan and His Self-defending Devotee

Once Lakshmi and Narayana were seated in Vaikuntha, when Narayana suddenly stood up. Lakshmi had been stroking His feet. She said, 'Lord, where are You going?' Narayana answered: 'One of My devotees is in great danger. I must save him.' With these words He went out. But He came back immediately. Lakshmi said, 'Lord, why have You returned so soon?' Narayana smiled and said: The devotee was going along the road overwhelmed with love for Me. Some washermen were drying clothes on the grass, and the devotee walked over the clothes. At this the washermen chased him and were going to beat him with their sticks. So I ran out to protect him.' 'But why have You come back?' asked Lakshmi. Narayana laughed and said: 'I saw the devotee himself picking up a brick to throw at them. So I came back.' (p.790)

Man with Occult Power

A man who had acquired occult powers was sitting on the seashore when a storm arose. It caused him great discomfort; so he said, 'Let the storm stop.' His words could not remain unfulfilled. At that moment a ship was going full sail before the wind. When the storm ceased abruptly the ship capsized and sank. The passengers perished and the sin of causing their death fell to the man. And because of that sin he lost his occult powers and went to hell. (p.547)

Sri Ramakrishna's Timeless Message

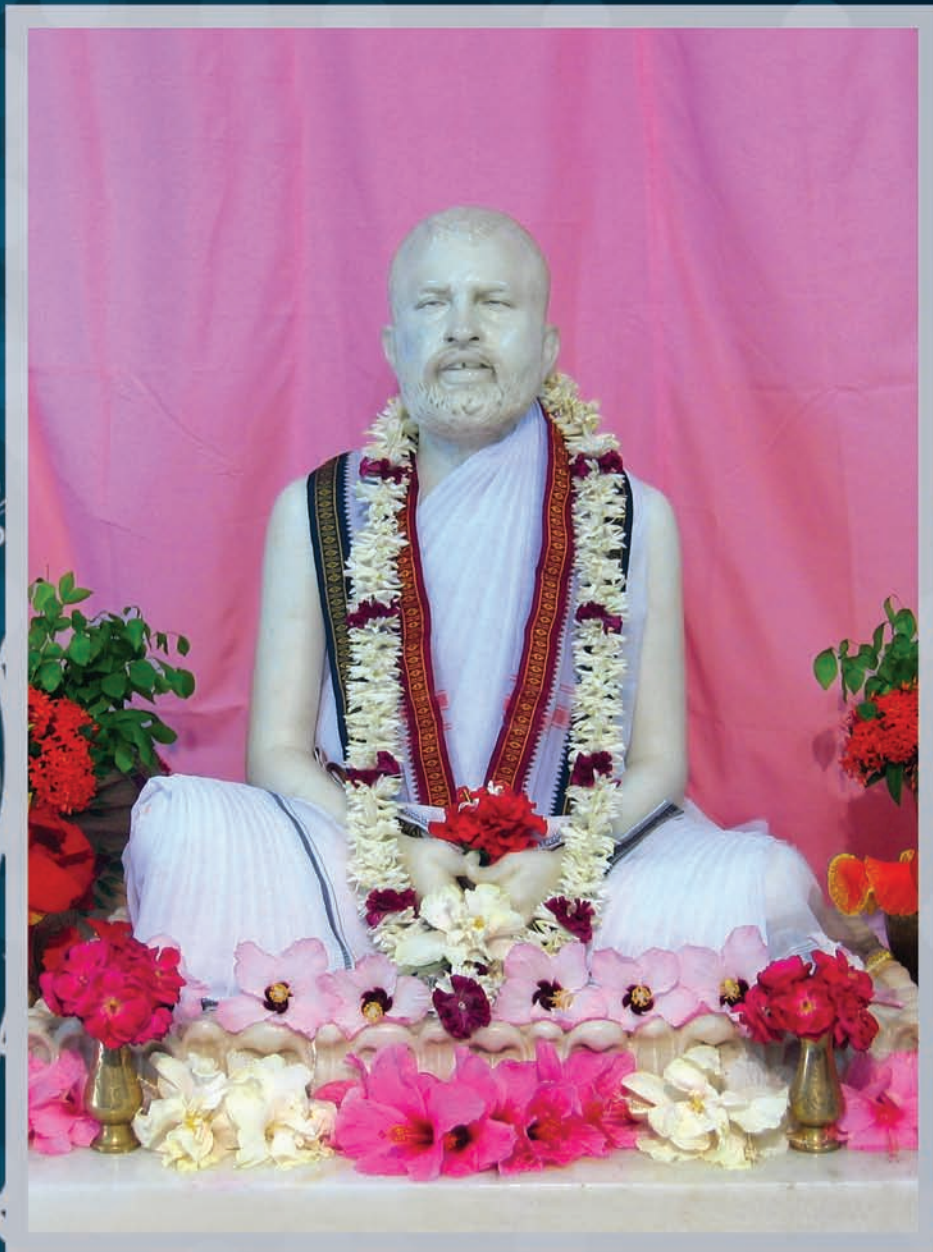


A Special Presentation of Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings
along with pictures of His Images worshipped
in various temples of the Ramakrishna Order.



Sri Ramakrishna Math, Belur

First set up God in the temple of the heart; first realise Him.
—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Math, Kamarpukur

God is formless and God is with form too, and He is that which transcends both form and formlessness. He alone can say what else He is.

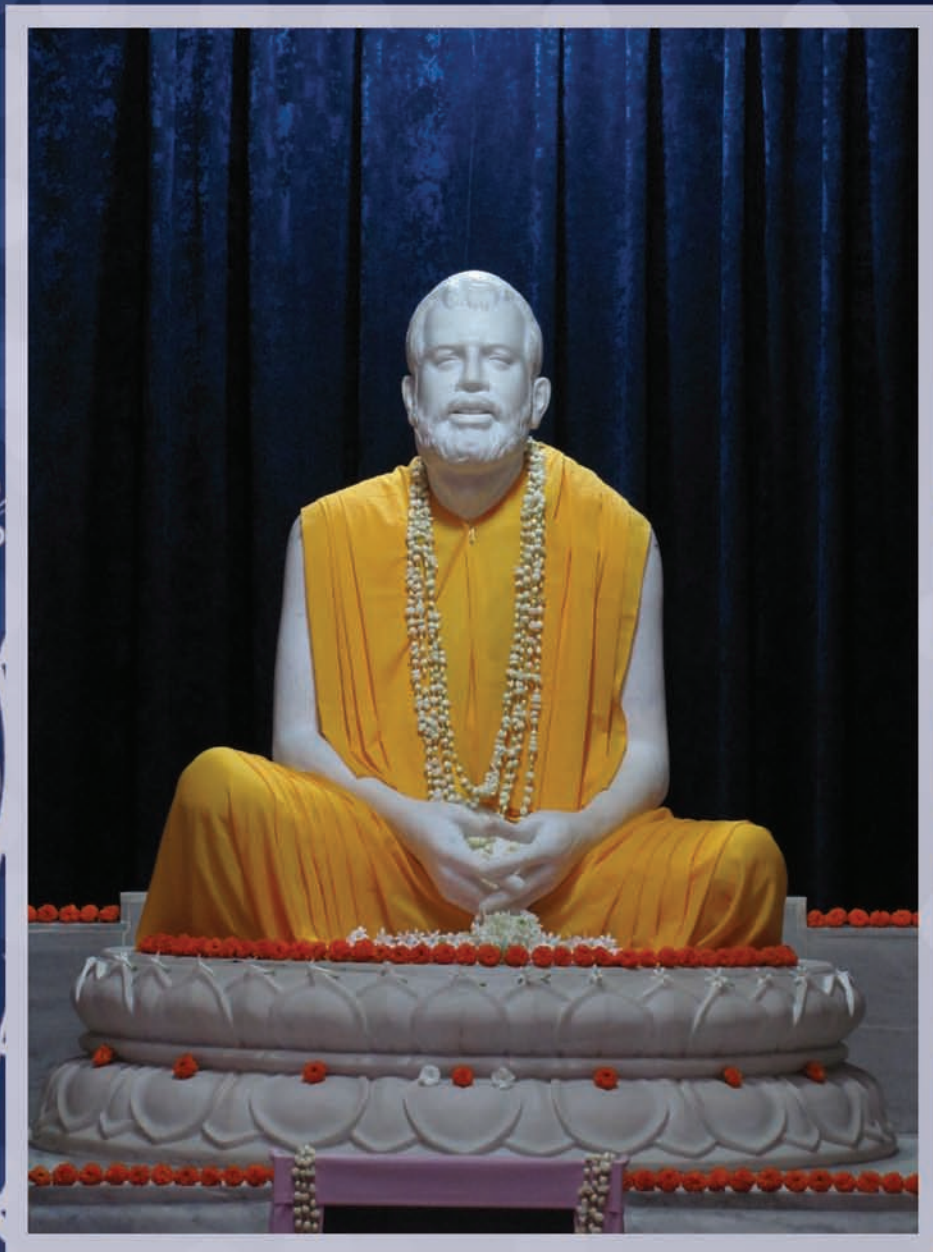
—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Varanasi

Cry unto the Lord with a longing and yearning heart, and
then you shall see Him.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Math, Allahabad

As a lamp cannot burn without oil, so a man cannot live
without God.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi

The tree laden with fruit always bends low. So, if you
wish to be great, be lowly and meek.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Math, Chennai

He who can resign himself to the will of the Almighty with simple faith and guileless love realises the Lord very quickly.
—Sri Ramakrishna



RIMSE, Mysore

Men are like pillow-cases. The colour of one may be red, that of another blue, and that of a third black; but all contain the same cotton inside. So it is with man; one is beautiful, another is black, a third holy, and the fourth wicked; but the Divine Being dwells in them all.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Sarada Ashrama, Poonampet

He is born in vain who, having attained the human birth so difficult to get, does not attempt to realize God in this very life.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Vishakapatnam

He is truly a man to whom money is only a servant but,
on the other hand, those who do not know how to make
a proper use of it, hardly deserve to be called men.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Mission, Singapore

The magnetic needle always points to the North, and hence it is that the sailing vessel does not lose her direction. So long as the heart of man is directed towards God, he cannot be lost in the ocean of worldliness.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa, Durban

As one and the same water is called by different names by different people, some calling it 'water,' some 'Vari,' some 'Aqua' and some 'Pani,' so the One Sachchidananda, Existence-Intelligence-Bliss Absolute, is invoked by some as God, by some as Allah, by some as Hari and by others as Brahman.

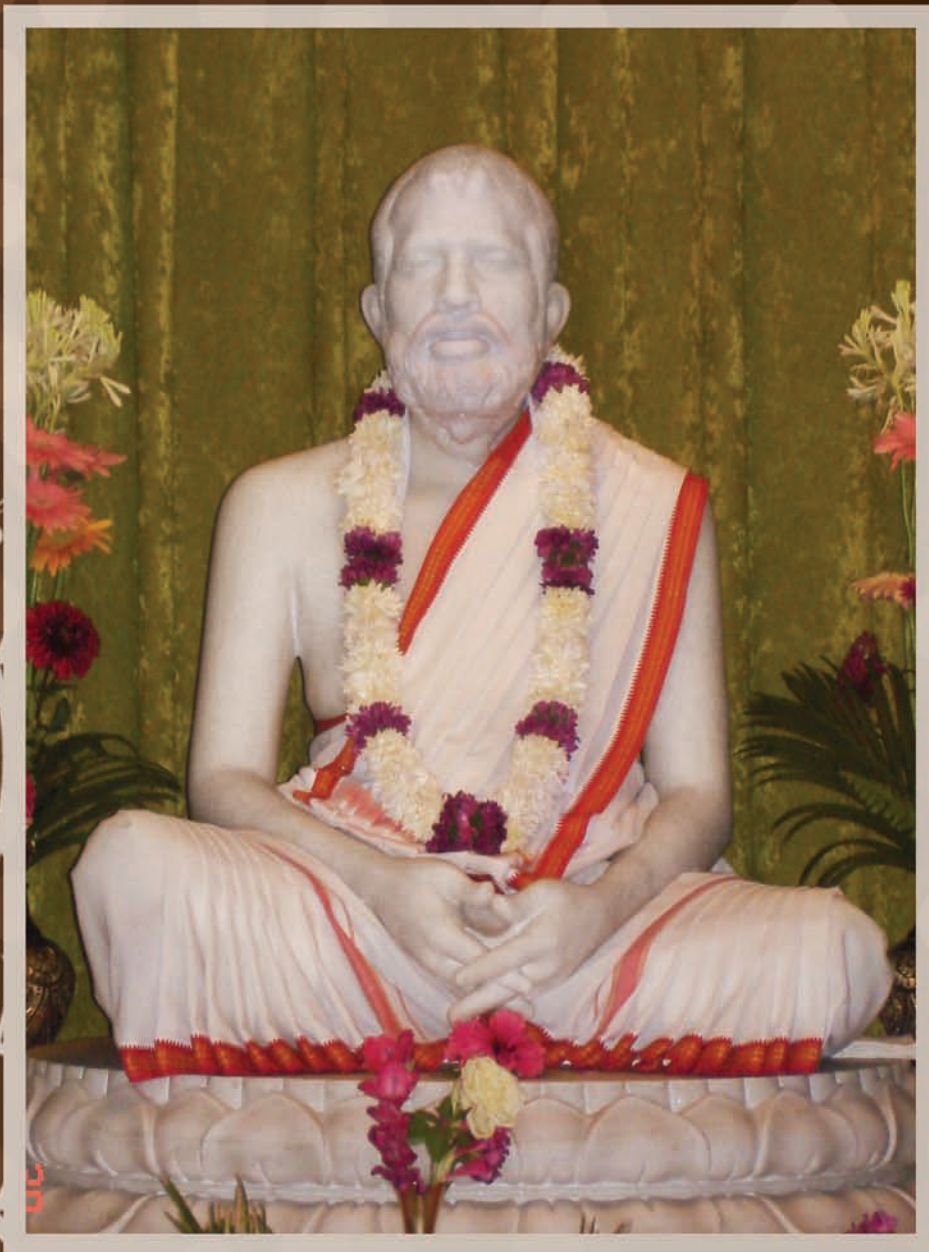
—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Ashrama, Kishanpur, Uttarakhand

Meditate on God either in an obscure corner, or in the solitude of forests, or within the silent sanctuary of your own heart.

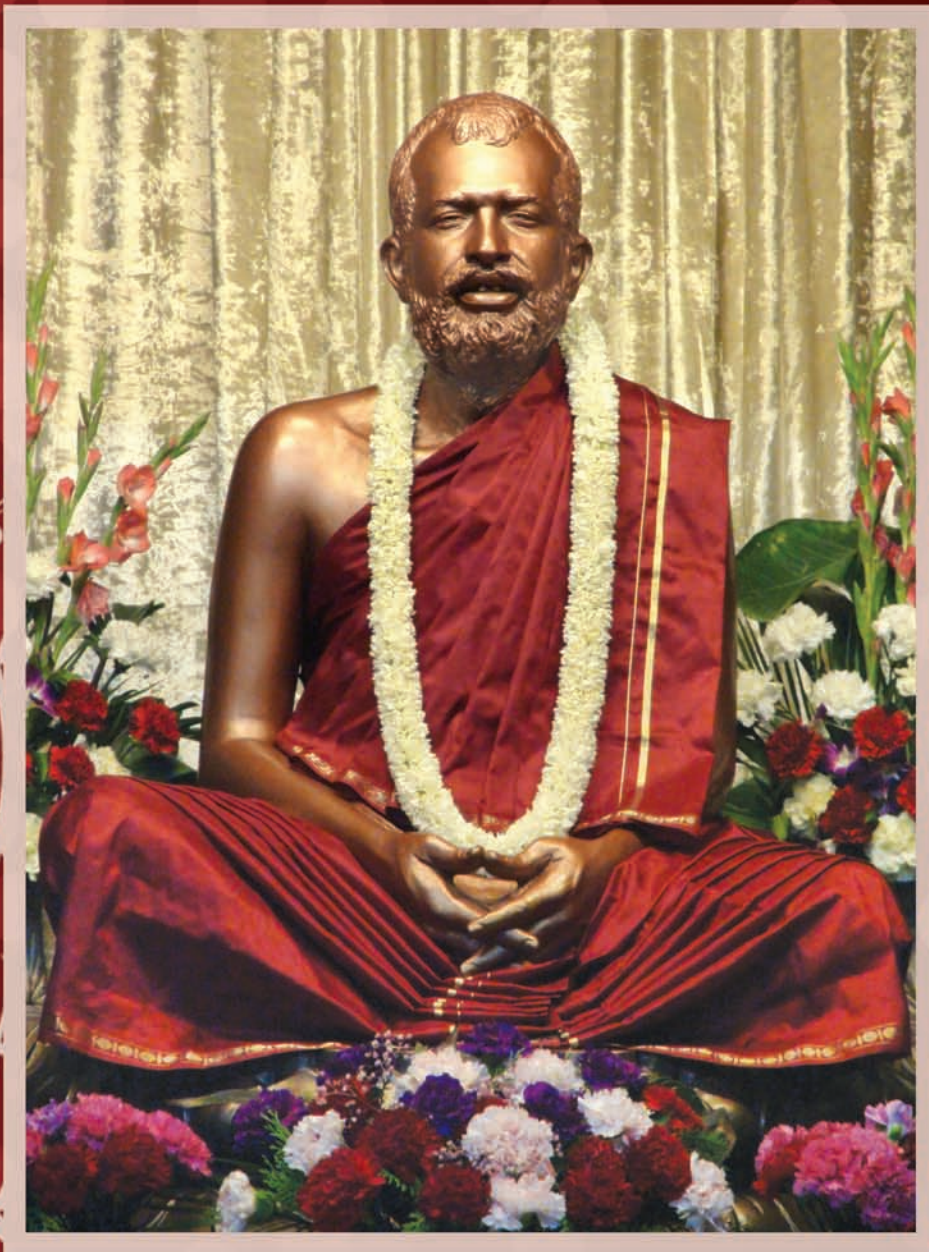
—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur

If you must be mad, be it not for the things of the world.
Be mad with the love of God.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad

However much you may try, without God's grace nothing can be attained; He cannot be realized without Divine grace.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Belgaum

As long as I live, so long do I learn.

—Sri Ramakrishna



Sri Ramakrishna's room (northern view) at Dakshineswar

Sri Ramakrishna —the Great Master of Life Skills

M SIVARAMKRISHNA

‘But I Can Swim’

Let us look at a story, in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* as an entry into ‘the soft skills’ we can learn from him:

Once, several men were crossing the Ganges in a boat. One of them, a pundit, was making a great display of his erudition, saying that he had studied various books—the Vedas, the Vedanta and the six systems of philosophy. He asked a fellow passenger, ‘Do you know the Vedanta?’

‘No, revered Sir.’

‘The Sankhya and the Patanjala?’

‘No, revered sir.’

‘Have you read no philosophy, whatsoever?’

‘No, revered sir.’

The pundit was talking in this way and the passenger sat in silence, when a great storm arose and the boat was about to sink. The passenger said to the pundit, ‘Sir, can you swim?’ ‘No’ replied the pundit.

The passenger said, ‘I don’t know the Sankhya or the Patanjala, but I can swim.’¹

How do you read this story? Will *you* read it as a product of STEM education—Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics? If you wish to, you can; but, then you miss the Life-skills which Sri Ramakrishna made his disciples learn—by this story. His

way of making them learn is by analogy, example, by stories and yet, the most important example is his own life. *Upamana*² and *upakhyana*: these were his ‘tools’. And, he wanted them to *act* on what they learnt, i.e., enjoying the example, absorbing its skills, executing them in action.

Experts these days call it ‘managing oneself’. Peter Drucker, a famous management / business *guru* says:

Of all the important pieces of self-knowledge, understanding how you learn is the easiest to acquire. When I ask people, ‘How do you learn?’ most of them know the answer. But, when I ask, ‘Do you act on this knowledge?’ few answer, yes. Yet, acting on this knowledge is the key to performance, rather not acting on this knowledge, condemns one to non-performance.³

Learning to act and acting to learn, both from success and failure sum up this process. And the guiding attitude is what Sri Ramakrishna himself practised: ‘As long as I live, so long do I learn.’ But, what are generally the implicit or explicit motivations? For the majority, it is simple: from ‘Learning’ remove the letter ‘L’: earning lot of money and lead a comfortable life, enjoying its good things.

If you look at some of our products from the most prestigious IITs and IIMs (in India and abroad), they assume sky is the limit and



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corruption to reach the sky, does not matter. As the parable of Sri Ramakrishna puts it: even if you have seven jars of gold, of which, one is not full, you desperately try to fill it; in the nature of things, it cannot be filled. Your greed does not make you wise to use the six full ones! Then, what life-skills do we learn from Sri Ramakrishna, their supreme exemplar?

Going Across the River of Life

First remember, that the devotee (M.) who recorded the story, himself, faced the turbulent waves of life. He felt troubled by domestic factors so severely that he came close to committing suicide, the apex of the anatomy of human destructiveness. M. was a great educationist, a professor, a brilliant scholar in almost all branches of knowledge and, yet apparently unable to handle the problems of personal life. And, he went to see Sri Ramakrishna, not a professional 'soft-skill' instructor, at all. In fact Sri Ramakrishna went through even the primary level of schooling with great difficulty. But, M. found in him, his guru, not a mentor who tortures, but one who gently teaches. He made him learn by example: therefore, M. effortlessly absorbed the 'skills' without even knowing that his Master was teaching and he was learning! That is how one should learn.

Let us look at the story: the river Ganga is sacred; take a dip in it you derive *punya*, they say. But, if you are careless, it will also decently drown you! Take a dip, a dip in the river of life or, if you like the idiom, the ocean of *samsara*, but see that you do not take risks from which there is no return. You may say, I don't want to expose myself to the storms of life. I will not cross the river at all. The answer is in the 'boat' itself. A boat, a ship, or a steamer is safe in the harbour. But, are they built to lie there or meant to navigate through the

most turbulent waves? So is life. It is given as the battleground of heroic struggle. One has to face it.

Moreover, the boat is built by those who are products of STEM education: Science-Technology-Engineering-Mathematics. Will such education be total?

Now, observe the pundit and the passenger. The pundit could be one of our great professors. He has the positive of proficiencies, expertise in his / her areas. The negative is vanity, a sense of superiority stemming from egoism that has to be knocked off. Hence, I suppose, the pundit asking the passenger whether he knows the scriptures. (In STEM model, there is no scope for human sciences, I suppose). Not knowing the scriptures is ignorance and knowing them is education, punditry. Compare, how the Master himself makes M. free from this. When the Master asks M. about his wife, M. replies: 'She is all right. But I am afraid, she is ignorant.' Instantly, Sri Ramakrishna 'with evident displeasure' retorts: 'You are a man of knowledge!'⁴ Sri Ramakrishna goes to the extent of saying: 'What will a man gain by knowing the scriptures? The one thing needful is to know how to cross the river of world.'⁵

In short, Sri Ramakrishna highlights the need for education of one's character. In fact, the boat as symbolic of knowledge and wisdom one finds in the *Bhagavad Gita* (4. 36):

Even though you are supreme sinner among sinners, that ocean of sin you can cross by the boat of knowledge.

This requires more than knowledge; wisdom is needed to use that knowledge in a positive way. Every skill has the potential to kill; to be harmful. We are careful about a gas cylinder. But, in matters of using our knowledge and intelligence, we are careless because the effect is not immediate. Moreover, we split

our personality into public and private areas. Says Daryl Koehn, a management expert:

. . . The separation of the public and private sphere is never absolute. When task competencies are directly threatened by weaknesses of character—or by a major gap between personal and professional practice—we become alarmed.

And,

If we continually rationalize questionable behaviour outside the office,—‘It’s okay to take drugs because it’s not hurting anyone else—there is nothing to stop us from explaining away corrupt behavior at work—.’ It’s okay to steal from my employer because the company is not paying me what I’m worth.⁶

Go back to the story. The pundit is not corrupt but vain. He tried to point out through *comparison* how superior he is. Comparison breeds competition and ambition for success generates anxiety of failure. In her ‘breath-takingly personal’, yet highly adaptable account of the delicate job of parenting, the Chinese American author Amy Chua (Professor of Law at Yale University) says, praising one child at the expense of another, should not be ‘favoring the one’. It should be intense encouragement to the one who has not done well, so that it prevents him or her to ‘indulge in her own inner doubts.’⁷ Favouritism is injurious.

There is in nature the principle of horizontal equality of all functions and the vertical variety of different functions. The pundit could have asked the passenger: ‘Please help me. I don’t know swimming.’ Similarly, the passenger could be helpful: ‘Come on, sir. Hold on to me. I shall take you across.’ Not hurting but helping is what is needed. Not taunting but tackling the crisis is what the context needs. In short, knowledge is ok but it requires the faculty to tap the skills of others, without exploiting them for one’s own gain.

Be Alert!

Young people these days are very much expected to know ‘Group behaviour’, Are passengers a group, a team or a crowd? Do they face the storm together or run helter-skelter out of sheer panic and meet a watery grave? In short, if the boatman has elements of leadership the motley crowd becomes a group, a team; together, they can even drain the boat if there is a leak! (These scenes are very popular in movies but there is only one hero! Can all be CEOs?) A crisis probably brings people together. But, then, even in ordinary matters there are lessons—as Sri Ramakrishna shows one such is worth looking at—simple but suggestive.

This is a *real* incident. Once a Keertan (devotional singing), was arranged in the Panchavati. It was rainy season and a disciple took an umbrella. Suddenly, there was a hailstorm and they rushed back to the Master’s room. The first thing the Master asked Gopal, a disciple, was: ‘Did you bring back the umbrella?’ ‘Listening to the music, I forgot to bring back!’ said Gopal.

The Great Master, a unique Master of all skills in ordinary life said: ‘I am generally unconcerned about the world, *but not to that extent*. Rakhal also is very careless. Referring to the date of invitation he says eleventh instead of the fourteenth. And, Gopal? He belongs to the herd of cows?’ (Innocent, naïve). Writes Swami Chetanananda, while narrating this incident,

Ramakrishna disliked carelessness in people. If a person is forgetful in minor things, he will be forgetful in the vital aspects of life.⁸

What is carelessness? Absence of awareness and attention, it is a dispersed mind: some jobs are to be done carefully; some can be done carelessly, it does not matter. Behind is motivation. Are we careless or careful depends on

the context. You may be careless about getting the lunch box and eat in the company's restaurant. But, if you concoct a crime carefully? Carefully fudge a) the accounts assuming, b) the scrutinising authorities are not very careful or, c) even if they detect, we can manage by suitable 'compensation' (bribing) or, d) make another, generally the subordinates, the scapegoats?

The simple incident, often a result of forgetfulness is fraught with several aspects. 'Enjoy music but don't forget the Master's umbrella'. Isn't it strange that the Master who is generally in a state of ecstasy saw the lapse of his disciple? Alertness to the nth degree! Yet, but then, don't imagine that Gopal (Advaitananda) was like this. That is a pre-judgment without knowing the full picture. The Great Master, himself, 'praised Gopal's managerial capacity in household affairs and his sweet behaviour with people.'⁹

Mind is All

At this stage, one can perhaps risk formulating Sri Ramakrishna's ways of teaching. It is also a STEM, more than a Stem it underlies all other stems. It can be phrased thus: *Self Transformation Through Effective Mind-Management*.

'Mind is all' is Sri Ramakrishna's basic mantra. He compared it to a laundered white cloth which takes whatever colour you dip it in. Whatever you crave and cry for, it assumes that and marshals all the mind's energy to achieve it. Mind is a bundle of thoughts, feelings and emotions culminating in acting. This is no longer a pious analogy of saints. Thought is power and the power of thought is infinite.

Mary J. Lore, an expert on managing thought, says: 'We are not our minds . . . our brains are tools. . .' But 'We are not the tools.

We are the ones using the tools', she says and asks: 'Do we identify with or attach to the thought and let it rule our world?' Finally,

Through managing our thought, through mindfulness in each moment, we move from the back of our brains to the front of our brains. In doing so, in that moment we reshape our circumstances, remain on purpose and achieve significant results.¹⁰

The problem with this is: what choices do we make as targets for the tremendous power of thought and minds, nurtured by an 'education' in which the hidden curriculum of values never or rarely surface? This is, of course, a generalisation. The choices which younger minds find eminently attractive can be phrased thus: 'earning oriented learning, the resulting affluence directed to enjoyment of the good things of life.' What enjoyment means is, perhaps, adopting the western way of life. Way back in 1995, George Steiner, an eminent literary and cultural thinker, pointed out: 'The best of America which has a kind of largess of generosity of human experiential humor and relaxation does not export well. What exports are McDonalds, "Kentucky Fried Chicken" the comic book, and all the dreadful soap operas!'¹¹

Did Ramakrishna disregard the human instinct for enjoyment? Is he one of those preachy prophets who are world-denying and puritanical? Absolutely not. He regarded the world as a Mart of Joy—*majer kuti*, the only thing is to enjoy it in a balanced way. Any excesses create endless sorrow.

Let us learn from him in a real event: Upendra, a disciple, brought some sweets to the Master quite often, Ramakrishna pointed out that this was with the desire that he should bless him to become rich. Any offering brought with a motivation, the Great Master could not accept.¹²

But in interpersonal relations Sri Ramakrishna is strict, even severe, but not insensitive. 'Hiss but not bite' is his method. Not to hurt Upendra, he used to take small pieces. But, on Kalpataru Day, Sri Ramakrishna, though fatally ill, gave the disciples who were present, so to say, a blank cheque. 'Tell me what you intensely desire! That desire shall be fulfilled!' Upendra asked for fabulous wealth. Oddly, Sri Ramakrishna who identified money and lust as explosive energies, granted him his desire. Upendra became, gradually, extremely affluent by starting a journal. And, when Swami Vivekananda returned to India from the US, Upendra arranged to get thousands of notices, bill-boards about the great event which, perhaps, Calcutta had never seen before. The money Upendra spent is fabulous! And, the reception was grand.

You may say that, this is what we today call 'Corporate Social Responsibility'. That is one view. But, Sri Ramakrishna inspired Upendra to spend that money as a concrete symbol of his ethical and spiritual growth. 'Mindfulness'—that is the way of soft skill about money (and, all other aspects). But then, Sri Ramakrishna had also disciples who represent the human tendency to 'buy' God's grace.

Rigid, Yet Flexible

There is Adhar who wanted to become the Vice-Chairman of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation.¹³ This only after cultivating everyone else who can probably help him. Finally, he asked Sri Ramakrishna to pray for his promotion and, the Master agreed reluctantly. But, as was his nature, as a child of Divine Mother, he never had a wish of his own to be fulfilled. Therefore, he prayed: '*If it is Your wish Mother, do the needful.*' Adhar did get the assignment but, died in a gruesome accident, falling off the horse he was riding.

(Mother has her own code of crime and punishment. Isn't it? She has her own Lok-pals!)¹⁴

With money comes, deadly pride. Perhaps, affluence and arrogance may quite often go together. Sri Ramakrishna knew that this is not a punishable, fatal sin but, a curable defect of character. As Swami Chetanananda says, the way great teachers like Sri Ramakrishna 'discipline their followers' are different, hard to understand. 'Sometimes it is through love, sometimes through indifference, and sometimes through harshness.'¹⁵

Thus, when Surendranath Mitra, another disciple, brought a huge and expensive garland and was about to adorn the Master, he snatched it and threw it far away. One is surprised! Does the great Master have so much anger? Is he capable of hurting another? But, then, he is like a surgeon: surgery cannot have any compassion. No local anaesthetic of lecturing is needed in this case. Straightaway action is needed. Intensive care is imperative.

As expected, Surendra felt bitter and told the devotees: 'How can this poor Brahmin know how valuable a garland it is. He does not know how expensive it is.' But, innately mature, he repented in no time and said: 'None can buy God with money. Pomp and pride can never buy him. I am full of them. Then, how can he accept my garland?' And, he declared 'I, in fact, wish to die!' The Master, at the same time was seen rising to his feet, dancing ecstatically. Lo and behold, he had Surendra's garland round his neck!

This has a special relevance at present. Even, religious institutions and their heads are objects of adverse media attention. Regarding wealth, Sri Ramakrishna's formula of 'lust and gold' seems to be illustrated with greater urgency than before. Whether it is legal or illegal, true or false, there is an urgency about

our attitudes to earning as irrepressible *yearning* and its fruitful use. Money is a great but mesmerising medium which invariably creates character crisis from which few recover. But one will be somewhat surprised, how careful he was in the matter of buying things. He used to say that when you buy something like sugar or ghee, etc., traders generally give a little extra. 'Insisting on getting that is necessary—Do it!' he used to tell his followers.

Building Up Character

We have looked at some soft / life-skills as character formation aspects. Then, the question is: how persistent are you / we in doggedly putting them into practice? Then, read the last narrative:

A woman devotee's grand-mother wanted to have darshan of Sri Ramakrishna. She got off the boat and, asked a person strolling there, 'Where can I see the Paramahansa, about whom many are talking about?'

The person replied: 'What do I know about him, mother! Some call him a "Paramahansa", some others "the young priest"; the rest address him as "Gadadhar Chatterjee"! Ask someone else to locate where he is.' Thus, ended the talk.

The woman went round and could not find him: for, the person who talked to her was himself, the Paramahansa! The quest ending, the woman came grumbling. Her idea was that this Paramahansa was, like the average anonymous sadhus who swarm around temples. The woman felt, 'If he is really a Paramahansa, he would be famous himself, the Paramahansa!'¹⁶

If there is a setback in something you wanted to achieve, will you give it up? You want success in playing cricket. Will you give it up after a few attempts? You attend interviews: You don't get selected initially. Will you withdraw or, patiently, persistently try to succeed? Assess where you went wrong—

don't we? We strengthen our conviction, sharpen our attitude and strike.

This comes close to what Sri Ramakrishna called '*Vyakulatha*', *intense longing*. And, he gave an analogy:

'When can I realise God?' asked a disciple. The guru did not talk. He caught him by the hand, took him to the river and pushed his head down into the water and kept it like that for just a few minutes. The aspirant struggled desperately for breath but, the guru held him. With sheer marshalling of all his strength, the disciple pushed away the guru's hand and surfaced.

The guru said: 'When you have desperate desire to get your breath back, for realising God, you will certainly succeed.' Do our youngsters have this persistence, not just in studies, but, in character formation? Life skills of Sri Ramakrishna are a harmonious blend of our ordinary life, the roots of which ought to be nourished by ethical and spiritual bases. Without the roots, life skills are like scaffolds without foundation.

Conclusion

Finally, meditate on a real-life situation which the Great Master describes as indicating a mind which performs multi-tasks simultaneously so effortlessly:

Back home in my village, women produce and trade in flattened rice. Listen to how they go about it. A woman uses one hand to push the required measure of rice under the pounding machine, while with the other hand, she continues to breastfeed her baby. In the meantime, there arrives a customer. At that point, you will find the woman continue to pound the rice, breastfeed the child and also, remind the customer about the debts he needs to clear before making fresh purchases—all done at the same time. This is a good

example of a mind, trained through constant practice.¹⁷

Listen! The Great Master exhorts. Listen and reflect. All skills are here! □



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Sri Ramakrishna was most careful in his speech and manner. Compared to him we are all boors. When do we call a man mad? When there is incoherence in his thought and words, or when he behaves differently from others. But neither of these was true of Sri Ramakrishna. He was always most courteous, and every word he uttered was full of wisdom. Even when he would sit and talk to his Divine Mother people could not possibly have taken him to be mad. For what was he doing? He was shaping the lives of those who sat there before him awe-struck by his words, He was satisfying the needs of each of those hearts and lifting their burdens.

He had such wonderful power. Every time one went to see him one felt as if a great load had been taken off one's back and mind. Whatever doubt was in one's mind was sure to be cleared, without putting any question. Yet the Master was always simple and humble in his manners towards everyone, always ready to learn even from a baby.

—**Swami Ramakrishnananda**, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna
[*Ramakrishna As We Saw Him*, p.147]

The Divine Dance of Sri Ramakrishna

ANNAPURNA CHANDRASHEKAR

How cleverly you hide
The dark-blue form you wore at Braja!
But your slanting eyes betray you.
Now with eager heart I hasten
To your feet: Lord I implore you,
Keep me safe within their shadow.¹

Dance—a Divine Art

In ancient India, art expressions were the outcome of the inner joy and the Divine Self within was its theme. The inner aim and vision governed the labour of outward expressions. The need to express that joy gave birth to various kinds of art forms.

In music, the birth of *ragas* is the outcome of various moods, emotions and feelings of the singer in his inward journey. It is confined to the sense of time or *tala* (i.e., rhythm). Sculptures and paintings are the outcome of an intense brooding over a particular aspect of god (*deva*) or goddess (*devi*). It is confined to the boundaries of space.

Dance is an outcome of bliss and joy which supports the whole creation and is confined to time and space. Without joy one cannot dance. The rhythm and the music lend their support. The movements form a visual appeal in space.

We have heard that gods and goddesses dance. Indian mythological scriptures portray scenes and instances where gods and god-

esses dance, sing and play stringed instruments.

It is said that, Shiva the Lord of dance, dances in Mount Kailash and His *tandavas* (dances) are many. The story goes that during



A sculpture of Lord Nataraja

Lord Shiva's marriage, the devas and sages wanted to witness His celestial dance. He promised that on a certain date and time they would witness it on earth, in Thillai Vanam—now known as Chidambaram—the abode of Lord Nataraja.



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There are sublime hymns sung by Nayanmars, the Shaivaite class of saints extolling the dancing aspect of Shiva.

One saint sings,

Oh Lord Thy arched eyebrows, Thy crimson red lips and flowing locks of hair with the coolness of Ganges water spilt, Thy body with a coral hue, and Thy carved foot lifted up while dancing—I do not mind to take any number of human births in this mortal world if I get a glimpse of you in this manner.

There are thousands of sacred verses on Shiva's and Krishna's dance in Hindu literature. The Alvars' (Vaishnava saints of Tamil tradition) poetry is full of sweet mysticism describing Sri Krishna's dance. The domes of Indian temples are embedded with sculptures portraying gods and goddesses dancing.

Why Do Gods Dance?

It is told that God is ever Blissful. The whole creation has come out of His Bliss and to Bliss it will return. Now when he expressed that Bliss and joy He danced and the manifold creation came about. It is also said, that when He blissfully creates, He dances. When He blissfully supports His creation, He dances and again when He blissfully destroys, He dances.

The dances of gods and goddesses are so well classified in our Natya Shastra (or 'the science of dancing', cf. *Natya Shastra* of Bharata Muni) and names are given accordingly.

Again, the destruction-dances (*tandava nritya*) of Shiva are many. The Divine Mother Shyama dances in the cremation ground. Mother Kali dances in the battle-field—with *atta-hasya*—the laughter of confidence in the victory of truth which spreads havoc in the army of demonic forces.

In *Sri Chandī* or *Devī Mahatmya* we see the Matri-ganas—the Divine Mother's attendants—dancing in the battle-field playing

kettle drums and jubilantly announcing the victory of Mother Durga over demonic forces. The Apsaras and Gandharvas—the celestial beings—shower flowers and celebrate by singing praises of the Divine Mother and dancing.

Thus it is the experience of an intense joy that motivates one to dance and express.

Avatars who Knew the Art of Dancing

Among the Avatars (when God comes in human form), Lord Ramachandra was well accomplished in the art of dancing and singing. Again we have Sri Krishna dancing in Vrindavan. The moonlit Ras-lila on the banks of the black river Yamuna has made Vrindavan the earthly abode of Lord Vishnu. As a rustic



Baby Krishna dancing in joy

cowherd boy he played on the flute and danced with all the Gopis who immersed their minds in His blissful form adorned with wild forest flowers and yellow scarf. He again danced on the head of serpent Kaliya to the accompaniment of instruments played by all

gods and goddesses. It was then he acquired the name *Natwari*—the best dancer. It is believed that a complete set of new rhythmic syllables emerged from that particular dance of Krishna.

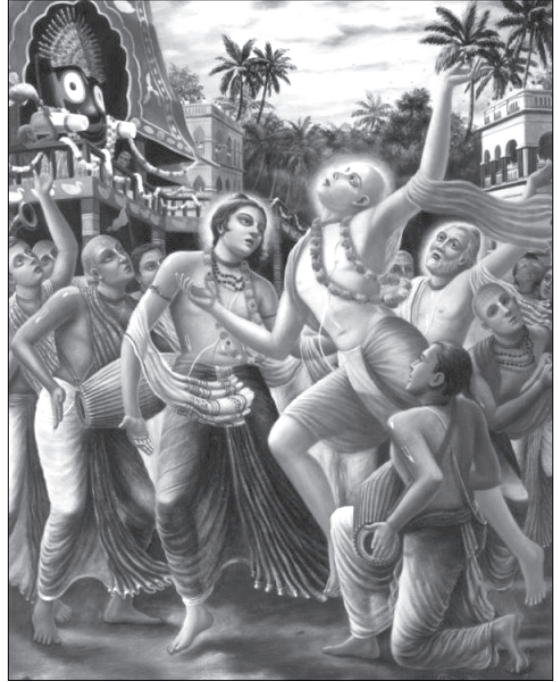
It is told that what Mahavira and Buddha achieved through meditation and concentration Lord Krishna revealed to Gopis through dancing and playing the flute. The minds of the Gopis were tuned to such one-pointedness that they forgot this entire apparent world when they were dancing with him. Krishna danced with them on a full moon night. The entire Vrindavan was soaked with His blissful presence. There are eight stanzas called *vrindavanashtakam* that sing of the glory of Ras-lila which took place in Vrindavan. The poet goes on singing that it is indeed a blessing to be born even as a grass or as a tree in Vrindavan. That way one can witness the eternal dance of Krishna with Gopis.

Next to Sri Krishna, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu established on earth an atmosphere of intense love for God through singing and dancing. Some Vaishnava texts say that he even excelled Sri Krishna in dancing. His entire body would burn with such intense love for the Lord and turn into molten gold. His limbs were supple and full of light. He danced with the softness of a flower as well with the strength of a lion. Once when he was crossing a forest he was immersed in his dancing and singing. His dance created such joy that wild beasts lost their animosity and surrounded the path he was traversing to witness his dance.

To us, these are divine scenes enacted by God when He incarnated Himself and we are full of awe when we hear them.

Sri Ramakrishna's Dance

In the present age, one reads about Sri Ramakrishna's ecstatic dancing and singing.



Picture of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu dancing

When Sri Ramakrishna danced, the devotees too felt ecstatic and danced with him. There are many eyewitness accounts of his unparalleled dancing and singing. Men, women children, used to gather around to see and taste that bliss which emanated from him.

This reminds one of Sri Krishna's dance in Vrindavan. When he danced, the Gopis felt the divine attraction of yoga maya and danced with Him. Sri Ramakrishna once remarked,

You see, such is the power of yogamaya that she can cast a spell. That is why Subol was able to unite Sri Krishna with Radhika. Yogamaya, the primal power has a power of attraction. I applied that power myself.²

Here is a description of Sri Ramakrishna's dance through Swami Brahmananda:

Swami Brahmananda, a most intimate disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, once went into an ecstatic mood at the sight of an image of Lord Nataraja at the Madurai temple in South India. Nataraja

literally means the King of Dancers. Shiva is portrayed as a majestic dancer who dances his dazzling dance poised wonderfully on one foot in an act of supreme balancing. Usually, it is the left foot that He raises in the air, keeping the right foot on the ground, and thus he does his balancing act standing on one foot.

The story goes that the Pandya king ruling over Madurai empathetically felt the Lord's pain in the right foot and fervently pleaded with Nataraja to change His posture: to dance, for a change, with the left foot on the ground and the right one in the air. The compassionate Lord at once obliged and started dancing as requested! This image of Nataraja dancing the reverse way is seen only in Madurai and is considered a unique posture of the dancing Shiva. When Swami Brahmananda saw it, he at once went into ecstasy and exclaimed that he had seen Sri Ramakrishna dance exactly in the same posture!³

Sri Ramakrishna was not a professional dancer but a Divine dancer. When he danced, all divine moods manifested in his body. His dance was rhythmic, natural and aesthetically beautiful. The sound of Mridanga or Khol or mere hearing of Sri Krishna's name during a Sankirtan would throw him into a rapturous mood and would transport him to another realm of witnessing God's beauty and splendour and he would dance. Even the passengers travelling by boat on Ganga heard the reverberating music and dance from his small room at Dakshineswar. Some of the young boys, who later became his direct disciples, watched those scenes in utter astonishment and wonder.

One such boy named Sharat, who later on became a great Vedantin, Swami Saradananda, wrote,



A sketch depicting Sri Ramakrishna dancing amidst devotees—by the renowned artist of Bengal School of painting, Nandlal Bose

When we first met the Master he was about 49 years old—perhaps five or six months short of that. Before we became acquainted with the Master, we thought that although people love to see children dance and make gestures, it disgusts them or becomes ludicrous if a robust man acts that way. Swami Vivekananda used to say, 'Does anyone enjoy watching a rhinoceros dance like a dancing girl?'

When we came to the Master, we had to change our views. Although the Master was advanced in age, when he danced, sang, and made gestures—they were so sweet and beautiful. Girish once remarked: 'I never dreamt that an old fellow could look so beautiful when he danced!'⁴

But we are not fortunate enough to see Sri Ramakrishna's dancing, so either we shall have to visualize it from the eye-witness accounts or see it through our mental eyes.

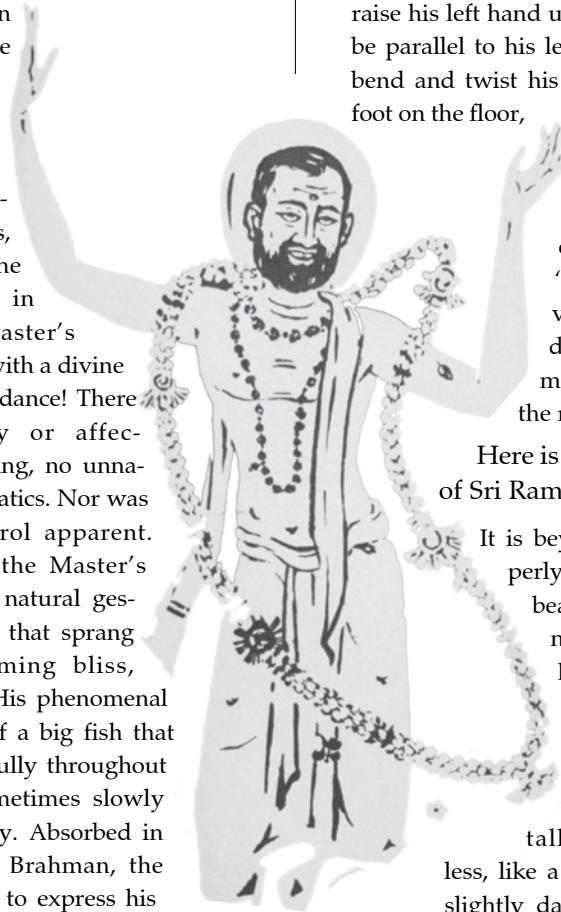
Now, let us visualize an immortal scene of the Master's captivating and uplifting dance during a Brahma festival depicted by the great Swami Saradananda.⁵

High waves of heavenly bliss seemed to be flowing in the room. Everyone there was laughing, crying, and dancing—they had become

completely lost in the kirtan. . . The Master was dancing in the centre of that God-intoxicated group, rapidly moving forward and backward with rhythmic steps. In whatever direction he moved the crowd made room for him, as if enchanted.

An extraordinary combination of tenderness, sweetness, and leonine strength was visible in every one of the Master's limbs. His face shone with a divine smile. What a superb dance! There was no artificiality or affectation in it—no jumping, no unnatural gestures or acrobatics. Nor was any absence of control apparent. Rather, one saw in the Master's dancing a rhythm of natural gestures and movements that sprang from his overwhelming bliss, sweetness, and zeal. His phenomenal dance was like that of a big fish that swims freely and joyfully throughout a vast clear lake, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. Absorbed in the ocean of blissful Brahman, the Master used his body to express his inner feelings. . . A current of divine bliss emanated from the Master and spread in all directions, allowing the devotees to see God face to face. Those of a lukewarm temperament found their fervour intensified; those with idle minds began to enthusiastically progress in the realm of spirituality; and those who were attached to the world became, for a while, free from their attachment. . .

Ramlal, Sri Ramakrishna's nephew, left a graphic account of the Master's dancing and singing:



An artist's view of Sri Ramakrishna's dance

When the Master would sing this song, 'O Mother, this world is a marketplace of crazy people,' he would dance this way: He would raise his left hand up, and his right hand would be parallel to his left shoulder. Then he would bend and twist his right knee, stamp his right foot on the floor, and turn at the waist. When the Master was in a great mood, he would dance back and forth and also in a circle. When he would sing, 'O Mother, you live in various moods,' he would dance, clapping his hands, moving his waist, and keeping the rhythm with his feet.⁶

Here is another account of beauty of Sri Ramakrishna's divine form:

It is beyond human power to properly describe the extraordinary beauty of his divine form. We never could have imagined a human body changing in a moment of ecstasy. We saw the Master's tall figure every day, but on that day it appeared to grow even taller and become weightless, like a body seen in a dream. His slightly dark complexion became brighter and turned golden; the divine mood shone on his face and illumined everything around him. When people saw his incomparable smile—a combination of grace, compassion, peace and joy—they forgot everything and followed him, spellbound. The beautiful colour of skin blended with the bright ochre colour of his silk wearing-cloth so that it seemed as if he were enveloped in flames.⁷

At Kamal Kutir

A touching song in the *Gospel*, describing God's playfulness, says,

Thou it is that dancest, Lord, and Thou singest
the song;

Thou it is that clappest Thy hands in time with
the music's beat

but man, who is an onlooker merely, foolishly
thinks it is he.⁸

There is only one photograph of Sri Ramakrishna taken during his ecstatic dance. It was at Kamal Kutir or Lily Cottage, the house of Keshab Chandra Sen, the well-known Brahmo leader. He engaged 'The Bengal Photographers' of Calcutta and secretly captured Sri Ramakrishna's image during his ecstatic state. This photograph shows Sri Ramakrishna standing in ecstasy with hands holding dance *mudras*. It is indeed a great boon for the world of dance and music to have this photograph which denotes the ultimate aim and goal of all endeavour and labour involved in the divine arts of music and dance—that of the Divine Self in us being the theme and all outward technical expressions only a body lending its support to the spirit. How this photograph was taken and the eyewitness accounts relating to this unearthly picture and the dance *mudras* that are shown by Sri Ramakrishna are the main focus of this article.

Let us, like children, listening to the tales of yore, visualize the scenes that brought about this photograph. It is recorded:

'It was September 21 1879.'

Autumn season (i.e., the month of September) in Bengal is very sacred because of the 'arrival' of Mother Durga, or daughter Uma. The fields wear the robe of luscious green colour and marigolds and lotuses are in abundance. The love for Mother worship is in the air. One can see *prothimas* (clay images) of Durga nearing completion with the painters giving the last touch of *kohl* (collyrium) to the eyes of the image and adorning Her with customary red sari and vermilion on Her

forehead. Winter is ahead with evenings already becoming colder.

May be on one of those evenings Sri Ramakrishna decided to visit Keshab Chandra Sen once again. He was a Brahmo leader leading the youth of Bengal with modern revolutionising thoughts and founder of a sect which believed in the formless worship of God. Sri Ramakrishna was a priest at Dakshineswar. The mere educated scholars and orators of Brahmo Samaj were deeply touched and shaken by their encounters with Sri Ramakrishna. His state of God-consciousness, termed as colossal in the history of spirituality, and his utterly simple manners had surprised them.

Let us go back to that wonderful evening.

The Master with Hridayam, his nephew, decides to go to Kamal Kutir, a cottage of Keshab Chandra Sen and meet his Brahmo devotees. A carriage is hired and they start from Dakshineswar. The Master as always takes permission from the Mother inside the temple and gets into the carriage. The carriage moves on. Meanwhile at Kamal Kutir, the hosts prepare sweets and refreshments for the Master's arrival. They light the chandeliers and candles in the hall where the gathering will take place. Keshab is waiting outside with his followers.

The Master's carriage arrives. Hridayam supports the fragile delicate body of the Master when he alights from the carriage. They enter the cottage. The Master's loving face shines with tender smile. They garland him and give him refreshments. The Master is seated on a floral carpet with white sheet spread on it. The Brahmo devotees surround him with wonder and curiosity. The musicians and men who play other instruments sit in a corner. After a while Sri Ramakrishna wants to hear their singing.

The tanpura is tuned. The loud sound of Mridanga and Khol is heard. They sing Brahma songs and then on Sri Krishna, Mother Kali. Sri Ramakrishna hears and is transported to another realm. He suddenly gets up in ecstasy and dances and is lost in samadhi.

It was at this poignant moment that he was photographed.

The Picture of His Divine Dance

He is surrounded by Brahma devotees and supported by Hridayram his nephew. His feet are a little distanced and both his hands are in mudras. His face is lighted up with an ecstatic smile and eyes are half-closed. He is wearing a *punjabi* i.e., *kurta* (shirt-like loose fitting upper garment worn in India) and there is tied a scarf around his waist and a dhoti with a thin red border worn in a rustic Bengali manner. We also see inquisitive faces of devotees who were blessed to be present on an occasion witnessing the dance of an Incarnation during His ecstasy. There appears a huge window at the back, blinded by a bamboo curtain.

This is the first time a real samadhi had been photographed. The photographer arranged by Keshab Chandra Sen has caught a moment in eternity. But at that moment Sri Ramakrishna was experiencing a state beyond time and space. The photograph still casts on onlookers waves of the spell of his ecstatic posture with tremendous God-centred vibrations. Swami Vidyatmananda, a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, wrote:

Surendra Nath Chakrabarty gives the following account of what occurred at Keshab's September



Sri Ramakrishna in samadhi—Kamal Kutir

21st festival. The devotional music threw Sri Ramakrishna into ecstasy. He uttered the word 'Om' and stood up, raising his right hand. His outer senses left him and he went into samadhi. Fearing that the unconscious body would fall to the ground, Ramakrishna's nephew and attendant, Hriday, supported Sri Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna had probably been wearing his chadar either over his shoulders, or hanging folded from his left shoulder, as is the custom. But when Ramakrishna rose, the chadar fell to the ground. Hriday picked it up and tied it around Ramakrishna's waist for safekeeping. At this point Keshab had the picture taken. . .⁹

Is there a meaning in the particular position of Ramakrishna's hands and the gesture of his fingers—that is, is he making a mudra? Swami

Nirvanananda reports that Swami Premananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, speculated that the meaning is this: 'Everything is there (up, right hand) not here in this world (left hand).'¹⁰

Different people have interpreted the gesture of Ramakrishna's hands in this picture differently, such as one person says: 'The Master wanted to indicate the world is not real and God is only real.'

According to Natya Shastra, there is a great significance of the mudras (gestures) used by Sri Ramakrishna in this photograph.

The marvelous sculpture of Nataraja, with Shiva's one foot raised and bent horizontally, signifies the treatment of the cosmic movement in the delight dance of Shiva.

The standing posture of Sri Rama with bow and *abhaya hasta* [the hand assuring fearlessness] signifies the establishment of righteousness and dharma.

The charming expression of Sri Krishna with the flute and a peacock plume signifies a call to the entire creation, by the Godhead to turn back to His eternal *ananda*.

Now what does this standing ecstatic, dance posture of Sri Ramakrishna convey?

First it is the Divine Himself in human form portraying a tremendous joy to obtain which the whole creation is rushing about. Sri Ramakrishna is standing there, abandoning himself in the joy and beauty of God.

We see Sri Ramakrishna's left hand showing a mudra which, according to Natya Shastra, is called *ala padma*. The right hand shows a mudra called *simha mukha*. His feet are in *sama pada*. His indrawn eyes indicate *nimilitha drishti*, and his face *smita mukha*.

Let us elaborate on some aspects of Natya Shastra in order appreciate Sri Ramakrishna's divine dancing.

Natya, Aharya, Mudras, and Hasta

❖ *Natya*: There are different sources of Shastras which reveal clearly the factors concerning the usages of these mudras. One is Natya Shastra or Natya Veda. It was written by sage Bharata and is the first available encyclopaedic treatise on dance, music and literature and has been in vogue by the beginning of Christian era.

There is a story behind the creation of Natya Veda:

It is said that once Brahma went into meditation and took *paathya* (from *pathana*, to recite)—speech, from Rigveda, *gaana*—music, from Samaveda, *abhinayam*—expressions, from Yajurveda and *rasa*—aesthetic joy, from Atharvaveda and created the fifth Veda—the Natya Veda.

The entire human activity is carried out by three faculties which are—mind, speech, action (in Sanskrit, *manas*, *vak*, *karma*). There are the three instruments (*karanas*)—*sattoika* (the pure), *vachika* (verbal), and *angika* (related to limbs) respectively. While dealing with *angika abhinayam* (bodily expressions), the treatise divides the human body into three categories—1. *Angas*, major limbs, 2. *Upa-angas*, minor limbs, 3. *Pratyanga*, subsidiary limbs, and again among the six major limbs, *hastas* or hands have an important role to play.

❖ *Aharya* (*a-harye*, external) means outer apparel or the clothing and other accessories. It plays an important role in the field of visual arts. Even the temple deities are adorned and wrapped with silken cloth and ornaments which gives the onlooker an immediate access to the form which the Divine represents.

For instance, Sri Krishna is always adorned with yellow apparel and *vyjayanti mala* [garland of yellow flowers] and tulsi garlands. On His crown is a peacock plume with ornaments and chandan as tilak on His forehead. But Shiva is depicted as an ascetic; or just as a



Lord Krishna with vyjayanti mala,
flute and peacock feather

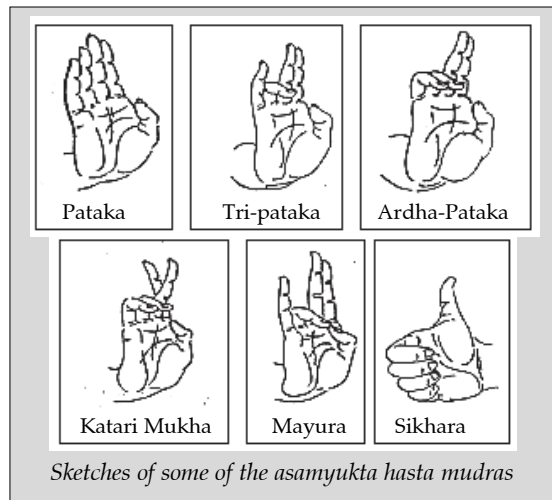
Linga, wrapped with a white cloth, with ashes and bilva-leaves strewn all over. The moods of the Divine are represented by the aharya. Some Sanskrit verses describe that the entire universe with sun, moon and stars are the ornaments of Shiva and the Divine Mother, and the whole sky and space their apparel.

Natya Shastra vividly gives details of *aharya abhinaya*. The placement of ornaments, the costume, the make up and other accessories complete the role a dancer has taken up to portray. It helps the dancer to connect outwardly also with the theme presented and also acts as a means to establish the *bhava*.

Sri Ramakrishna too used aharya abhinaya. But he used it not to portray any character or to perform. With his sweet innocent charm he decorated himself in so many ways with external marks conducive to that mood he wanted to manifest. Sri Ramakrishna adopted appropriate aharyas during his different sadhanas. His longing to experience God in different moods made him dress and change his outer appearance in many ways.

❖ *Mudras*: A mudra is a symbolic or ritual gesture widely used in Hinduism and Buddhism. While some mudras involve the entire body, most are performed with the hands and fingers. A mudra is a spiritual gesture and an energetic seal of authenticity employed in the iconography and spiritual practice of Indian religions and traditions of Dharma. One hundred and eight mudras are used in Tantric rituals. During ritualistic worship, the Hindus use mudras to please or evoke the deity.

According to Natya Shastra, all the mudras have viniyogas or specific usages. One can use them to denote or express. A mudra has a colour, a presiding deity, a rishi, and so



Sketches of some of the *asamyukta hasta mudras*

many other aspects. There are stories related to the birth of these mudras.

❖ *Hasta*: The usages of the *hastas* or hands range from ordinary mortal things of human existence to deeper things pertaining to higher worlds and to denote gods and goddesses. In *hastas*, we have *asamyukta hastas*—single-hand postures, and *samyukta hastas*—both hand postures. There are about 28 *asamyukta hastas* and 24 *samyukta hastas*.

All these *hastas* can become mudras when held in a particular position to communi-

cate or express anything belonging to this world or higher worlds.

The Two Mudras Sri Ramakrishna Used

When we look at Sri Ramakrishna's picture in which he is dancing, we see his left hand showing a mudra, which according to Natya Shastra, is called *ala padma*. The right hand shows a mudra called *simha mukha*. In other treatises *ala-padma* is also noted as *ala pallava* or *solapadmaka*.

His four fingers are seen in a separated mode, with thumb turned in slightly. It is called *ala-padma hasta*.

Natya Shastra outlines certain usages of *ala-padma hasta*. The *ala-padma hasta*, held in that position, may be used to denote the following: freshly churned butter (*haiyan-gavine*), intense yearning (*virahe*), a full blossomed lotus (*phulla padme*), beauty of form (*rupa soundarye*), dancing (*nartane*), moon pavilion (*chandra shalayaam*), sweetness (*madhurye*) and so on. Let us consider his mudra in the light of these meanings.

Ala-padma means full blown, shaking lotus. The placement of this hasta near the heart may indicate that once the heart is open everything will blossom by itself (*ala* meaning blossom). It's another name is *ala-pallava* which means, shaking twig. In this portrait, Sri Ramakrishna used this hasta. What he meant to us can be meditated upon in various ways.

❖ Natya Shastra says that the *ala-padma hasta* can be used to denote *virahe*—unable to bear the separation from the Beloved. It also denotes *vyakulata*—intense yearning.

❖ Another usage is *rupa soundarye*—which means beautiful form. May be Sri Ramakrishna is indicating to us, 'What can be more beautiful than my matchless Mother's form, seeing which one loses interest in everything else!' (cf. *O je rup dekhe che shei*

mejeche anyo rup lage na bhalo—a song of Ramprasad)

Or, was Sri Ramakrishna, seeing the peerless beauty of God, that shames the splendour of a million moons, full of awe?

❖ Now take the meaning of the mudra as dance (*nartane*). In the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, we read,

Further, take the case of Shiva. He has everything—Kartika, Ganesha, Lakshmi, and Saraswati. Still, sometimes He dances in a state of divine fervour, chanting the name of Rama, and sometimes He is absorbed in samadhi.' This is the true dance.¹¹

❖ Now when it comes to another usage (*haiyan-gavine*) which goes with the origin of this mudra, where it was told that it was born when Sri Krishna was separating butter from buttermilk. Sri Ramakrishna once told a devotee,

The world is water and mind milk. If you pour milk into water they become one. You cannot find the pure milk anymore. But turn the milk into curd and churn it into butter. Then, when the butter is placed in water it will float. So, practise spiritual discipline in solitude and obtain the butter of knowledge and love.¹²

May be he is indicating how ought we to live in this world.

Now comes hasta. When the tips of the middle finger and the ring finger are applied to the thumb and the rest are extended, it becomes *simha-mukha hasta*. The Natya Shastra says that when *simha mukha mudra* is placed near the heart it means salvation or mukti (*hridi samsthitah moksha arthe*). But we see Sri Ramakrishna holding his hand above his head. Here liberation or salvation may be denoted by him in a wider sense.

Apart from these mudras, when we gaze at Sri Ramakrishna's face, it is revealing boundless joy. Swami Vijnanananda, a direct

disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, remarked about the wonderful expression of Sri Ramakrishna's face during his ecstasy,

His face shone with a heavenly lustre and a smile played over his lips. His teeth were visible, and there was such a joyful expression on his face that it seemed as if it would crack—like a cracked melon! His eyes seemed to be gazing at something, and he appeared to be immersed in an ocean of bliss.¹³

Now we see his eyes, they are half closed and reveal an inward look. This is *nimilitha drishti* (half-closed eyes) which denotes intense meditation and fervour. In dance, this *drishti* is used to convey the look of a sage or a muni. His feet, in *sama-pada*, indicate the abode of our surrender in this world and hereafter.

Rasa-anubhava or Experiencing Joy

The essence of music and dance is communion with the Divine and His *rasa* or joy in all existence. The noblest purpose of dance has clearly been given as the adoration of the God, as it is considered higher than all other offerings such as flowers, oblations and the rest (*pushpanaivedyadanebhyo nrittadaanam vishishyate*).¹⁴ The offering of dance to the accompaniment of vocal and instrumental music assures the merit of sacrifice performed (*yajnasya phalam ashnute*).¹⁵

Sri Ramakrishna once observed that one should sing and dance and relate to God with

one's intense devotion forgetting this apparent world and that, it can lead to nearness to God.

The impersonal delight that is born out of this pursuit is the *rasa*. Rasa or aesthetic consciousness is the object of all art.

The true *rasa* of all art forms and even of our very existence is the *rasa* of God—His beauty, His delight, His love, His compassion, His oneness which encompasses everything and calls again and again His entire creation to become that and be above all divisions and fragmented, painful living.

When we go through the scenes of Sri Ramakrishna's life, we find that not only when he danced but even when he was in his simple natural self there was a profound richness of *rasanubhava*. A casual smile, a passing phrase from his lips, a single touch, has turned the lives of people around him.

Conclusion

Sri Ramakrishna's life gestured to the world the supreme *rasa* of how to annul oneself so that only God remains. He expressed this *rasa* and *bhava* in every walk of his life. The bliss and *rasa* that he enjoyed caught everyone who came into his fold.

When we shall thus meditate on Sri Ramakrishna's dance, may we experience the blissful touch of his divine feet. Let our hearts become the stage and let Sri Ramakrishna dance his divine dance there eternally. □



References

1. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p.340
2. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p.720
3. cf. *Swami Brahmananda As We Saw Him*, p.379
4. *How to Live with God*, Swami Chetanananda, p.438
5. *Sri Ramakrishna, and His Divine Play*, Swami Saradananda, Pp.733-734
6. *Sri Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*, Swami Chetanananda, p.44
7. *Divine Play*, Pp.859-858
8. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p.395
9. c.f. *Sri Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*, p.463
10. *Ibid.*, p.463
11. *Gospel*, p.293
12. *Gospel*, p.82
13. *God Lived with Them*, Swami Chetanananda, p.592
14. *Nataraja*, by C Sivramamurti, p.11
15. *Ibid.*, p.11



An archival picture of Sri Ramakrishna's room, with two cots used by him, at Dakshineswar

‘Musical Miracles’ Songs in *the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*

M SIVARAMKRISHNA

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (the English translation of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* or just *Kathamrita*) abounds in innumerable features which enchant the reader. For one, its absorbing narrative line simply hooks you. Even if one is not ‘spiritually’ inclined, the *Gospel* has a quality of gripping our attention—just like that. Like its recorder M., we feel an inexplicable sense of wonder: ‘What a wonderful man!’ M. exclaims at the very first glimpse. *Ascharya* or amazement suffuses our being. As our acquaintance of this God-man deepens, we notice further aspects of the initial enchantment.

For me, the one basic *rasa* or quality which suffuses the story is *ananda*: Joy. If joy is the fragrance of life, the *Kathamrita* is the quintessential embodiment which enshrines that joy. This *ananda* emanates from two sources which are so skilfully blended, that the one enriches the other: not just *vak* and *artha*, word and its meaning, but underlying them are *sahitya* [literature] and *sangita* [music]. They say, *sahitya* is *alochanamrita* and *sangita* is *apata-madhurya*. One can take them to mean: literature is nectar churned out after prolonged contemplation: *alochana*, the inner eye has to open up and perceive beyond words. Experience the truth, so to say. And music, in whatever form, is instantly ‘delectable’ [*madhurya*].

One need not know the *raga*, *tala*, etc.—in fact, knowledge blocks receptivity quite often. It is instantaneous joy. All reflexes are neutralised and the *nada—anahata*—suffuses our being.

II

The *Kathamrita* is *sahitya* and *sangita* brought into play in what one can call all *samarasya*. A balancing of individual identities, yet a miraculous blending of both so spontaneously, that neither can exist without the other. The one and the other are two wings of this divine Lila of the Great Swan. But, few seem to notice the function of the amazingly large number of songs that shine like diamonds in the sky—the *chidakasa* in which *The Gospel* shows the Great Master as constantly roaming. Perhaps, this can be appreciated by those who listen to the renderings of the songs in Bengali. But, this is to circumscribe the limits of the Great Master’s language to one language (in this case, Bengali) and its alleged untranslatability. The English translations of *Kathamrita* songs are equally, if not more, of communions in the world of poetry which transcend syntactic limitations because of the very fact that they are innately evocative of generic human emotions. These transfigured emotions (*rasas*, if you like) are universal, as universal as music is. But yes, they have cultural



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specifics, mythical bases but one should peel them off (or, rather they spontaneously fall off like the dry leaves of a coconut tree) once one tunes oneself. Communication of content and communion of the emotion fuse effortlessly. A deeply contemplative *bhava*, perhaps, overtakes us.

III

Sri Ramakrishna himself sang more than eighty songs—going by the *Concordance to The Gospel*. Imagination is afire, even, to visualise Sri Ramakrishna singing so frequently. After a discourse, comes a song. The very first song which is recorded comes after answering a crucial question posed by M. ‘Under what conditions does one see God?’ ‘Cry to see the Lord with an intensely yearning heart and you will certainly see Him. People shed a whole jug of tears for wife and children. They swim in tears for money. But, who weeps for God? Cry to Him with a real cry.’ And then, the Master sang:

Cry to your Mother Shyama with a real cry, O mind!
 And, how can she hold herself from you?
 How can Shyama stay away?
 How can your Mother Kali hold Herself away?
 O mind, if you are in earnest, bring Her an offering of betel leaves and hibiscus flowers;
 Lay at Her feet your offering
 And, with it mingle the fragrant sandal paste of Love.

Longing, *vyakulata*, is what the Great Master always emphasized. He explains it later on (after singing the song). But, then, the intertext of a song appears. Does it have a function other than a poetic expression of what has already been explained in prose? Does Poetry / song, make any difference? Perhaps, it does. A song tunes a restless mind. ‘Music is the food of love’ says, Shakespeare (in *Twelfth*

Night). If a song is sung, it swells inherent emotion, ignites the passion, the longing which is needed and, how if the song is sung by Sri Ramakrishna whose ‘longing’ was limitless, unfathomable for Mother Bhavatarini?

The effect is electrifying, even, in translation. For the simple reason that Sri Ramakrishna knew what longings the human psyche hugs to itself. That is why he says:

God reveals Himself to a devotee who feels drawn to Him by the combined force of those three attractions: the attraction of worldly possessions for the worldly man, the child’s attraction for its mother and the husband’s attraction for the chaste wife.

And,

If one feels drawn to Him by the combined force of these three attractions, then through it one can attain Him.

If we look at the juxtaposition of a song and, a sequence of prose explanation, we feel that M. seems to be adopting the structure of a *Champu Kavya*: prose and poetry in juxtaposition. The song can say things suggestively—which, if put in prose may sound plain and, often, pontifical. In this instance, we notice that the song is addressed to Divine Mother Shyama. And, Kali, only a synonym for Shyama! The Dark One.

There is also another—remarkable, subtle use of *dhvani*, suggestion—by citing the items of offering to the Mother: betel leaves and, hibiscus flowers. Longing is the emotion but, it must be ‘real’ and ‘earnest’. The physical articles which are easy to offer create no problem. But, what is the *sine qua non* of *vyakulata* is in the last line: Lay all those articles at Kali’s feet; yes, this is ritual, done easily. But, then, Sri Ramakrishna tells [us] ‘mingle it with the fragrant sandal paste of Love’, ‘L’ with a capital letter as distinct from the love of the

worldly man, the ordinary love of the husband or the child, with an attitude, 'real', 'earnest'.

Am I not paraphrasing? Yes, I am. But, then, one can do some spiritual manoeuvring of *sadhana*: for Shyama Kali, I place 'Sri Ramakrishna'. Then, I know, at least guess, what it is to love the Great Master. Love is primary; rituals are optional. Just as an expression like 'crying' is optional; but the devotee's 'pain' and suffering, implicit in intense longing are inevitable.

What are the bases, the foundations of this longing? 'The most important thing is faith', the Master affirms and, cites three lines of a song:

As is a man's meditation, so is his feeling of love;
As is a man's feeling of love so is his gain,
And faith is the root of all.

This is the equation: love is the goal, the means is meditation and the root of the transformation which makes meditation culminate in love is *faith*. 'Root' is a very important metaphor: it is what one can call *sankalpa taru*, the tree of strong, unflinching *sankalpa*, conviction which weathers every storm brought by gales of doubt and uncertainty. The seed of faith will not germinate in a land laid to waste. The land is not intrinsically a wasteland. It has not been cultivated. Faith is innate. Its root is inherent. But, it needs nourishment through the technique of meditation. In short, 'mind' management. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it tersely, '*mane sab*'. Mind is all. He exhorts and addresses the mind itself in a song he sings:

O mind, you do not know how to farm!
Fallow is the field of your life.
If you had only worked it well,
How rich a harvest you might reap!
Hedge it about with Kali's name
If you would keep your harvest safe;
This is the stoutest hedge of all,

For, Death himself cannot come near it.

The context of this song is the Great Master's remarks about 'the law of karma'. A Tantrik, asks: '... the law of karma exists, doesn't it?' The Master replies: 'That also is true. Good produces good, bad produces bad. Don't you get the hot taste if you eat chillies? But, these are all God's Lila, His Play.' The Tantrik asks: 'Then, what is the way for us? We shall have to reap the result of our past karma, shall we not?' Sri Ramakrishna says: '*That may be so*. But, it is different with the devotees of God. Listen to a song.'

Look at the above song: at this stage, there is no discussion about the law of karma—whether it exists or not. First look at, locate the land and 'farm'. The source of doubts, in this case, about the most annoying 'law of Karma': O mind! 'You don't know how to farm' it. Don't we notice here that there is a shift in perception? 'Look at tidying up your mind' rather than muddying it up with problems like karma, pragmatics of doing, paradoxes of a dubious nature.

Not just the land, entire life is rendered sterile. In fact, what is available for fruitful cultivation is neglected. Recover it and, 'work at it well'. Even now, all this is about the nebulous entity called, 'mind'. A concrete focus is needed. And, that too in tune with the Tantrik's faith, which coincides with the Great Master's. 'The stoutest hedge' to protect the harvest is 'Kali's name'. And, let alone bad karma, even, 'Death' himself is distanced, dissolved. Then, where is karma and, its operative apparatus?

There is one more subtlety. In the gathering, there were also other devotees. They, perhaps, are not—all of them—Tantriks. Kali would certainly tune with the Tantrik, what about others? Sri Ramakrishna continues the song:

Sooner or later will dawn the day
 When you must forfeit your precious field;
 Gather, O mind, what fruit you may,
 Sow for your seed the holy name
 Of God that your guru has given to you,
 Faithfully watering it with love
 And, if you should find the task too hard,
 Call upon Ramprasad, for help.

Now, we notice a change in the tenor of the song. A note of finality suggests itself: The finality of 'forfeiting your precious field'. In effect, the fact of death. 'Forfeit' may not, in this context have that meaning; it could simply mean lose something or have something taken away from you, because you have done something wrong. Something, a person has to pay for, obviously, a punishment. Once these lexical meanings are kept in view, perhaps, 'forfeit' could evoke the karmic fruit. This meaning seems appropriate since earlier, there was mention of 'the law of karma'.

Obviously, Sri Ramakrishna sang the song as a suggestive, dhvani-laden answer to the law of 'good result for good, bad for bad'. The antidote for karma itself (good or bad) is sowing the seed of the holy name of God, your guru gave. It is now not specifically, Kali, but, any name that evokes God. Thus, the specific reference to Kali is no longer a privileged one. Any holy name is a potentially 'powerful' seed which annuls karma.

IV

The toughest condition for achieving all this is again *faith*. This is now qualified: 'faithfully' watering the seed of faith, with LOVE. The task is too hard. Since love is something which comes glibly to the tongue but, involves a regimen which is the finale of all sadhana, should we ask Ramprasad as the song suggests? We can, we should. My feeling is: One may follow any path but, behind is

Shakti. This is an invariable. The Great Master will never make a categorical statement. We get the doubt cleared in a repetition of the three lines quoted earlier, with the addition of three more lines: The Master sings:

As is a man's meditation, so is his feeling of love;
 As is a man's feeling of love, so is his gain;
 And, faith is the root of all.
 If in the Nectar Lake of Mother Kali's feet
 My mind remains immersed,
 Of little use are worship, oblations or sacrifice.

When I read the last three lines, I literally gasped. 'My mind'—so affirmative, but, by indirection, what about 'my' mind? The song suggests several answers. But, the answer of answers is LOVE.

From the above, it is possible to arrive at three basic maxims of Ramakrishna Vedanta Sutras. First, the aim of life is God-realisation; Second, Mind is all; Third, Karma *upaya* not *uddesh*: a means not an end. All the three inundated by and suffused with love. Or else, 'Of little use are worship, oblations or sacrifice.'

It seems the innumerable songs evoke the implications of the above with such rich evocative power that even reflecting on them could be a meditation in itself. Why songs? Can anyone imagine *The Gospels* of Christ without the psalms? The songs are the Psalms of *Sri Ramakrishna's Gospel*.

The one inescapable condition for the songs to penetrate the prosaic crust of our mind is 'listening'. Rene Daumal, in his precious volume on *Rasa* says:

The man who knows how to listen, in this supreme moment, finds that he has been awakened by a musical miracle in an instant of perfect silence. The melody which imposes the form and, the harmony which evokes the living substance, are reunited in their common goal, the silent moment of the perception of the self.

For, 'self' place Sri Ramakrishna. Every song in the *Kathamrita* then becomes a musical, meditative, miracle. Thus, to listen is to love, and, we love to listen. □



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Sri Ramakrishna's Singing

If someone broke the rhythm while singing, the Master would cry out 'Oohu, Oohu'. But if the person sang with devotion and deep absorption, such irregularity would not disturb him. He was not interested in ragas, raginis, or the signs of music. The Master sang in ecstasy, and his voice was soft, sweet, and melodious. Sometimes when he was singing, he would improvise some joyous phrase. I saw the Master enter into Samadhi many times while singing. Sometimes he would ask me or Swamiji to sing, and while listening he would again enter into samadhi.

—**Ramlal Chattopadhyay,**

Sri Ramakrishna's nephew

[*Ramakrishna As We Saw Him*, p.44]

Ah, how charming was the Master's singing! He would become lost in spiritual moods as soon as he started to sing. I have never heard such soul-enchanting singing from anyone else. My heart and soul were filled with his singing.

—**Swami Shivananda,**

a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna

[*Ramakrishna As We Saw Him*, p. 128]



School of Lahas, Kamarpukur, where Sri Ramakrishna as a young boy learnt his three R's

Sri Ramakrishna, the Educationist

SWAMI ABHIRAMANANDA

Holistic Education

When Swami Vivekananda prayed to Saraswati, the Goddess of learning, and addressed the audience in the Chicago Parliament of Religions with the words, Sisters and Brothers of America, 'hundreds rose to their feet with shouts of applause. . . For full two minutes, he attempted to speak, but the wild enthusiasm of the audience prevented it'.¹

Later, Swamiji noticed the benefits that education had showered on the westerners and returning to India, he spoke a lot on the degraded condition of the Indian masses and how they can be raised through education. He was convinced that the right type of education was the only panacea for all the evils plaguing the Indian society. By the right type, he meant a judicious blend of the Indian spiritual and the western technical aspects of education. He was certain that such an education alone would be holistic and comprehensive.

During his college days, Swamiji had mastered all the modern western subjects including the sciences, history and literature. From his mother, he had also imbibed the spiritual and cultural traditions of India. But the highly learned youth had to go to the 'illiterate' Sri Ramakrishna and sit at his feet for five years to complete his education! Around the same time, several other youths also approached Sri Ramakrishna and eagerly drank the ancient India's spiritual ambrosia flowing from his lips. Sri Ramakrishna com-

plemented these college youths with the glory of spiritual wisdom to fulfil the lacuna in their learning system.

While Narendranath and the other young disciples represented the acme of secular education, Sri Ramakrishna symbolized the wisdom of ancient India. The system of education imparted in the Ramakrishna Mission institutions is designed to reap the benefits of these two types of education. This brings home to us several truths, namely,

a) Education becomes complete when knowledge rises to the level of wisdom. Mere knowledge without wisdom can be dangerous. Educated people with evil propensities can do more harm to the society than uneducated people with the same qualities.

b) In the Indian context, secular and spiritual education have always been complementary and never contradictory; the two have always marched together. It is only in the background of the western religious traditions that sacred and spiritual aspects of education have been at loggerheads.

c) The journey of the secular to the sacred is continuous and spontaneous. As Swamiji says, physics merges with metaphysics in the higher stages.

The Need for Values

In the present day scenario, where all the indicators related to the social and economic development of our nation are showing



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an upward trend, one has to be warned that these achievements should not be at the cost of our culture and values.

India has a long history of imparting secular education with a spiritual base. In 1835, Lord Macaulay advocated the policy of stopping grants to schools teaching in Sanskrit and regional languages, and started providing grants only to schools teaching in English. The idea was to impose western culture on the Indians. As if in protest to this major policy reverse, Sri Ramakrishna incarnated in the very next year and challenged the western method of education. His brother himself started a Sanskrit school in the heart of Kolkata, the then Capital of India. Sri Ramakrishna abhorred the idea of 'bread winning education'² and emphasized on ethical and spiritual elements in it. As child Gadadhar, he spent most of his days in spiritual activities such as making images of deities out of clay, listening to the narration of shastras, serving wandering monks and enacting dramas on the lives of great spiritual souls.

In the independent India all our policy makers on education have endorsed the views of Sri Ramakrishna. They have consistently and assiduously highlighted the importance of spiritual and ethical elements in the curriculum as a strong foundation for secular education. To quote the relevant passages from a few reports on our educational policy:³

❖ *The University Education Commission (1948-49)*: Spiritual training should be incorporated in the curriculum of educational institutions.

❖ *The Secondary Education Commission (1952-53)*: Religious and moral instructions do play an important role in the growth of character.

❖ *Sri Prakasa Committee on Religious and Moral Education (1959)*: Many ills that our

world of education and our society as a whole are suffering today, resulting in wide-spread disturbance and dislocation of life are mainly due to the gradual disappearance of the hold of the basic principles of religion on the hearts of people. The only cure, it seems to us, is in deliberate inculcation of moral and spiritual values from the earliest years of our lives.

❖ *Education Commission Report (1964-66)*: In a rapidly changing world of today, one thing is certain: moral education and inculcation of a sense of responsibility must be stressed in the educational system. . . Modernisation does not mean—least of all in our national situation—a refusal to recognize the importance of or to inculcate the necessary moral and spiritual values and self discipline. There should be a search for the knowledge of the self, of the meaning of life, of the relationship of man to other human beings and the ultimate Reality. In the situation that is developing, it is equally important for us to give a proper value orientation to our educational system.

❖ *Committee of Members of Parliament on Education (1967)*: The most important and urgent reform needed is to transform the existing system of education in order to strengthen national unity, promote social integration, accelerate economic growth and generate moral, spiritual and social values.

❖ *National Policy on Education (1968)*: The educational system must produce young men and women of character and ability committed to national service and development.

❖ *National Policy on Education (1986)*: Our country's rich and varied cultural traditions need to be bridged. The present preoccupation with modern technologies should not be allowed to sever our new generations from the roots of India's history and culture. Deculturation, dehumanization and alienation

must be avoided at all costs. Education must and can bring about a fine synthesis between change-oriented technologies and the country's continuity of cultural tradition.

❖ *Acharya Ramamurti Committee (1990)*: Education must provide a climate for the nurture of values, both as a personalized set of values, forming one's character and including necessarily social, cultural and national values, so as to have a context and meaning for actions and decisions, and in order to enable persons to act with conviction and commitment.

❖ *National Implementation Committee to celebrate 150th Birthday of Swami Vivekananda (2010)*: Introduce Swami Vivekananda's life and teachings in the school curriculum and create Vivekananda chairs in Indian universities.

Swami Vivekananda himself said that he believed religion to be the innermost core of education.⁴ But very little has been done to translate these policies into our national educational system until today, probably due to political and other compulsions.

Sri Ramakrishna likened all our life's achievements to zeroes which have no value unless the integer 'one' is placed before them; the digit 'one' symbolises the moral and ethical aspect of education.⁵

Sri Ramakrishna's Method

Let us now see the remarkable methods of teaching adopted by Sri Ramakrishna. It is amazing how an illiterate person from a rustic background could speak in the language of the modern policy makers on education. No wonder, more and more schools and colleges are being dedicated in his hallowed name!

Methods of teaching employed by Sri Ramakrishna:

Sri Ramakrishna possessed a scientific temperament and never accepted anything

without proof. He forbade his disciples to accept anything without repeated verification. He made his own body and mind a great spiritual laboratory and tested the veracity and validity of the ancient scriptures to this age by practicing them one by one. He vigorously pursued each of the paths for just three days and attained realisation through every one of them. His own life was an open book on spiritual and moral values. Yet he strenuously taught his disciples the subtleties of spirituality through certain methods which have now been recognized as effective means for imparting value education by policy thinkers on education. Some of the methods which he intuitively followed are given below.

1. *Conceptual Method*—In this method, a concept is introduced and a number of illustrations are used to explain it. Sri Ramakrishna is adept in this method of teaching. He introduces the difficult concepts of Brahman with and without form, Maya, Bhakti, Jnana, harmony of religions, etc., and explains them in such a lucid way through simple examples that everyone can easily understand them.

For instance, to resolve the dilemma of how God with form and God without form can co-exist, he compares God with form to a block of frozen ice and God without form to an ocean. Just as the block of ice melts into the ocean with the dawn of sun's rays, God with form merges into formless God with the rise of knowledge.⁶

Describing the superiority of Bhakti over Jnana, Sri Ramakrishna likens Bhakti to a woman who can enter into the inner apartments of her friend's house, whereas Jnana is like a man who cannot venture beyond the drawing room.⁷

To illustrate the concept of harmony of religions, he uses the example of four people

drinking water from the same pond, yet each one of them calling it by different names such as *vari*, *aqua*, *pani*, *jal*, etc. The experience of the thirst getting quenched, however, is the same for all the four people. In the same way, though God is called by different names, He is One in His quintessence.⁸

To explain the most difficult concept of Maya he compares it to a veil or screen held in between the Jivatman and the Paramatman. The moment the veil is removed, the Jivatman is able to realize the Paramatman.

2. *Biographical Method*—This has been a very effective method employed right from the ancient days in scriptures like the epics and the Puranas. Here, the story of a spiritual role-model is narrated to bring home the applicability of the abstract spiritual principles into practice. The availability of a concrete symbol to personify the abstract spiritual concepts makes it very easy for the student to grasp the content. Sri Ramakrishna often used to ask the devotees to read aloud from the stories of saints like Dhruva, Uddhava,⁹ Vilvamangal¹⁰, Krishna, Rama, Harischandra,¹¹ etc. He even asked his disciple and famous dramatist, Girish Chandra Ghosh, to dramatize some of these stories in the theatre and himself witnessed the dramas on Chaitanya¹² and Prahlada¹³.

3. *Group Discussion Method*: This method employs an exchange of ideas and views to widen understanding, thinking and reasoning. It ideally brings forth the best answer to a question. Sri Ramakrishna used to ask some of his learned disciples like Narendranath, Mahimacharan Chakravarty, Mahendranath Gupta and Girish Chandra Ghosh to discuss about the philosophy of the Hindu schools¹⁴. When some devotees felt that these discussions were useless, Sri Ramakrishna objected to their intervention by saying that these do have a meaning and so should be continued. In most

of such debates, differences of opinion used to arise among the participants in their interpretations and invariably Sri Ramakrishna would finally reconcile their differences.

4. *Multi-level, Multi-grade Teaching*—is a concept promoted zealously nowadays by prominent national educational bodies like the NCERT (National Council for Educational Research and Training). Multi-level indicates the different levels of entry into an educational institution. Multi-grade means the different methodologies used to teach the above different levels of students—to each one according to his ability. This concept bears a striking resemblance to the Delors' Report published by the UNESCO as an Education Document for the 21st century, which reads in part:

Education should be pursued in terms of flexibility, diversity and availability at different times and different places. Not only must it adapt to changes in the nature of work, but it must also constitute a continuous process of forming whole beings—their knowledge and aptitudes as well as critical faculty and the ability to act. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment, and encourage them play their social roles at work in the community.¹⁵

In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, we find people of multi-levels—householders, prospective sannyasins, women disciples, etc.—coming to him for spiritual learning. Again, among the householders there are highly evolved souls like Naga Mahasaya, socially rich and influential people like Mathur, bohemians like Girish Chandra Ghosh and normal sadhakas like many of the rest. Among the sannyasin disciples, again, there are very highly learned ones like Narendra, intensely contemplative aspirants like Hari and Rakhai, illiterate persons like Latu and born yogis like Kaliprasanna. Sri Ramakrishna received each

of them with open arms and taught them individually and wherever possible, collectively. He identified and took each one from the level where he or she stood and raised them from there. The result was, at the end of his teaching, all the disciples became holistic personalities in their own unique ways and contributed to the welfare of the society. Thus, viewed from the perspective of the modern trends in education, Sri Ramakrishna was a teacher *par excellence*.

5. *Inductive and Deductive Methods of Learning and Teaching*—Deductive method of learning is that in which we assume the final result hypothetically and then prove it through a self-discovered process. Child prodigies who excel in various fields by a stroke of genius without proper teacher and training belong to this group.

Inductive method is deriving the results from the first principles, i.e., start without assuming the conclusion and logically arrive at the final result step by step. This is the normal, traditional method by which a vast majority of people learn.

In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, we first find that he experienced God without the help of scriptures or Guru, i.e., he followed the deductive method. Afterwards, he took up different Gurus and strictly followed the injunctions enjoined by his Gurus, i.e., he followed the inductive method. It is a well-known fact that for one's own learning and versatility, deductive method is enough, whereas to attain sustainability and teach others, one should have preferably undergone both the inductive and deductive methods of learning; in the characteristic, simple words of Sri Ramakrishna, 'One needs a sword and shield to kill others; but to kill oneself, a needle or a nail-knife suffices'¹⁶. We see in the life of Sri Ramakrishna that he attained remarkable

success through both the inductive and deductive methods of learning and teaching.

6. *Life-long Process of Learning and Teaching*—The above-quoted Delor's Report further states that 'education must be pursued throughout one's life; there is a need to rethink and broaden the notions of education on a lifelong basis.'

This is another way of expressing Sri Ramakrishna's oft-repeated statement 'As long as I live, so long do I learn.'¹⁷

Sri Ramakrishna and Special Education

We find an interesting incident in the life of Sri Ramakrishna when he was a young priest in the temple of Dakshineswar. One day, a priest by name Kshetranath was carrying the image of Lord Govinda when he slipped and fell down. As a result the leg of the deity broke. The owner of the temple, Rani Rasmani and her son-in-law Mathur Nath were worried because as per scriptural injunctions the worship could not be continued on a broken image. They invited all the famous scholars of Kolkata for a meeting to ascertain the procedure to be adopted. The unanimous verdict of the learned assembly was 'Let the broken image be immersed in the Ganga and a new one installed in its place'. When Sri Ramakrishna was consulted, he said in a state of ecstasy, 'If Rani Rasmani's son-in-law's leg is broken, would she abandon him and bring in another son-in-law? Or make proper arrangements for his treatment? Let the same be done in the case of this image also.' According to his advice, the image was mended and replaced.¹⁸

Significance of the above incident in the field of special education: Special education means education and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities. It is estimated that all over the globe, nearly a whopping 10% of the

population are disabled in one way or the other—blind, deaf and dumb, orthopaedically handicapped, mentally ill, mentally retarded, autistic, dyslexic, leprosy-cured and so on. In the last few centuries, the outlook of the society upon this section has evolved in three stages:

i) *First Stage*: Their deformity was thought to be as a result of God's curse on them. So they were shunned and discarded.

ii) *Second Stage*: Today we are passing through this phase. At this stage, the disabled are tolerated by the society, but have separate schools, academies, training centres, etc., such as the school for the blind, vocational centres for the deaf and dumb and so on. They live separately without much contact with the main society.

iii) *Third Stage*: The disabled are integrated into the main society. For example: Two to three blind students are put in a classroom with 50 normal boys. Their special needs are supplemented through facilities outside the school hours. This method has been proved to be very successful in enhancing their confidence and making them useful members of the society. This latest concept is called 'inclusive education'.

Viewed in the background of these developments, the above quoted incident of Sri Ramakrishna gains enormous significance. Brushing aside the unanimous verdict of the entire scholastic community of Kolkata, Sri Ramakrishna

i) Disapproved the throwing away of the damaged image

ii) Disapproved the idea of even keeping the broken image aside and worshipping another in its place, and

iii) Strongly recommended that the broken image be mended, which he himself did, and the daily worship be continued with it.

Drawing a parallel from this for the disabled section of the society, the implication is evident:

i) The disabled should not be discarded like the people of olden days used to do with the socially stigmatized categories. In the olden days people with diseases like leprosy were thrown into a huge pit, and food, water, etc. were also lowered into it by their relatives.

ii) The disabled should not even be isolated from the society, as is being done now.

iii) The disabled should be educated, rehabilitated and treated like any other normal person by absorbing them into the main stream of the society, which is in line with the presently emerging and progressive concept of 'inclusive education'.

In recent days, international welfare organizations have recommended 'human rights approach' in contrast to the compassion backed 'charity approach' of the olden days for solving the problems of the disabled persons. Educating and rehabilitating the disabled is no more considered a charitable act. Rather, every disabled person has a right to live in the society with grace and dignity. This idea seems like reframing the utterance of Sri Ramakrishna: 'Compassion for all beings? How foolish to speak of compassion! Human beings are as insignificant as worms crawling on the earth—and they are to show compassion to others? That is absurd. It must not be compassion but service to all. Recognise all as manifestations of God and serve them as such'.¹⁹

Conclusion

We conclude with what Swami Vivekananda said on Sri Ramakrishna:

The man at whose feet I sat all my life—and it is only a few ideas of his that I try to teach—could

hardly write his name at all. All my life I have not seen another man like that, and I have travelled all over the world. When I think of

that man, I feel like a fool, because I want to read books and he never did. That is why he was his own book.²⁰ □



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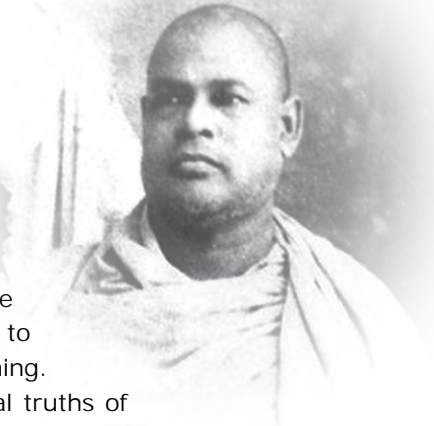
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Mere Book Learning Does Not Help

When Sri Ramakrishna was young he met a pandit of the Vedanta philosophy, who taught him about the impermanence of the world and the reality of God. From their talk the Master thought that the pandit was free from all worldly attachments. One day, however, he saw the pandit performing rituals as a priest for a little rice. This convinced him that mere book learning does not help a person attain true knowledge, and that there must be some other means to attain it. Thus he became disgusted with book learning.

Later, seeing the pandits talk about the transcendental truths of Vedanta, he often compared them to vultures. As vultures soar very high thought there eyes are always on the charnel pits, so the pandits constantly talk about high spiritual matters but their minds are on money.

—**Swami Ramakrishnananda**, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna
[*Ramakrishna As We Saw Him*, p.143]





Temple of Sri Ramakrishna, Belur Math

Facets of the Prophet-Mystic

SATISH K KAPOOR

A Unique Prophet

Introducing Sri Ramakrishna to his western readers, Romain Rolland, the Nobel laureate in literature for the year 1915, wrote:

I am bringing to Europe, as yet unaware of it, the fruit of a new autumn, a new message of the Soul, the symphony of India, bearing the name of Ramakrishna. It can be shown . . . that this symphony, like those of our classical masters, is built up of a hundred different musical elements emanating from the past. But the sovereign personality concentrating in himself the diversity of these elements and fashioning them into a royal harmony, is always the one who gives his name to the work, though it contains within itself the labour of generations. And with his victorious sign he marks a new era.¹

If ever a God-intoxicated person in human history experienced the Reality through such different pathways as those of the Vaishnavas, the Advaita Vedantists, the Tantrics, the Muslims and the Christians, saw no difference between Krishna and Christ despite being the priest of a Hindu temple dedicated to the Goddess Kali, had the least hesitation in seeking spiritual guidance from Bhairavi, a tantric teacher, and could even turn Tota Puri, one of his gurus, into his disciple, visualise the Divine Mother (Goddess Shodashi) in his wife, Sri Sarada Devi, and lead a life of chastity without nurturing any libidinal feeling, that man was Sri Ramakrishna.

If ever an illiterate person was sought after by the intellectual celebrities of his time like Pratap Chandra Majumdar and Keshab Chandra Sen, and received rich encomiums from such scholars as Max Muller, Romain Rolland, Aldous Huxley, and Arnold J. Toynbee, could go into a spiritual trance without using any psychological medium, made no supernatural claims and yet could lift a person to the higher states of consciousness by his look or touch, he was none else than Sri Ramakrishna.

Christopher Isherwood, the renowned American writer, called him a 'phenomenon,' because a phenomenon is 'often something extraordinary and mysterious' besides being 'a fact, an object of experience'.² But the word 'phenomenon' which refers to anything extremely unusual, has its limitations since it does not postulate the highest Truth, of which Sri Ramakrishna was the living embodiment.

Sri Ramakrishna straddled between the physical and the astral worlds, often involuntarily, and lived in *mahabhava*, the supernal feeling of divinity, reflected cosmic glory in his persona. He spoke in a simple, yet illuminating manner, like the Buddha, Jesus and Zoroaster, to unfold the realm of the spirit. He who spurred the higher values of life, whose echo was heard in America and Europe, through his able disciple, Swami Vivekananda, was indeed a prophet. He was a prophet both

□ Dr Satish K Kapoor, Ex-British Council Scholar, is the Secretary, Dayanand Institutions, Solapur, Maharashtra.

in the traditional sense of the word, meaning 'one who speaks out', and in its modern signification, as one who is divinely inspired to deliver the truth.³

His Transforming Influence

Sri Ramakrishna was born on February 18, 1836 at Kamarpukur, a tiny village in the Hooghly district of Bengal. His family name was Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya. He nurtured the sapling of Indian Renaissance so ably planted by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore and other reformers. As he harmonised different strands of religious thought, he is regarded as 'the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people'.⁴

As a priest of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna did not merely perform the ordained rituals, administer sacraments or carry out other sacerdotal duties. Rather, he became the instrument of spiritual transformation. Those who watched his strange moods and movements, his habit of losing body-consciousness and shedding tears of love, and his elevating dancing acts in moments of spiritual exaltation were convinced that he had seen God face to face, and attained the nirvikalpa state in which the subject and the object dissolve in eternity.

Sri Ramakrishna's absorption in samadhi used to be so deep that, on one occasion, he is said to have remained insensitive to a burning piece of coal on which he had fallen till he regained consciousness. Sometime, in the *bhavamukha* moods, in which one lurks between the normal and the transcendental states of consciousness, he identified himself with Hanuman, wind-god, Radha, divine consort of Sri Krishna, or other holy personages, and behaved the same way as they did. Strong emotions are spun into the texture of

consciousness and affect the bioplasmic body, triggering many physical and psychological responses. The sublimity of divine feelings envelope the complete person as is evident from a statement of St. Bernard of Clairvoux:

When I love God with my will, I transform myself unto him, for this is the power or virtue of love, that it maketh Thee to be like unto that which Thou lovest.⁵

A Mystic *Par Excellence*

The American Psychologist J.H. Leuba saw similarities between the epileptic and the mystic states. In his view, 'the exaltation and illumination of the mystic are due to certain unconscious organic changes which influence the psychical life, and produce results which are interpreted as the effects of an impact on the spirit of God.'⁶ It has, however, been argued that a mystic has 'clarity of vision and lucidity of mind' which enables him to see the Invisible, unlike the epileptic.⁷ Sri Ramakrishna was assured by the Tantric sannyasini, Bhairavi, that what he experienced in mystical phases was not insanity but an exalted state of spiritual attainment.⁸

Mysticism, being the highest state of propensity of the human soul to see the *Reality* face to face and to realise the ultimate truth, is beyond ratiocinative faculty and cannot be fully described, shared, or scientifically validated. The mystic remains immersed in his *experience* and gains new insights which are not possible through empirical ways. A xenophrenic state may not always be a mystic state but the deep awareness of the mystic stands in a class apart, as it is not abnormal but paranormal.

A Remarkable Combination

The mystics of the world are known to have the third eye, the para-perceptive faculty,

which helps one to see, feel or grasp what lies beyond the domain of sense perception. Sri Ramakrishna was no exception in this respect as proved by contemporary accounts. He did not have any philosophical training yet his understanding of religion and philosophy was marvellous. He did not know Sanskrit, or any European language, like the educated and progressive people of his time. But he imbibed the quintessential of sacred and secular literature of mankind. His knowledge of Bengali was far from satisfactory. But his ennobling thoughts expressed in that language, during private conversations or at small religious gatherings, contained the elixir of wisdom—the fruit of his own spiritual experiences. He was not a monk or a preacher in the strict sense of the term. But the ‘noetic quality’ of his mysticism (to use William James’ expression) provided naturalness and profundity to his utterances. He did not initiate reforms in orthodox Hinduism as Francis of Assisi did in Christianity. But he proved to be a striking example of soul-force, much before Mahatma Gandhi, and became a catalyst of socio-religious change.

Like Socrates, he wrote nothing. But each word that poured from his lips seemed to have come from the beyond. He taught through parables, proverbs and anecdotes, sometime interspersed with wit, humour or satire, taken mostly from the Indian spiritual and mythological lore, and impressed even the cynics, sceptics, atheists and agnostics who came to visit him. He did not offer a spiritual utopia to his disciples and remained focussed on God-realisation. Nor did he ever try to convert others to his faith. His disciples like Girish Chandra Sen, Suresh Chandra Datta, Ram Chandra Datta, Mahendranath Gupta (popular as M.) and Swami Brahmananda among others, took notes of what he spoke and thus

preserved his teachings and dialogues for posterity.

His Idea of Supreme Reality

God or Brahman remained the Supreme Reality for Sri Ramakrishna which he described as unchangeable, immovable, unconditioned, indescribable and beyond all relativity; as both eternal and temporal, formless and with form, male and female. In static mode, it is the absolute; in kinetic form, it is Shakti. Sri Ramakrishna regarded Brahman and Shakti as one like milk and its whiteness, gem and its lustre, butter and buttermilk. ‘The original milk is Brahman realised in samadhi; the butter, the Impersonal-personal God; and the buttermilk, the Universe made up of twenty-four categories.’⁹

To know Brahman is to know oneself. The Kena Upanishad says:

He who says he does not know (Brahman) knows it; he who says he knows, does not know it. It is known to those who say they do not know it; it is not known to those who say they know it.¹⁰

Sri Ramakrishna was in tune with the Infinite but he never boasted of his spiritual attainment, or made a show of his occult powers (*siddhis*) for publicity. The display of *siddhis* depletes one’s spiritual treasure, loosen one’s control of the senses, and deviates one from the *path beyond*. Sri Ramakrishna spoke of a Hatha Yogi who was an expert in performing all the physical postures (*asana*) and could lecture well on samadhi, but deep within, he longed for ‘women and gold’.¹¹

God and God Men

Like the Vedic Rishis, Sri Ramakrishna believed that Truth sustains existence. Truth is beauty and bliss itself, the characteristics of the Supreme Reality, which is perceived

differently by different people. The Jnanis call him Brahman, the Supreme Godhead; the Yogis, Paramatman or great soul; the Bhaktas, Bhagwan or God, and so on.¹² Purusha and Prakriti, the male and female principles of creation are integral and one.¹³ Unlike Adi Shankaracharya who regarded maya as the illusion-creating power of Brahman, Sri Ramakrishna accepted its existence but warned that it is a snare. 'Maya is to Brahman what the snake in motion is to snake at rest'. The snake is not affected by the poison in its fangs; but, when it bites, the poison kills the creature bitten. Likewise, Maya is in the Lord but does not affect him while the same maya deludes the whole world.¹⁴

Sri Ramakrishna saw the manifestation of God in all beings and things—the apparent difference is in degree, not in kind. He felt that God can be perceived both in saint and sinner, in birds, animals and plants, in elemental forces, in the seen and the unseen objects. One may find cheats, gamblers, and carnivores among the Homo sapiens who may aptly be described as the 'cheat-God', 'the tiger-God'; etc.¹⁵ The divine play of the Absolute Being goes on, and each living being has an assigned role in it. The embodied souls are traditionally classified into four categories: those who are bound (*baddha*), striving for liberation from bondage of matter (*mumukshu*), the emancipated ones (*mukta*), and the ever-free (*nitya-siddha*). Sri Ramakrishna believed that divinity descends in corporeal form (*avatara*) for the redemption of souls enmeshed in maya.

The Idea of a Personal God

The idea of *ishta-devata*, or personal God, predominates the philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna. Himself a great devotee of Divine Mother Kali, towards whom he nurtured the feeling of divine love (*matri-bhava*), he describ-

ed her as the personal aspect of the Impersonal Brahman:

Kali is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kali. She is both the efficient and material cause of the Universe and functions at many levels, in different ways. She is time, which assumes infinite proportion in the finite world, and is also beyond time, space and causation.

Sri Ramakrishna would speak to Kali as one speaks to one's mother in flesh and blood. He was like Horus to Isis, as in the Egyptian tradition. Yet he was different in the sense that he regarded the Mother Kali, not just as a Goddess who was the power point of his spiritual practices, but as the Supreme Being—both father and mother, male and female, preceptor and caretaker, and much more beyond human imagination. When a devotee asked him to justify the worship of personal God, Sri Ramakrishna replied that as one can recall one's father by his photograph, the image 'reveals in a flash the nature of Reality.'¹⁶ But he argued that only after attaining the supreme knowledge (*brahma-jnana*) one could discern unity between Brahman and its Shakti.¹⁷ Sri Ramakrishna identified himself so much with Kali that his disciples like Rakhali and Tarak visualised in him the image of mother, a devotional feeling similar to the one held by the followers of Varkari tradition for Sant Jnaneshvara, who is called *mauli* (Marathi word for mother).

Sri Ramakrishna's religion was a matter of personal experience, not of beliefs. He professed that God could be realised through love, faith and surrender. The devotee could assume towards God a particular attitude, may be that of father, mother, brother, friend or beloved, and remain in God-consciousness always. As Narada says in *Bhakti Sutra* (LXVII): 'Primary devotees are those, who have one-pointed love for God'. Sri Ramakrishna

believed in the futility of 'book-learning' as study is no substitute for a direct experience of the Supreme Reality. God cannot be found after reading a scripture, like a person who cannot describe the city of Banaras after seeing it only on a map.¹⁸

Bhakti and Jnana

Sri Ramakrishna likened Jnana (knowledge) to a man and Bhakti (devotion) to a woman. 'Knowledge has entry only up to the outer rooms of God . . . but lover . . . has access even into the harem of the Almighty.'¹⁹ Jnana is not empirical knowledge but awareness of the Supreme Truth. Bhakti, in the ultimate analysis, leads to Jnana but it is far away from the realm of dialectics. Bhakti is a matter of yearning, an intense longing for one who is none other than one's own self. The bee hums as long as it is outside the petals of a flower and has not tasted the sweetness within, but when it gets inside, it partakes of nectar without making noise.²⁰

Sri Ramakrishna preferred Bhakti to Mukti or complete liberation from the bondage of matter and of attachment, like some Vaishnava saints, and the followers of Shaiva Siddhanta School like Manikkavachakar, Appar and Sambandhar.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, love is of three kinds: selfish, mutual and unselfish.²¹ The first is of the lowest quality as it is overtly concerned with one's own interests and neglects the welfare of others. Mutual love is based on each other's needs and nothing more. But unselfish love which demands nothing in return, is of the highest kind. It is the affinity of being with being, and hence immortal (*amrita-swarupa cha*). The more it is given, the more it is received.

Renunciation and Service

Sri Ramakrishna argued that so long as one indulged in *bhoga* or sensory pleasures, one could not attain to *yoga* or union with God. Since it was impossible for ordinary human beings to get rid of cravings or passions, it was desirable that these should be directed towards God. As devotion to God increases, attachment to worldly objects decreases. The obstacles to spiritual life are egotism, narrowness of outlook, jealousy, hatred, fear, and the lure of *kaya* (flesh) and *kanchana* (gold). To grow spiritually, one should learn to live in the world, like the lotus which stays in water but remains untouched by it, or like 'a mudfish in the marsh.'²² 'A boat may stay in water but water should not stay in the boat.'²³

Sri Ramakrishna's yearning for God did not make him oblivious of the objective realities. He stressed that service of man is service of God. His catholicity, breadth of vision and love for mankind, did not exclude any sect or class, not even low castes or outcastes, rogues or the fallen women, for all of them were inherently divine in nature, an Upanishadic idea made popular by his disciple, Swami Vivekananda in India and the West.

Harmony of Religions

One of the greatest contributions of Sri Ramakrishna lay in harmonising all religions. The occultism of tantrics, the bhakti-marga of Vaishnavas, the spiritual discipline of Sufi orders, the gospel of love and service of Christians and the all-embracing approach of pantheistic cults, stirred him deeply, and he came to realise that different religions were like different paths leading to the Ultimate Reality. Just as water is called by different names such as '*vari*', '*aqua*', '*jal*' or '*pani*', the Absolute is invoked as God, Allah, Hari, Brahman or by some other name.²⁴

Sri Ramakrishna was opposed to religious hypocrisy, dogmatism, and the sense of infallibility and stressed that one should maintain 'an attitude of respect towards other religions.'²⁵ He advised that one should stick to one's faith, but eschew 'bigotry and intolerance.'²⁶

Just as all rivers lead to the sea, so do different religious paths lead one to the Supreme, says the *Shivamahimana Stotram* (verse 7). Explaining this point to Keshab Chandra Sen, he observed:

God can be realised through all paths. It is like your coming to Dakshineswar by carriage, by boat, by steamer, or on foot. You have chosen the way according to your convenience and taste; but the destination is the same. Some of you have arrived earlier than others; but all have arrived.²⁷

When asked, if the God of every religion is the same why is it that He is viewed differently, he replied that just as the master of the house is differently related to different

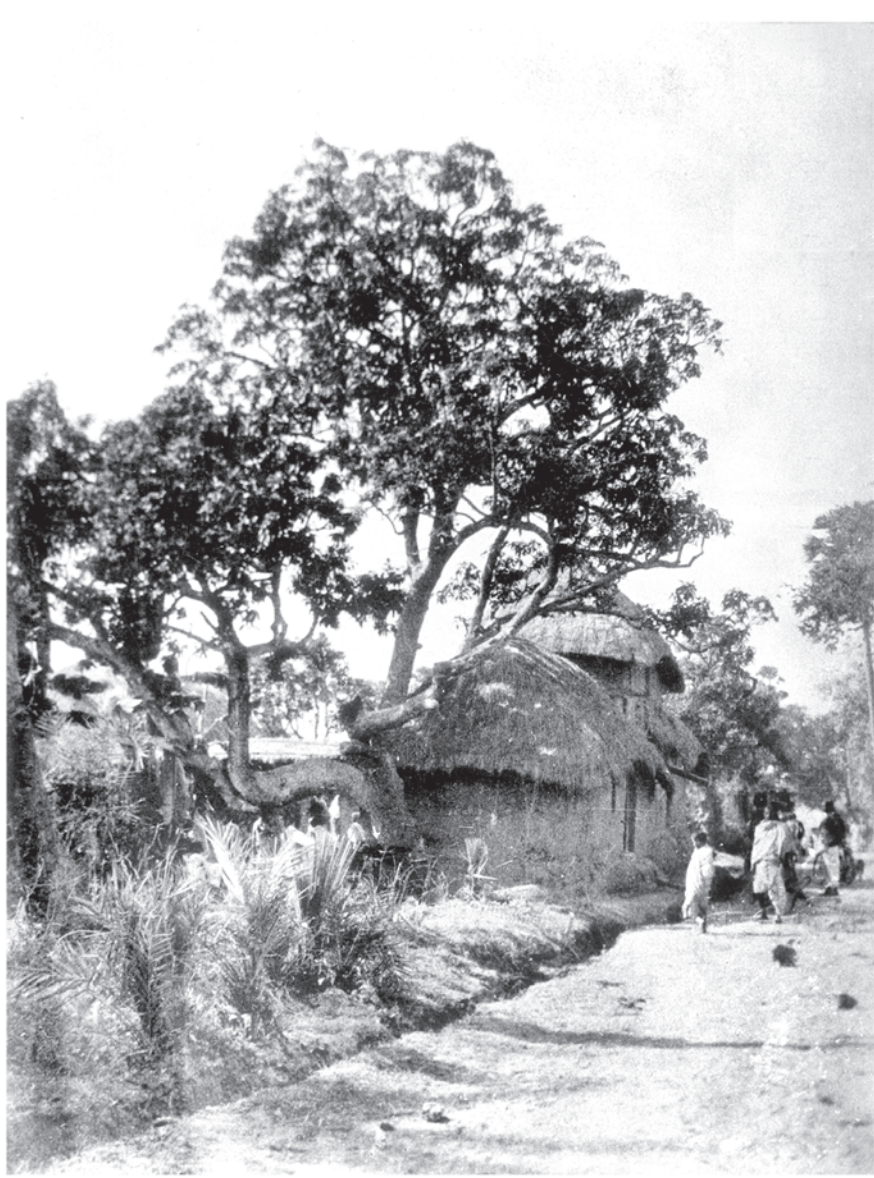
members of his family as father, brother, husband or some other, 'so the one God is described in various ways according to the particular aspects in which He appears to particular worshippers.'²⁸

Sri Ramakrishna perceived the law of unity and harmony operating at different levels of existence. His message can unfold a new vision for mankind—a vision that does not stifle the spirit of enquiry and reposes a person's faith in himself. It is a message which does not lead to lopsided development and lays equal emphasis on spiritual values; it generates one's concern for fellow-beings and helps each to experience the Reality behind all realities. His teachings enable one to appreciate and to imbibe the best in all traditions. Mark his catholic vision when he says:

Let a man be a Christian in the matter of mercy, a Moslem in the matter of strict observance of strict forms, and a Hindu in the matter of universal charity, charity towards all living creatures.²⁹ □

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An archival picture of Sri Ramakrishna's house, Kamarpukur

Sri Ramakrishna, the Master Yogi

SWAMI ATMAPRIYANANDA

Two Descriptions of Sri Ramakrishna

The well-known first verse in the *Bhagavad-Gita* records Dhritarashtra's question on what happened on the holy ground of Kurukshetra when the two warring groups, Kauravas and Pandavas, assembled, determined to fight.¹ And the answer to this is found in the very last verse² in which Sanjaya, the reporter of the entire episode to blind king Dhritarashtra, blind both literally and metaphorically (in the words of Ramanuja), affirms that wherever there is Krishna, the Lord of Yoga, and Arjuna, the wielder of the bow, there reign good fortune, victory, prosperity and enduring policy.

There are many epithets by which Sri Krishna is described in the Gita, but the acme seems to have been reached in the description of Krishna as *Yogeshwara*,³ the Lord of Yoga, the Master Yogi. Interestingly, this description occurs at the very end signalling as it were, that it is the culmination of whatever Krishna stands for—his being a Master Yogi.

Swami Vivekananda too has described his Master Sri Ramakrishna by various epithets in his famous *aratrika* hymn sung at the vesper service beginning with *khandana-bhava-bandhana*. There is one significant epithet *Tyagishwara*, the Lord of Renunciation, the Supreme King of renouncers. Sri Sarada Devi, the divine spouse and helpmate in Sri Ramakrishna's mission, reverentially and affectionately known as the Holy Mother, once commented

that this epithet of Sri Ramakrishna as the Lord of renunciation describes him the best.

It is a fascinating spiritual exercise to contemplate Sri Ramakrishna as *Tyagishwara* on the one hand and as *Yogeshwara* on the other hand and to discover how from these two pictures flow,

(i) his fundamental message of harmony of religions, studied in the light of Sri Sarada Devi's statement that he is the King of renouncers—*Tyagishwara*,

(ii) harmony of yogas of which he was the veritable embodiment, as emphasized by Swami Vivekananda⁴—*Yogeshwara*, and

(iii) the unique idea enunciated by Swami Vivekananda in expounding his ideal of universal religion, that harmony of yogas at the individual level naturally translates as harmony of religions at the collective level.

1. *Yogeshwara* Sri Ramakrishna

Swami Vivekananda was never tired of emphasizing the ideal of *yoga-samanvaya*, the harmony of the four Yogas—Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Raja-yoga—modelling on Sri Ramakrishna's personality which was a perfect blend and synthesis of these four yogas. While the emphatic message that he gave through the emblem of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, a creation of his spiritual and artistic genius, is well-known, his emphasis on looking upon Sri Ramakrishna as the veritable embodiment of the ideal of *yoga-*

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samanvaya and modelling one's life on this ideal—what he called 'casting oneself in the mould of Sri Ramakrishna'—needs to be highlighted.

Explaining the meaning of Sri Ramakrishna's advent on earth, Swamiji once said to his disciples, 'It is my opinion that Sri Ramakrishna was born to vivify all branches of art and culture in this country. Therefore this Math has to be built up in such a way that religion, work, learning, Jnana, and Bhakti may spread over the world from this centre. Be you my helpers in this work.'⁵ On the same occasion, Swamiji explained the meaning of the emblem or the symbol of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, in the following words:

The wavy waters in the picture are symbolic of Karma; the lotus, of Bhakti; and the rising sun, of Jnana. The encircling serpent is indicative of Yoga and the awakened Kundalini Shakti, while the sun in the picture stands for the Paramatman (Supreme Self). Therefore the idea of the picture is that by the union of Karma, Jnana, Bhakti, and Yoga, the vision of the Paramatman is obtained.⁶

He also said that a person who shows deficiency in any one of the above yogas has failed to cast himself in the mould of Sri Ramakrishna. In a letter to Sri Pramadas Mitra, he writes that Sri Ramakrishna 'laid down his life after having attained to superhuman heights of Jnana, Bhakti, Love, and powers, and after having practised for forty years stern renunciation, non-attachment, holiness, and great austerities'. He unequivocally wrote in the Rules and Regulations for the monastic Order at Belur Math:

Such a unique personality, such a synthesis of the utmost of Jnana, Yoga, Bhakti and Karma, has never before appeared among mankind. The life of Sri Ramakrishna proves that the greatest

breadth, the highest catholicity and the utmost intensity can exist side by side in the same individual, and that society also can be constructed like that, for society is nothing but an aggregate of individuals. He is the true disciple and follower of Sri Ramakrishna, whose character is perfect and all-sided like this. The formation of such a perfect character is the ideal of this age, and everyone should strive for that alone.⁷

The Bhagavad-Gita description of Sri Krishna as *Yogeshwara*⁸ could be interpreted in the light of the above statements of Swami Vivekananda: *Yogeshwara* or the Lord of Yoga is one who has achieved the harmonious blending, harmonizing and synthesizing of the four yogas of Jnana, Bhakti, Karma and Raja-yoga, and living as a veritable embodiment of this harmony and synthesis, he inspires humanity as a model for emulation, as a mould for others to cast their personalities in, as an ideal for others to follow. Swami Vivekananda felt that this harmony and synthesis were achieved first by Sri Krishna to some extent while it has attained its acme in the personality of Sri Ramakrishna:

As, in the olden times, it was the Lord alone, the deliverer of the Gita, who partially harmonized these apparently conflicting statements, so with a view to completely settling this dispute, immensely magnified in the process of time, He Himself has come as Sri Ramakrishna. Therefore no one can truly understand the Vedas and Vedanta, unless one studies them in the light of the utterance of Sri Ramakrishna who first exemplified in his life and taught that these scriptural statements which appear to the cursory view as contradictory, are meant for different grades of aspirants and are arranged in the order of evolution. The whole world will undoubtedly forget its fights and disputes and be united in a fraternal tie in religious and other matters as a consequence of these teachings.⁹

The harmony of yogas blends the two apparently contradictory characteristics of human life, namely, depth and breadth or intensity and extensity. Intensity is usually characterized by narrowness while extensity is marked by shallowness. A harmonious blend of intensity and extensity, 'deep as the ocean and broad as the sky'¹⁰ is an achievement in human evolution that marks the acme that comes through *yoga-samanwaya*. Swami Vivekananda placed Sri Ramakrishna's personality as such an ideal of harmony and synthesis and emphatically stated that he alone is a true follower of Sri Ramakrishna who has or is trying to similarly harmonize the four yogas in his own life.

2. Tyagishwara Sri Ramakrishna

Tyaga literally means to give up, to renounce. The Gita defines *tyaga* as the giving up of the fruits of all actions [and surrendering them to the Supreme Being]. Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly emphasized that nothing can be achieved in spiritual life without giving up worldly attachments. He was particularly targeting what he called *kamini, kanchana*—lust and greed—which according to him were the greatest enemies of spiritual progress and of higher attainments in spiritual life. While this part of his teachings is only too well known, it is relatively less known that he laid equal emphasis on the giving up of narrow and one-sided conception of the Supreme Godhead—what he called *matuar-buddhi*—and limiting the Infinitude of the Supreme Being by restricting the Unlimitedness through one's own little evaluative understanding or limited intellect. It was to the eternal glory of Swami Vivekananda to have clearly pointed this out:

If there is anything which Sri Ramakrishna has urged us to give up as carefully as lust and wealth, it is the limiting of the infinitude of God

by circumscribing it within narrow bounds. Whoever, therefore, will try to limit the infinite ideals of Sri Ramakrishna in that way, will go against him and be his enemy.¹¹

In his own characteristic style, Swamiji used such strong language to condemn this one-sided tendency of the little human intellect arrogating to itself a complete understanding of the Ultimate Reality by measuring it with its little yardstick of bias and prejudice.

Any true enquirer into Truth even in the field of science feels the same way: the vastness and the majesty of Nature overwhelms the scientist's consciousness and his analytical faculties are flabbergasted into stunning silence. As Albert Einstein put it:

My religion consists of a humble adoration of an Illimitable Intelligence which our dull faculties can comprehend only in the most primitive terms.

And again,

The most sublime and most beautiful emotion one could feel is that of the mystical. It is truly the sower of science. He who is a stranger to this emotion, who can no longer stand in rapt awe, is as good as dead. To know what is Impenetrable really exists manifesting Itself as the Highest Wisdom and the most Radiant Beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in the most primitive forms, this intuition, this awareness, is at the core of religious and mystical consciousness. This cosmic spiritual consciousness is the mainspring of all scientific research.¹²

When the awareness of the Infinitude of the Ultimate Reality and its Incomprehensibility by the human mind impinge on one's consciousness the little mind dissolves in that Vastness and loses its individuality. True spirituality and true religion are born with this awareness. With this dissolution of the individuality, individual predilections, bias, pre-

judice, notions of what the Ultimate Reality or God is like, also get dissolved. This results in the spontaneous renunciation or *tyaga* of one's mental map of God and His true nature. This was why Sri Ramakrishna emphasized the importance of renunciation of any definitive conception or opinion of what God or the Ultimate Reality is like and taught humanity to give up the tendency to cling or hang on to this conception as the only true conception to the exclusion of any other. He termed this narrow-minded, prejudicial, biased approach as *matuar-buddhi* and taught that the renunciation of this kind of *matuar-buddhi* is as much important as the attachment to lust and greed.

From this kind of renunciation flows the true *dharma samanvaya* or harmony of religious ideas, for any type of religious intolerance has at its root the tendency to cling to one particular conception of God or the Ultimate Reality to the exclusion of any other. This results in the fond clinging to one's pet conception to the rejection of equally valid conceptions of others.

The uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna's mind endowed with the unique capacity to move from one conception of God to another with absolute ease, thus moving from the practice of one religion to another with ease and joy, has its ultimate roots in his spirit of renunciation—not the usual type of *tyaga* that is visible and tangible, like his renunciation of lust and wealth—but that renunciation which is subtle. The subtlest type of renunciation takes place not at the *sthula* (gross) level, not even at the *sukshma* (subtle) level, but at the *karana* (causal) level. This is dramatically demonstrated by Sri Ramakrishna's 'cutting' the luminous form of his most beloved *Ishta Devata* (Chosen Deity) by the 'sword of knowledge' when his mind was passionately

pursuing the Ultimate Advaitic (non-dual) Truth. To be able to renounce the luminous and beautiful divine form of his most beloved Mother in the pursuit of the Infinite formless Advaitic Reality is renunciation at the *karana* (causal) level. This was an extraordinary and unique characteristic of Sri Ramakrishna's mind.

Again, when he was performing the Islam sadhana, all the Hindu ideas, Hindu bias, Hindu prejudices, Hindu conceptions, vanished from his mind. They were spontaneously renounced, and he assiduously pursued the Islamic sadhana, assuming all the Islamic ideas, Islamic bias, Islamic predilections, etc, in matters concerning not only sadhana, but also in manners, dress, food, etc. After attaining the Ultimate Truth according to Islam, all these ideas got renounced spontaneously and naturally. And he came back to his Hindu frame of mind, remaining as before as the blissful child of the Divine Mother by which name he was fond of calling the Ultimate Reality.

This constitutional disinclination to hang on and stick to one set of ideas about the Ultimate Reality, which is described as renunciation at the subtlest level of consciousness, is thus at the root of Sri Ramakrishna's practice of religious harmony, which he did not practise on purpose. This is the profound significance of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's simple statement that Sri Ramakrishna did not practice religious harmony as a premeditated attempt to prove the truth of all religions, but went through various types of practices of different religions in his spontaneous urge to 'taste' the bliss of God in ever so many ways. He himself jocularly said he was a 'glutton' in the spiritual field, never satisfied and never satiated with countless ways of 'tasting' the Reality. Sri Aurobindo, himself a great mystic

of the modern times, once remarked that Sri Ramakrishna seized the Kingdom of God with violence as it were.¹³

Christian mystics call Jesus the Christ as the 'Hound of Heaven' meaning thereby that He 'violently' seizes the devoted souls and raises their consciousness to higher and higher levels. In Sri Ramakrishna's case this epithet could be applied both with regard to his 'violently' storming the citadel of God like one mad with divine frenzy as well as his 'aggressively' seizing his devotees and catapulting them into subtler realms of spirituality by his divine power of raising the inner consciousness of individual souls.

At the root of all this, as mentioned earlier, is his tremendous power of renunciation. The subtlest manifestation of his renunciation is his natural, spontaneous, unpremeditated capacity to renounce his ideas, his bias, his predilections, his notions, his pet conceptions about the Supreme Reality or God. It was his unique capacity, what we called earlier as the 'constitutional disinclination' to be circumscribed, bound, imprisoned, caught by, entrenched in any system or description of God, but freely swim and float in the infinite ocean of God-awareness as a huge fish swims joyfully in the ocean, unhindered and uninhibited by the constraints of thought patterns which we call the various religions of the world.

The simple statement of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, that renunciation was his ornament and that his achievement of religious harmony is not a premeditated act of a sadhaka or religious aspirant, shows that the religious harmony that Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated visibly and tangibly in his life flowed as a corollary from his spontaneous and supreme renunciation. Hence the epithet *Tyagishwara*, the King of renouncers, that

Swami Vivekananda used about Sri Ramakrishna in his famous *aratrika* hymn.

Sri Ramakrishna as Yogeshwara-Tyagishwara in one

Yogeshwara, the Master Yogi, is one who has harmoniously combined in his personality all the four yogas or paths to the Supreme Reality. Swami Vivekananda's assertion about Sri Ramakrishna's unique personality with a beautiful blend of all the four yogas has already been quoted above.

Swamiji also stated emphatically that if India wants to rise, it should have the spiritual Ideal bright before its eyes and Sri Ramakrishna's personality is one such embodiment of the spiritual Ideal. Swamiji wanted that the country should 'rally enthusiastically' around Sri Ramakrishna and his unique personality which is a blend of all the four yogas. Swamiji portrayed this aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's personality in the form of the emblem of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission—a gift of his artistic and spiritual genius. Swamiji also discovered a hidden connection between the harmony of yogas and the harmony of religions. Talking about his ideal of a universal religion, Swamiji says:¹⁴

That plan alone is practical which does not destroy the individuality of any man in religion and at the same time shows him a point of union with all others. But so far, all the plans of religious harmony that have been tried, while proposing to take in all the various views of religion, have, in practice, tried to bind them all down to a few doctrines, and so have produced more new sects, fighting, struggling, and pushing against each other.

I have also my little plan. I do not know whether it will work or not, and I want to present it to you for discussion. . . . In society we see so many different natures. There are thousands and

thousands of varieties of minds and inclinations. A thorough generalisation of them is impossible, but for our practical purpose it is sufficient to have them characterised into four classes.

First, there is the active man, the worker; he wants to work, and there is tremendous energy in his muscles and his nerves. His aim is to work—to build hospitals, do charitable deeds, make streets, to plan and to organise.

Then there is the emotional man who loves the sublime and the beautiful to an excessive degree. He loves to think of the beautiful, to enjoy the aesthetic side of nature, and adore Love and the God of Love. He loves with his whole heart the great souls of all times, the prophets of religions, and the Incarnations of God on earth; he does not care whether reason can or cannot prove that Christ or Buddha existed; he does not care for the exact date when the Sermon on the Mount was preached, or for the exact moment of Krishna's birth; what he cares for is their personalities, their lovable figures. Such is his ideal. This is the nature of the lover, the emotional man.

Then, there is the mystic whose mind wants to analyse its own self, to understand the workings of the human mind, what the forces are that are working inside, and how to know, manipulate, and obtain control over them. This is the mystical mind.

Then, there is the philosopher who wants to weigh everything and use his intellect even beyond the possibilities of all human philosophy.

Now, a religion, to satisfy the largest proportion of mankind, must be able to supply food for all these various types of minds; and where this capability is wanting, the existing sects all become one-sided. . . . What I want to propagate is a religion that will be equally acceptable to all minds; it must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic, and equally conducive to action. . . . To become harmoniously

balanced in all these four directions is my ideal of religion.

And this religion is attained by what we, in India, call Yoga—union. To the worker, it is union between men and the whole of humanity; to the mystic, between his lower and Higher Self; to the lover, union between himself and the God of Love; and to the philosopher, it is the union of all existence. This is what is meant by Yoga. This is a Sanskrit term, and these four divisions of Yoga have in Sanskrit different name. The man who seeks after this kind of union is called a Yogi. The worker is called the Karma-Yogi. He who seeks the union through love is called the Bhakti-Yogi. He who seeks it through mysticism is called the Raja-Yogi. And he who seeks it through philosophy is called the Jnana-Yogi. So this word Yogi comprises them all.

Now, read with Swami Vivekananda's another discovery obtained through a unique spiritual experience in the Himalayas, namely, the identity of the microcosm and macrocosm, this effectively means that *yoga-samanvaya* and *dharma-samanvaya* are the two sides of the same coin, complementary to each other. Thus, *Yogeshwara-Ramakrishna* (the embodiment of *yoga-samanvaya*) and *Tyagishwara-Ramakrishna* (the embodiment of *dharma-samanvaya*) are the complementary aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's unique personality. Swamiji wanted a new world Order, a new society, to arise out of such harmony.

He said:¹⁵

Such a unique personality, such a synthesis of the utmost of Jnana, Yoga, Bhakti and Karma, has never before appeared among mankind. The life of Sri Ramakrishna proves that the greatest breadth, the highest catholicity and the utmost intensity can exist side by side in the same individual, and that society also can be constructed like that, for society is nothing but an aggregate of individuals.

Conclusion

This, according to Swami Vivekananda, is the Ideal of the modern age. The *Tyagishwara-Yogeshwara* Ramakrishna is the beacon light showing the way to the realization of this unique Ideal.

In this age of globalization and liberalization, the panic-stricken world, crying for peace and harmony, will do well to listen to

this message of *yoga-samanvaya* and *dharma-samanvaya* emanating from the Divine Pied Piper.

Here is *Yogeshwara-Tyagishwara* Ramakrishna, singing the song of harmony and synthesis, crying hallelujah in sheer joy inviting humankind to 'rejoice and be exceedingly glad' as Jesus the Christ called forth. A Master Yogi calls forth—any listeners! □



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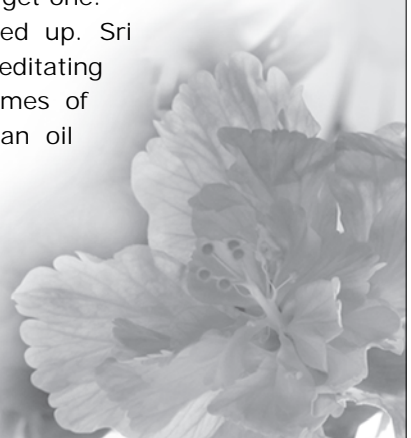
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A Yogi's Eyes

It was almost dusk. The Master said to me: 'The mind of the yogi is always fixed on God, always absorbed in the Self. You can recognize such a person by merely looking at him. His eyes are wide open, with an aimless look, like the eyes of a mother bird hatching her eggs. Her entire mind is fixed on those eggs, so there is a vacant look in her eyes. Can you show me such a picture?' I said, 'I shall try to get one.'

As evening came on, the temples were lighted up. Sri Ramakrishna was seated on his small couch, meditating on the Divine Mother. Then he chanted the names of God. Incense was burned in the room, where an oil lamp had been lighted. Sounds of conch shells and gongs came floating in the air as the evening worship began in the temple of Kali. The light of the moon flooded all the quarters.

—Mahendra Nath Gupta,
Ramakrishna As We Saw Him, p.296



Sri Ramakrishna's Legacy of Joyful Living

SUDESH

Only a bhakta [devotee] knows the joy of living a God-centred life. Casting his burden on the Divine, he lives joyfully, free of anxieties and cares of worldly life, like a child who plays happily in its mother's lap. Those who have not tasted this joy and are fettered by worldly life may say: 'Day and night these people speak about God. They are crazy. . . but. . . how we enjoy pleasure—money, honour, the senses!'¹

The Need for Renunciation

Sri Ramakrishna distinctly perceived that the chief bar to God-vision was man's clinging to the world of senses, to lust and greed. He said that none could taste divine bliss without giving up animal feeling. Of all human relations none is so pure and innocent, none so selfless and sweet as the relation of a child to its mother. The easiest way to escape from carnal passion was to know woman as mother—as the manifestation of Divine Motherhood. He himself could not see even his own wife in any other light. He taught that it was Shakti which played both as *vidya* and *avidya*—playing as the chaste wife as also the prostitute, in different garbs. By using the sword of discrimination the aspirant should vanquish his craving for 'gold' as he taught by his own example. Taking a lump of clay in one hand and a gold coin in the other he discriminated that both being matter could

never take one beyond it. Being themselves finite, these could never lead one to the infinite and then, he threw them both in the Ganges.

Another great obstacle in the path of spirituality was egotism. Where was the room for God in the mind of a person who was obsessed with the idea of 'I' and 'mine'; 'my house', 'my property', 'my family', who was always boasting—I am the son of so-and-so, I am a scholar, I am so charitable and religious? Sri Ramakrishna called it 'unripe ego', the outcome of ignorance. How difficult it is to get rid of this treacherous foe! Like the *ashwatha* tree, however often it might be cut, new shoots spring up again and again.

Cultivating Bhakti

One must not cherish any desires, said Sri Ramakrishna. Otherwise, an aspirant may practice spiritual disciplines, but the water of His grace would leak through the 'holes'. Moreover, worries were inevitable with enjoyment. Only when the 'fish' dropped from the kite's beak, it was no longer tormented by a flock of crows. But could man renounce by mere will? That is why Thakur prescribed the path of Bhakti, intense love for God. Through Bhakti senses come under control spontaneously. His 'I' and 'mine' change places with 'Thou' and 'Thine'. The devotee regards himself as God's servant, devotee or child.

□ A devotee from Ambala, Sudesh regularly contributes inspiring articles to *The Vedanta Kesari*.

Keeping a trace of 'ripe ego' he lives joyfully, enjoying the sweetness of God.

A Bhakta and a worldly-man: Juxtaposed

Longing for a vision of God, a bhakta weeps and prays, 'O God, reveal Thyself to me.' Tears wash away the dirt and his purified soul is drawn to God—the Source of all virtues. All the tears of a worldly man, on the other hand, are shed for wife, children and wealth. Little does he realize that those whom he considers his nearest and dearest would desert him in his dying hour, that God alone was his Sole support and Abode of rest.

Bound souls perform those very actions which bring them untold miseries. A couple may get into debt at the time of marriage of their daughter. But lo! They go on having children and get entangled in the thorny bushes of the world. Another couple, devoted to God, after the birth of one or two children live a celibate life. They pray to God to make their activities less and less and to keep their minds fixed at His Lotus Feet.

Body and wealth are impermanent. This moment the body is and the next moment it may not be. Yet, the worldly-minded runs about seeking luxuries and creature comforts. But he may not live to enjoy his wealth or fall a victim to various diseases. All his money may be squandered in paying the doctor's bills, by his children's extravagance, in litigation or robbed by thieves. A bhakta, on the other hand, lives contented with what comes of its own accord. Thakur says that if a man becomes so inebriated with love of God that he cannot think of providing for his family, forgets even his body which is so dear to all, God becomes responsible for him and provides for his family and everything he needs for his sadhana.

The popular notion is that a bhakta becomes self-centred and insensitive to others'

sorrows, being concerned with his own emancipation. But it is the worldly man who is only concerned about hunger and thirst, pleasure and pain of his immediate family. A bhakta feels deeply for the miseries of all. Seeing the One Divine Presence in all, he can identify himself with the afflictions of others and prays to God for the welfare of whole humanity. If a worldly man has been insulted or cheated by someone how much he shouts and curses: 'May such and such a thing befall on you. How dare you do it to me? Don't you know who I am?' A bhakta in similar situation remains tranquil and even sympathetic towards the offender thinking: 'No doubt God abides in the hearts of all, yet all are at a different stage of evolution. The poor man is doing it out of ignorance.'

In disease, grief and bereavement, a worldly man is completely shattered. He who never thought of God now blames Him, 'O God, why of all the people, have you done it to me?' But in all physical and mental afflictions a devotee remains un-nerved and unruffled. Miseries of the world touch him not, like an anvil which gets blows constantly but remains unaffected. He bears all troubles and tribulations with equanimity, knowing that his Divine beloved was just at his back, protecting him in all crises. Said Ramakrishna:

God's devotees have nothing to fear. They are his own. He always stands by them. Once Duryodhana and his brothers were imprisoned by the gandharvas. It was Yudhishtira who freed them. Yudhishtira said, 'If our relatives are placed in such a plight, then it is our disgrace.'²

Firmly believing that in happiness and misery, in health and disease, the Lord was playing with him, he surrenders himself to His will and bears everything cheerfully. This is the core of self-surrender.

Blinded by impenetrable curtain of Maya, a worldly man remains confined in his shell of narrowness and selfishness. Not a ray of light enters his soul. While a Bhakta—having a glimpse of the infinite field Beyond through the ‘hole’—roams about freely, basking in the Light of His Love, Knowledge and Bliss.

A worldly man is besides himself with joy of ‘*kamini kanchan*’, name and fame, power and pelf. Soon he is disillusioned from this ‘framework of illusion’. A bhakta who thirsts only for a vision of God cares nothing for the treasures of heaven. The body of the most beautiful woman appears to him as ashes from funeral pyre. This very world becomes to him a ‘mansion of mirth’ where he can sport and make merry with God. How infinitely superior is the joy of communion with God to the fleeting pleasures of the world!

Joy of Meditation

‘Higher than worship is japa, and higher than japa is meditation,’³ said Sri Ramakrishna. Meditation is turning the mind inward and fixing it on God in the silence of one’s soul, letting no thought or desire intrude. The mind must flow continuously as a stream of oil in the contemplation of God.

Meditation becomes effective to the extent the mind is purified of its dross, bad impressions and samskaras. How could the mind if immersed in worldliness, without any higher vision be concentrated on a higher Ideal?

The aspirant can meditate on formless God or on God with Form. But to mediate on formless God he must wipe out all that he sees or hears and contemplate on the nature of his Inner Self. He may find it extremely difficult to keep the mind fixed on the Formless, Abstract Reality without having some spiritual content to meditate upon.

Moreover, in Kaliyuga, man is totally dependent on food for life. How could he, like rishis of old, spend the whole day meditating on Brahman as his inner Consciousness and subsist only on a little fruit and roots? That is why Sri Ramakrishna told the devotees to meditate on the Form, Name or Divine Lila and Attributes of their Chosen Deity, particularly during the primary stages.

The realisation of the Absolute also comes through the realization of Personal God Who is only a manifestation of the transcendental Reality. Sri Ramakrishna practised each of the five moods of spiritual love. Through one-pointed meditation and deep concentration his mind merged absolutely in the object of his love. The one who meditated became identified with the Deity of his meditation, experienced perfect unity and realized the non-dual Reality.

Until a man’s spiritual consciousness is aroused, his mind dwells in the three lower planes—at the navel, the organ of generation and the organ of evacuation. Spiritual consciousness cannot be aroused without the awakening of Kundalini. In every man Mother Kundalini—the Primordial Power—the Power of Shiva, dwells in the Muladhara at the bottom of spinal column, like a serpent coiled in sleep.

When through intense spiritual discipline, Kundalini is awakened, the sadhaka has the first glimpse of spiritual consciousness. His mental gaze turns upwards to higher centres. The darkness of his heart is scattered. As his meditation becomes deeper and consciousness rises higher he may see divine light or have a vision of his *Ishta Deva*, ‘bright with unspeakable beauty, adorned with holiness, wisdom and truth.’ When his consciousness rises to the Sahasrara, the thousand-petalled lotus in the head—the dwelling place of Shiva the

Absolute, he loses all consciousness of the world and goes into samadhi. His mind, life and soul, like the 'salt doll' get merged in the Ocean of *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. His limited 'I' expands to become the '*Universal I*'. The individual soul and Supreme Soul become one. The jiva goes beyond the realm of maya. The body falls down in twenty-one days, never to return to the dark and perilous sea of the world. He attains as Swami Vivekananda says: 'Immortal life un-lived; / Eternal death unmourned.'⁴

Joy-Filled Child of Kali

For centuries Divine Mother Kali has been worshipped in Bengal. The songs of mystic poets like Ramprasad and Kamla-kanta have popularised the worship of Kali among Bengali masses. With the advent of Sri Ramakrishna—'this ecstatic, mysterious manifestation of the Mother' says Lex Hixon,

There has been a global awakening to the Reality of Mother as the path to global humanitarian civilization that is seamless... in the West everyone is being drawn to the teaching of God as Mother . . . Sri Ramakrishna and Mahakali are not limited cultural forms. She is Reality Itself. We cannot say, 'Sri Ramakrishna was just a Vendantin; all he practised was *ahambrahmasmi*'. No. He was and is a manifestation of Mahakali. . . This wonderful, gentle, yet powerful presence of the Mother is already permeating the world.⁵

The songs of Ramprasad and Kamla-kanta Sri Ramakrishna would sing for hours, in the fond hope that Mother would reveal Herself to him as She had done to Her poet children of yore. Nay! He did not just sing those songs, he 'lived' them, as it were, spontaneously manifesting the particular aspect or form of Mother as expressed in the song. Many a time the devotees saw him

reeling and staggering, his eyes red and words indistinct like one drunk, on account of divine bliss, so much so that they had to hold him and help him walk, manifesting the reeling Form of Kali as in the song: Drunk with a draught of celestial wine, She reels and yet She does not fall.⁶

Even at the mention of intoxicants like 'hemp', 'wine', etc., he became intoxicated by their association with the inebriation of divine bliss.

While singing kirtan, or descending from samadhi, he used to dance in an exuberance of Joy: sometimes like a mad elephant, sometimes like a fish swimming about in great delight and sometimes with the stride of a lion manifesting the dancing Form of Kali: O Kali, my Mother full of Bliss! Enchantress of the almighty Shiva!

In thy delirious joy Thou dancest, clapping Thy hands together⁷

Later the devotees said that his words might fade from the memory but who could forget his beautiful dancing form. 'It appeared as if the dance was the dynamic bodily expression of the surge of Bliss, the Reality of Brahman, which the Master was experiencing within.'⁸

Swami Saradananda, a monastic direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, said:

Although She kept him encased in a body, She always kept his mind keyed to a lofty pitch, a high state of Oneness. The identification was so intimate and natural that whoever saw him felt that the Mother was the Son and the Son, the Mother; both were Consciousness.⁹

Completely identified with Mother, yet Sri Ramakrishna lived as a son inviting everyone, all over the world to Mother's Divine Feast; to lead us all to Mother's realm of Indivisible Light and Everlasting JOY. He has left a rich legacy of joyful living for all—the

monk and the householder, the scholar and the ignorant, for peoples of all nations. And it is inexhaustible. All are free to take to their fill and yet it remains full to the brim. Says a

Bengali song: *Ramakrishna bole, nao re tule, jar jato hoi prayojan* ['Sing the Name of Ramakrishna, take whatever you take, as much as you can']. □



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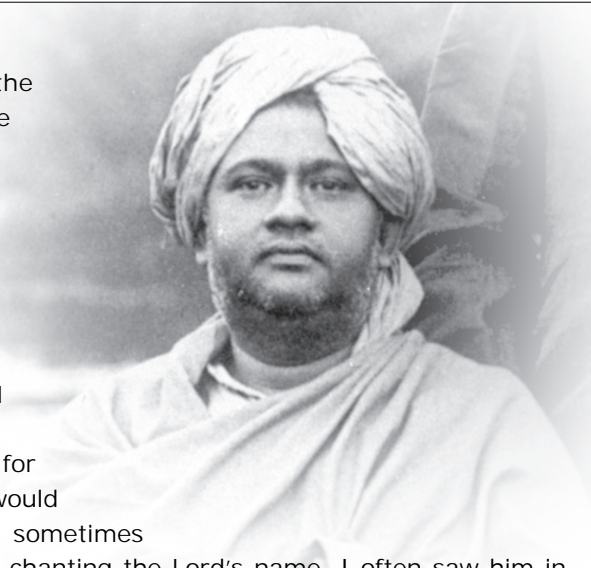
Living with Sri Ramakrishna

Ah, how joyfully we lived with the Master at Dakshineswar! Sometimes we would be convulsed with side-splitting laughter by his humour and wit. What we cannot now experience by meditation, we then attained automatically. If my mind went astray even a little, he would understand it from my appearance and would pass his hand over my chest, setting my mind right. And how free I was with him!

Usually Sri Ramakrishna never slept for more than an hour or so at night. He would pass the night sometimes in samadhi, sometimes singing devotional songs, and sometimes chanting the Lord's name. I often saw him in Samadhi for an hour or more. In that state he could not talk in spite of repeated efforts. Regaining outer consciousness, he would say: 'Look. When I am in Samadhi I want to tell you my experiences, but at that time I lose my power of speech.' After Samadhi, he used to mutter something. It seemed to me that he was talking with somebody. I heard that in earlier years the Master stayed in Samadhi most of the time.

The temple garden of Dakshineswar which Rasmani has built, provided everything Sri Ramakrishna needed for practicing sadhana. If you have true faith, love, and, devotion, God will provide everything you need.

—**Swami Brahmananda**, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna
[*Ramakrishna As We Saw Him*, p.74]





*An archival photo of Panchavati in Dakshineswar temple complex,
the scene of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual practices*

Thoughts on Ramakrishna Sadhana

WILLIAM PAGE

The Meaning of Sadhana

Sadhana means spiritual discipline or religious practice. It refers to any activity or group of activities people engage in when they are trying to get closer to whatever they regard as ultimate reality. In the Vedantic tradition, this means achieving heightened consciousness of a personal deity or the impersonal Brahman. Such heightened consciousness may eventually lead to mystical experiences or varying degrees of ecstasy. The ultimate goal is *vijnana*, seeing God in everything.

When we come to the term *Ramakrishna sadhana*, there are two possible interpretations. The first refers to the religious practices Sri Ramakrishna followed when he was trying to realize God. These are recorded in detail in the compilations of his teachings and the biographical accounts that have been written about him, most notably *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*¹ and *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lila-prasanga*.² They are well-known, easily available, and require no further elaboration.

The second interpretation refers to the religious practices that people follow when they undertake to realize Sri Ramakrishna as their Chosen Ideal.

Objections to the Ramakrishna 'Cult'

I have heard that some people object to the worship of Sri Ramakrishna as a personal deity. They say he never wanted people to

worship him, and object to the idea of building a 'cult' around him. But it is recorded that when he was in an exalted mood, he accepted people's worship without objecting.³ We have to keep in mind a statement he once made: 'Here (i.e., within him) are two personalities. One is She [the Divine Mother], and the other is Her devotee.'⁴

The people who object to worshipping Sri Ramakrishna usually prefer to emphasize the universal and more impersonal aspects of Vedanta. They tend to favour Jnana over Bhakti. But Vedanta is broad and all-inclusive. It embraces both Jnana and Bhakti—and everything between the two and beyond the two.

Those who like to contemplate the universal Oneness are encouraged to do so, and those who like to worship a personal deity are also encouraged to do so. There should not be any conflict between them. It is a fundamental principle of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that everyone should follow his own path, but respect other paths—and bear in mind that, at the end of the journey, all paths converge.

Hinduism embraces many different *sampradayas*, which some may call cults: the cult of Krishna, the cult of Shiva, the cult of Rama, the cult of Kali, and so on. God manifests himself through innumerable forms, and can be worshiped through any and all of them. The more the merrier! If anybody deserves to be added to the list, it's Sri Ramakrishna. As



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Max Muller pointedly observed: 'Whom else should we worship, if not such as he?'

Some people use the word *cult* as a derogatory put-down to demean any religious group or viewpoint they do not agree with. But since every religion focuses on a particular object of worship, you could call any religion a cult. You can call the worship of Sri Ramakrishna a cult if you want to—but do not act as if it's a dirty word.

Ramakrishna Sadhana

What then are the religious practices that aim at realizing Sri Ramakrishna as a personal deity? They include all the sadhanas that he followed, and also all the sadhanas he taught: worship, prayer, japa, meditation, singing bhajans, dancing kirtans, studying scriptures, discussing religious topics, keeping holy company, going on pilgrimages. And finally there is the practice that Swami Vivekananda emphasized: serving God in others. This is an outward-directed ideal that not only helps others, but prevents religious practice from degenerating, as it sometimes does, into a narrow, self-centred narcissism.

A comprehensive Ramakrishna sadhana would include all these practices and focus them on Sri Ramakrishna. Devotees may choose to emphasize some of them more than others. They may also discover new practices that they can add to the list. Obviously they should think about Sri Ramakrishna as much as possible, and do their best to keep him always in mind.

Some people like to engage in imaginary dialogues with him. This can be a useful way of developing one's own thinking. It can also lead to some hilarious exchanges—just try it, and you will see. Just looking at his picture for long periods of time can also be beneficial. Wearing an amulet bearing his image will

remind us of him each time we look at it. The same goes for keeping various pictures of him around us: in our room, on the walls, on shelves and tables. Sri Ramakrishna himself kept pictures of gods and goddesses on the walls of his room.

Some people like to carry Sri Ramakrishna's picture with them, and therein lies a tale. I used to work in Saudi Arabia, where Islam is the only religion people are allowed to practice openly. Images of deities from other religions are prohibited: if the police find one, they confiscate it.

Once, while I was going through customs, the inspecting official noticed the little box I carry Sri Ramakrishna's picture in and opened it. 'Who is this?' he demanded to know. 'Your grandfather?'

I hesitated. I did not want to lie, but I did not want him to confiscate the picture, either. So I said, 'Not exactly'.

'Whose photo, then?'

I thought hard. My guru was Swami Akhilananda, his guru was Swami Brahmananda, and Swami Brahmananda's guru was Sri Ramakrishna. I did some quick calculating and announced, 'This man is my great-grandfather'.

He grunted and waved me on.

Burning Devotion, the Primary Need

The central requirement of all these practices is burning devotion. We can pray till our throats are sore, do japa till our fingers are callused, meditate till our legs are frozen in the cross-legged position—but if we lack that inner fire, we won't get anywhere. Obviously it is impossible for the average devotee to generate the degree of passionate intensity that fueled Sri Ramakrishna's drive for realisation. But at least we can try. He himself assured us that if we can practice one-sixteenth of what

he taught us, it will suffice. And then, we rely on his grace. He is always here to help us.

A Suggestion: Weekend Retreats

There is one practice that Sri Ramakrishna recommended that I suspect is largely neglected in the modern world. He often advised householders to go into solitude whenever they could for a few days at a time. There they were to devote their time purely to spiritual practice.⁵ It would be beneficial for devotees if Vedanta centres and branches of the Ramakrishna Mission could facilitate this practice—or something similar—by sponsoring weekend retreats. They could be held maybe once a month, or once every two or three months, according to local needs. Maybe some centres are already doing that.

There is an objection to this, because retreats are conducted in groups, and Sri Ramakrishna emphasized solitude. But in one place he says the devotee may do his practice 'either in solitude or in the company of holy men.'⁶ A retreat would enable devotees to do their practice in the company of holy people—or at least in the company of people who are trying to become holy.

It is difficult for modern devotees to get away from their work for more than a weekend at a time—and sometimes not even that. But Sri Ramakrishna says, 'Whenever you have leisure, go into solitude for a day or two.'⁷ This suggests that even a single day can be helpful, although longer is obviously better. A beginning has to be made.

I can see some heads of centres (of Ramakrishna Order) shaking their heads and saying, 'Weekend retreats! Where are all these people going to sleep? How are we going to feed them?' Some centres are set up for this, others aren't. But the idea can be adapted to local conditions.

You do not have room for so many people to sleep? In urban centres, if devotees live nearby, have them start the retreat Saturday morning, go home at night, and return Sunday morning. To maintain the spiritual mood and keep them in the 'retreat mode', advise them not to watch TV or play with any of their techno-toys while they are at home. No drinking or smoking, either, and no gossip or naughty language.

You cannot feed so many people? In India, let them bring their own tiffin, or order tiffin to be delivered. In the West, let them bring box lunches. In centres that are blessed with such amenities, phone out for pizzas, and let each devotee pay for his own.

If weekend retreats still are not practical, why not try one-day retreats? The Singapore centre recently held a one-day retreat that was very successful, and had people clamouring for more. Sunday would normally be the most convenient day; or a holiday.

Obviously you can not make an awful lot of spiritual progress in a single day, or even in a weekend. But every little bit helps. 'Drop by drop', the Buddha says, 'even a great cistern is finally filled by falling drops of water. Likewise, the wise man, gathering little by little, fills himself with good.'⁸ The cumulative effect of spiritual practice is sometimes unnoticeable; in some cases it does not become apparent until one is old.

People will ask, 'Well, what sort of activities should we provide during a retreat? Will not the monks have to work up some lectures? Will the devotees give presentations or performances?' Not necessarily. In Buddhist retreats held in Thailand, the emphasis is on meditation. The retreatants do vipassana meditation all day long, but with periodic breaks. When their legs get stiff from sitting, they do walking meditation. Talking is kept

at a minimum, especially between the sexes. Occasionally a monk may field questions, or deliver a little homily. Private interviews can also be arranged.

This format can easily be adapted to suit Vedantic predilections. Periods of meditation can be interspersed with prayers, group chanting, or the singing of bhajans. Maybe a kirtan or two to loosen up the limbs and inject

some jollity into the proceedings. A no-fun religion is no religion at all.

I know that many centres conduct longer retreats, usually during the summer. Maybe some are already holding one-day or weekend retreats; but those that aren't might want to think about it. They can be a useful addition to the spectrum of religious practices that constitute Ramakrishna sadhana. □



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Seeing God Face to Face

The story of Ramakrishna Paramahansa's life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face. No one can read the story of his life without being convinced that God alone is real and that all else is an illusion. Ramakrishna was a living embodiment of godliness. His sayings are not those of a mere learned man but they are pages from the Book of life. They are revelations of his own experiences. They, therefore, leave on the reader an impression which he cannot resist. In this age of skepticism Ramakrishna presents an example of a bright and living faith which gives solace to thousands of men and women who would otherwise have remained without spiritual light. Ramakrishna's life was an object-lesson in *ahimsa*. His love knew no limits, geographical or otherwise. May his divine love be an inspiration to all.

—Mahatma Gandhi



We must be bright and cheerful, long faces do not make religion. Religion should be the most joyful thing in the world, because it is the best.

—Swami Vivekananda, *CW*, 8.7

Sri Ramakrishna—the Embodiment of Scriptures

SWAMI VIRESHANANDA

The Importance of Scriptures

What is the importance of scriptures in the Hindu religion? Swami Vivekananda says in this respect,

There is not a book in India on religion which does not breathe this idea—Man must realise God, feel God, see God, talk to God. That is religion. The Indian atmosphere is full of stories of saintly persons having visions of God. Such doctrines form the basis of their religion; and all these ancient books and scriptures are the writings of persons who came into direct contact with spiritual facts. These books were not written for the intellect, nor can any reasoning understand them, because they have been written by men who saw the things of which they wrote, and they can be understood only by men who have raised themselves to the same height.¹

Scriptures are guidebooks. A spiritual aspirant takes the help of scriptures in order to find guidance in his journey towards God and also to ascertain the authenticity of his experiences. However, in Sri Ramakrishna's case, it was quite the opposite. He did not study the scriptures *before* he took up the spiritual disciplines nor was he concerned about the authenticity of his divine experiences. In the course of time, it became evident that it was his mystic visions that would give real validity to the age-old scriptures. Let us try to understand it through different perspectives.

The Backdrop

Sri Ramakrishna's personality is deeply rooted in Indian ethos. His ideas are not new to the Indian thinking. But what distinguishes Sri Ramakrishna from among the galaxy of great saints and savants is the perfect and authentic expression of Indian consciousness found in his personality. The Indian mind does not get satisfied with partial views on truth but craves for a harmonised and integrated expression of Reality. Sri Ramakrishna is the perfect illustration of such a spiritual aspiration and its fulfilment.

Several holy books and other allied literature, which come under the banner of Hinduism, attempt two things in general:

1. They record numerous experiences of saints and devotees of God.
2. Secondly, they try to uphold a particular argument of philosophy.

Another interesting aspect is that there is no rigidity in expressing one's viewpoint in earlier sacred books like the Vedas and the Upanishads. But in the later books, in order to systematise philosophical doctrines, there was a certain rigidity of thoughts. This led to bitter and long drawn dialectic conflicts. Although this process left a huge treasure of philosophical literature, which is considered to be the result of some of the finest brains in the world, it contributed little to the spiritual



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growth of the common mass. The situation arose when intellectual calibre began to receive precedence over mystical ability. This led to spiritual decline of the Hindu society in general. However, a galaxy of saints appeared from time to time and prevented this degradation by propagating spiritual values even among the lower strata of the society. But still in modern times, Hinduism suffered greatly due to the deluge of western thought and its materialistic influence.

At this critical juncture, what India needed was to re-assert its spiritual greatness. The need of the day was not to continue with the deliberations on the holy books but to have a living expression of the values taught in them. The spiritual visions and attainments described in the sacred books were to be established as true and authentic. In all, the scriptures were not only to be studied but also to be lived in one's life. This would bring authenticity to the religion and philosophy they proclaimed. Only this would have saved our religion and culture from near catastrophe.

Ironically, the man who took this mammoth task upon his shoulders was considered 'un-educated' for all secular purposes. It was not in his scheme of things to study and interpret the scriptures but to live a life where the truths enshrined. Here lies the wonderful ability of this God-man, Sri Ramakrishna, who shaped his life into a launch pad for the resurrection not only of the age-old spiritual values but also of the scriptures that embody them.

The Vedic and Vedantic Perspectives

For the sake of discussion, let us segregate *Vedas* and *Vedanta* here.

The term 'Vedanta' is used to denote Upanishads and the philosophy they contain. Though the Upanishads form an inseparable

part of the Vedas, their emphasis is quite different in content and purpose from the rest of the Vedic literature. The Samhita and Brahmana portions are usually ritualistic in nature while Aranyakas and Upanishads are philosophical and contemplative. The gradual metamorphosis from an extrovert propensity to an introvert temperament can be observed here. The significant factor is that this evolution is neither drastic nor antagonistic. The religion of the Vedas is not at all passive in nature but full of optimism and hope. A positive and dynamic attitude towards human life and its achievements—secular or spiritual—is clearly found in the Vedas and the Vedanta. Along with it, there is a celebration of life with all its ramifications. The search for knowledge of the unitary principle of the whole world identical with one's own personality, understanding of the world and human life in the right perspective, a strong desire to attain complete freedom from the limitations of worldly existence are some of the fundamental features of both, the Vedas and Vedanta.

In Sri Ramakrishna we find a harmonious expression of all the above qualities in their highest and noblest degree. Not only did he embody the true spirit of Vedas and Vedanta, he infused among his followers their essence through his teachings in an unequivocal style. Sri Ramakrishna's life represents a perfect and immaculate revival of the centuries old Vedic ideal, which is far more catholic and all-embracing than any philosophical theory that originated in India in the medieval period.

The Mystical Perspective

The Hindu scriptures give minute details about the mystical experiences of the great ones. Though varied in expressions and details, they are all supra-sensuous in nature.

In Sri Ramakrishna's life we find an actual demonstration of these experiences. It is fittingly declared by the great Sri Aurobindo that in Sri Ramakrishna the spiritual experiences of millions of saints who had gone before have been renewed and united. Indeed he had become a living testimony to the spiritual experiences recorded in the scriptures.

Another interesting factor is that mystical accounts found in the sacred books often appear to be contradictory. But in Sri Ramakrishna, they are perfectly harmonized. As a devotee, he had the visions of number of deities like Rama and Krishna after which, his mind rose to the highest realization of non-duality. Later, he was absorbed totally in the spiritual moods of a devout Muslim or a Christian also. Thus, varied expressions of mystical excellence were harmoniously blended in the universal personality of Sri Ramakrishna. Through this achievement, Sri Ramakrishna not only brought about harmony of mystical experiences, but also of the scriptures that record them.

The Philosophical Perspective

Scriptures are also the repositories of great philosophical view-points prevalent at the time. In Veda and Vedanta, different philosophical arguments are put forth but no attempt is made to reconcile them leading to a single conclusion. Even in a single work, we find different kinds of statements with regard to the nature of *man, God and the world* which form the three fundamental principles of any philosophical system. This catholicity, in the course of time paved way for numerous systems of philosophy with their firmly held views and bitterly fought arguments. Hinduism, a cluster of sects professing different philosophies, is always considered accommodative and in Sri Ramakrishna, the embodi-

ment of Universalism, we find a comprehensive picture of the Sanatana Dharma.

Hence, it can safely be said that it is Sri Ramakrishna alone, who comes very close to the liberal philosophical perspective of the Vedic Rishis. The reason for such an assumption is that he did not profess any exclusive opinion on philosophical matters. His varied mystic revelations and intellectual broad-mindedness not only brought all such view-points into one common fold but also put a stamp of authenticity on each and every one of them. He went beyond the idea of 'toleration' to prove that different religious ideas, in their essence, are uniformly true.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, the numerous philosophical arguments found in the scriptures are but different explanations of the same Reality, which he vehemently asserts to be one and the same. These accounts need not breed rivalry though apparently contradictory to one another. A wonderful fact that emerges from this discussion is that according to Sri Ramakrishna, even contradictory ideas do have relevance and legitimacy when seen from a higher standpoint. Sri Ramakrishna's perspective in this regard is universal and all embracing. Though this goes against the traditional concept of *ekavakyata* or reconciliation of scriptural text, it is in tune with the purpose and objective of the ancient scriptures.

The Theological Perspective

Theology is defined as the study of God, His nature, attributes, character, abilities, and revelation and so on. In the Indian context, it can be equated with mythology found in the Puranas and other allied literature. The most significant feature we find in these sacred books is the concept of *Avatars*.

Though *Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavata* and other scriptures describe the traditional view

of *Avataras* in detail, the whole credit of interpreting its historical evolution and significance in modern period goes to Swami Saradananda's *magnum opus*, *Sri Ramakrishna Leela Prasanga*. He achieved the mammoth task of showing in a precise manner how the old scriptural ideal of *Avatara* is embodied in all its glory and power in the personality of Sri Ramakrishna. In his great work, Swami Saradananda not only proves how the qualities of an *Avatara* explained in our scriptures found a living and vivid expression in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, but also points out how in his life, the Master exhibited some unique characteristics, not found in earlier incarnations. Sri Ramakrishna undoubtedly fulfils all the traditional requirements of an *Avatara* enshrined in our scriptures.

The Sadhana Perspective

The spiritual practices undertaken by Sri Ramakrishna are not new to the Hindu tradition. But the manner in which they are put into actual application, the intensity of involvement and effort therein, the ease with which the Master achieved perfection in each of them—all these features have no parallels.

As in the case of philosophy and theology, the Hindu scriptures teach numerous methods of sadhanas for different sections of spiritual aspirants. The sadhana prescribed for a particular individual is based on his temperament and ability. The Upanishads, particularly the *Chandogya Upanishad*, teach different types of *Upasanas* or techniques of meditation. The whole idea is to facilitate an aspirant in his journey towards liberation. The results of such practices are also varied but they are not considered contradictory to one another. In fact, an aspirant is encouraged by his teacher to pursue with a particular mode of sadhana with all sincerity and dedication.

It is clear from this fact that the purpose of the scriptures is not to engage an aspirant in dry polemic discussions but to inspire and encourage him in his own individual effort to discover the truth.

This spirit of catholicity, stress on individual effort, honesty and dedication in one's endeavour, renunciation of lust and greed—which are the hallmarks of spiritual practices prescribed by the scriptures—have once again found their pristine expressions through the sadhanas undertaken by Sri Ramakrishna. The significant factor is such a wonderful phenomenon was destined to happen in this very modern age, when the age old spiritual values were facing incessant degradation.

Sri Ramakrishna practiced different kinds of sadhanas and later declared, based on his own experiences, that all such paths are equally important and relevant in the pursuit for God. This testimony is but the echo of the ancient Vedic dictum—*Ekam Sat Viprah Bahudha Vadanti*—'Truth is one but wise men call it by different names.'

All through the history, the *wise men* referred to in the Vedic statement, are individuals appearing in different places and periods time. The interesting factor is that, in the case of Sri Ramakrishna, all those spiritual moods and achievements they stand for are beautifully blended and harmonised in a single person. In this respect, Sri Ramakrishna demonstrates extraordinary spiritual calibre and brilliance, which are far beyond the requirements of a perfect man, described in the scriptures. This spectacular achievement coupled with tremendous spiritual energy manifested in the Master's personality makes him a new bright star in the galaxy of the seers and sages who have come from time to time to draw our attention to the higher things of life.

Personality and Teachings

When we carefully go through the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita* and *Puranas* like *Srimad Bhagavatam* we find that the spiritual ideal enshrined in them being manifested in its entirety in Sri Ramakrishna. *Kathopanishad* says,

When all the desires that dwell in the heart fall away, then the mortal becomes immortal and here itself attains Brahman.²

The state of yoga is described in the same *Upanishad* as that where there is firm control of the senses; vigilance being the hallmark of such a state. The above traits are perfectly embodied in the personality of the Master. Not only was he completely without any kind of desire, even the very limbs of his body would repulse at the proximity of a person or an object of worldly nature. The instance of Narendra (later Swami Vivekananda) testing Sri Ramakrishna with a coin hidden under his bed illustrates this point.

The reason for such an attitude is that Sri Ramakrishna was not just satisfied with the mental renunciation alone. Swami Saradananda points out that

The Master was not convinced by merely renouncing mentally, whatever obstructed his path of God realisation. First he gave up those gross objects, keeping himself as far away as possible. Then he forced his body and senses to act contrary to basic instincts. . .³

This extraordinary sign of external renunciation is in tune with the statement in *Mundaka Upanishad* which says, 'One cannot attain *Atman* by knowledge alone, without accompanied by renunciation. By means of these aids, the soul enters the abode of Brahman.'⁴ This scriptural testimony put a stamp of authenticity to such incidents in the Master's life like throwing the clods and coins

in the Ganges saying 'rupee is clay, clay is rupee'. This kind of reasoning and its external application are also stressed in *Shvetasvatara Upanishad*, which says that there is no other path to reach the Supreme God than by reasoning and proceeding gradually from the gross plane to the subtle and from the subtle to the causal plane.⁵

Bhagavad Gita explicitly enumerates the external signs of a perfect soul mainly in four places—characteristics of *sthitaprajna* or steady minded (in 2nd chapter), of a *Bhakta* or a devotee (in 12th chapter), of a *Jnani* or knower of Brahman (in 13th chapter) and of *gunatita* or one who transcended the three *gunas* (in 14th chapter).

In all these, both human and mystical qualities of an illumined soul are described in detail. Not only can we trace them in Sri Ramakrishna's demeanour but also can come across perfection, intensity and honesty in every such act. Also, he demonstrates all the spiritual ideas taught in that great work like *Jnana*, *Bhakti*, *Karma* and *Dhyana*. The wonderful thing about Sri Ramakrishna is he embodies the perfect harmony of these *Yogas*, the very spiritual ideal, Sri Krishna advocates emphatically in his teachings. Apart from that, the humanism and deep compassion towards mankind emanating from the *Bhagavad Gita*, have manifested in Sri Ramakrishna's personality in an unhindered and spontaneous manner.

Srimad Bhagavatam is a unique work in which cluster of spiritual ideals and moods have been portrayed with the backdrop of intense love towards God. It strongly advocates devotion as the harbinger for any kind of spiritual attainment. *Bhagavatam* says that devotion is a state of mind resulting from the spontaneous concentration of all the energies of the mind including those of organs of

knowledge and action, towards the Supreme Being.⁶ As such, the ideal of devotion upheld by this great work is a state of harmony where knowledge, meditation and detached work also find equal place. This is the very ideal put forth by Sri Ramakrishna in this modern age. In tune with the teachings of *Bhagavatam*, Sri Ramakrishna declares that *Naradiya Bhakti*, the path of devotion as taught by the great sage Narada is the spiritual ideal of this age. We should not forget that Narada's teachings in this respect are akin to those of *Bhagavatam*.

Sri Ramakrishna's famous teaching of 'worshipping God in man' also has its origin in the scriptures. In *Bhagavatma*, we find this ideal clearly brought out in the teachings of Kapila to his mother Devahuti. In a striking statement of the type rarely found in our scriptures, Kapila, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, declares in an unambiguous manner,

If one disregards Me who is present in all beings as their soul and the Lord but ignorantly offers worship only to images, such as worship only with images, such worship is as ineffective as sacrificial offering made in ashes. A man who persecutes Me residing in others, who is proud and haughty, who looks upon God as the other—such a person will never attain peace of mind.⁷

In an incident described in *Bhagavatam*, the wives of Kaliya, the wicked serpent, in the

course of their prayer to Sri Krishna for mercy upon their husband say, 'O Lord! Right conduct comprising showing compassion to all living beings will surely propitiate you, since it is but yourself, who has become everything.'⁸ This statement finds resonance many a time in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, when the Master declares that it is God alone who has become everything. The Dharma or the code of conduct taught in the above passage is not just limited to individual effort but also includes humanistic feelings towards all creatures. This was the very intention of Sri Ramakrishna, when he taught, '*Shiva Jnane Jeeva seva*'—'Serve men considering them as the veritable manifestations of God.'

Conclusion

The Hindu scriptures represent spiritual endeavour and achievements of great ones, who appeared in this country from time immemorial. They also form concrete manifestations of collective consciousness of the people belonging to the Hindu religion. The uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna lies in the fact that he became the sole embodiment of all the above and exhibited enormous amount of spiritual power in his lifetime—the 'consummation of two hundred years of spiritual life of three hundred million people.' □



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Temple of Sri Ramakrishna at his birth place in Kamarpukur (West Bengal)

Sri Ramakrishna—the Uncommon Common Man

H N MURALIDHARA

A Gem of Many Splendours

Sri Ramakrishna is a multifaceted gem. From whichever side you examine the gem, you find it shining. Hence, a close study of Sri Ramakrishna's life opens many inspiring and unexplored dimensions of mystery called human life. Of course, a 'life' means something bound by space and time, and his life is no exception to it. Though bound like this, Sri Ramakrishna's life has a universal appeal.

From another angle, his life looks transcendental, unbounded by time, space and causation. It is, as if, a melody of eternity, a song of the infinite, sung for the common man.

His life, thus, has two dimensions: mundane (*laukika*) and otherworldly (*alaukika*).

We may explore another side of Sri Ramakrishna's life by comparing it to a linguistic expression. Every linguistic expression has its internal structure. It has a particular way of expressing things. But another side of a linguistic expression is contextual—it has been spoken or used in a particular context; it is a product of a certain situations and times. Seen in this context, we can look upon Sri Ramakrishna's life as a great spiritual life on one side, and an object lesson for humanity, from another. His life offers many a lesson from the pages of history, because his life was a response to certain historical facts and issues. There are, therefore,

two dimensions of Sri Ramakrishna's life—historical and contemporary.

The very life of Sri Ramakrishna is an idiom; it represents the state of being natural, straight and simple. We find no 'decorative' expressions in it. As an idiom, his life never raises its voice in eloquence that cuts to pieces opponents' arguments. It never divides but embraces everyone in an atmosphere of compassionate conversation. It carries everybody along its stream.

Common and Uncommon

One curious fact about Sri Ramakrishna's life was that it was firmly rooted in the common, everyday realities of life. He looked, behaved, spoke, walked like anyone of us. He was a common man *par* excellence with an uncommon insight into higher realms!

In our common parlance, we distinguish 'common' from 'uncommon' in different ways. While earning money, enjoying material comforts, pursuing a career and so on is considered 'common', spiritual practices and achievements are looked upon as 'uncommon'. Spirituality, hence, has an 'uncommon' status. No wonder, spiritual people are categorized as 'uncommon', a class of their own, while the 'commoners' plead their helplessness to be what they are! They feel their state of being is inherent in them—and spirituality is a far cry.



Dr. H N Muralidhara, a teacher of Kannada literature, held the Visiting Professor, Vivekananda Chair, Department of Philosophical Studies, University of Mysore. He has many poems and writings to his credit and is a long-standing devotee of Sri Ramakrishna. His doctoral thesis focused on the compositions of Purandara Dasa, the great saint-composer of fifteenth-century Karnataka. □

One more dimension of 'common' versus 'uncommon' issue is that, at times, 'common' people feel that time has come to live an 'uncommon' life. This feeling comes to them because they feel that being 'uncommon' gives certain respectable status and advantages. Thus, in order to gain recognition as 'uncommon' people (i.e., religious aspirants or leaders), they try to project themselves in an unusual or uncommon way. This they do by speaking differently, dressing differently, and even behaving differently. But rarely does this make them 'uncommon'. Their 'uncommon' stature, earned in such showy manner dies a natural death! And they remain, as earlier, 'common'!

Sri Ramakrishna's Unique Commonness

Sri Ramakrishna played a crucial role in reviving and strengthening India's spiritual traditions. Let us recall here the well-known tribute paid by French litterateur, Romain Rolland, who said, 'The man whose image I invoke here was the consummation of two thousand years of spiritual life of three hundred million people.' These words aptly summarize Sri Ramakrishna's contribution to India's spiritual uplift.

What makes, however, Sri Ramakrishna stand unique is that he completely identified himself with the common lot of people. Commonness, according to Sri Ramakrishna, means being *simple*, and being simple is to be natural. Sri Ramakrishna never accepted or appreciated anything that is unnatural. 'Unless a man is simple, he cannot recognize God, the simple One,'¹ Sri Ramakrishna would often sing.

As a child, young Gadadhar or future Sri Ramakrishna, loved to associate with common people. He played with his village friends, charmed simple villagers with his

pranks and so on. When he went to Calcutta, his elder brother wanted him to study, but he refused to learn 'rice and plantain earning education' (a reference to the practice of priestly class to receive rice and plantains after performing rituals for a fee). Education for mere earning of livelihood as its goal made no sense to him. On the other hand, when he was invested with sacred thread, he decided to receive his first customary *bhiksha* (alms) from Dhani, a low-caste woman. It was a befitting tribute paid to common man.

'Being common' was the special feature of Sri Ramakrishna's life. He expressed himself in a most natural way. He did not appear strange or peculiar in his dealings and behaviour. Even though he was often lost in the transcendental realm of samadhi, he appeared so common to the onlookers. Or shall we put it this way: only God can manifest such a perfect human quality?

He mixed with others in a common way and it was an object lesson in simplicity and humility. He loved to be with the common people and felt quite ill at ease when he had to meet someone highly placed in society. At such times, he would even express a child-like anxiety. His humanism mingled with his divinity and he expressed a perfect blend of the two. Swami Saradananda writes in his biography of Sri Ramakrishna:

Blessed by the gracious company of the Holy Master, we contemplate his life and character. The more we do so, the more we are overwhelmed by the wonderful coexistence of divine and human characteristics in him. Without seeing him, we could never have understood how it was possible for such contrary aspects to coexist harmoniously in one person. But because we have seen him, we are convinced that he was a Godman: His divine qualities and powers were fully manifested through the veil of a

human body and human nature. Because we lived with him, we realized that he never feigned any of these aspects. He truly took on a human nature in order to do good to humanity; he showed us the path leading from the human plane to the divine.²

One can cogitate on his simplicity from a historical viewpoint as well. Sri Ramakrishna lived in the British-ruled India. Thanks to the English education, every common Indian aspired to become 'uncommon' in some way or the other! They liked to dress, speak and behave in a different, 'superior' way. But Sri Ramakrishna never gave up his rustic simplicity, though he lived in Calcutta, the centre of political and cultural changes. Far from getting influenced by them, he would even deplore the 'babus'—the educated Indians who imitated the English in all possible ways, 'brown English men' of Macaulian scheme of things.

Though he liked to be associated with simple, common people, he had no hesitation to meet scholars and learned people. He himself went and met erudite members of the 'knowledge-world' and charmed them with his simplicity and commonness. He interacted with many eminent people of the time such as Keshab Chandra Sen, Ishvar Chandra Vidya-sagar, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya and Pratap Chandra Majumdar. They were deeply impressed with his personality. Many of them changed their opinions and ideas about spirituality and issues related to it. Here was a man, a poor temple priest, without Sanskrit learning, and devoid of English education, and yet, as time passed, he came to be regarded as the 'Incarnation of the Age' (*yugavatara*). He was indeed an uncommon phenomenon.

Two Approaches

Sri Ramakrishna's two outstanding disciples may be considered here. One was

Mahendranath Gupta ('M.') and the other Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda). They represent two models of the 'knowledge-world' of their times. It was, however, Sri Ramakrishna's 'commonness' that impressed both of them.

'M' went to Sri Ramakrishna when he was undergoing a great personal distress. He, at first, tried to examine Sri Ramakrishna through his 'rational' approach. Like all knowledgeable people of his times, he felt that true knowledge should be within a set of logical rules and conditions. Also, it was his firm conviction that those who are 'wise men' or 'uncommon' should take up the responsibility of educating the 'common' or ignorant lot. But as 'M.' listened to Sri Ramakrishna's spiritually enlightened words, he understood that his concepts were just a bookish knowledge. His idea of 'knowledge' was crushed to ground in his very first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna. The readers of the *Gospel* are well aware of it.

In the fiery Narendranath, on the other hand, we find an untiring tendency to question and investigate. Naren's investigative mind was not satisfied with university education; it went on probing and asking. And it did not find its fulfilment in a professor's chamber but in the small room of a 'common' temple priest who opted himself out of his village school! Sri Ramakrishna's bold but simple assertion of God's existence is a puzzle to today's 'institutionalised' education which imparts knowledge without transforming the receivers. Sri Ramakrishna stands as a symbol of challenge to this. His message is a message of life and inner change.

'Feel for the Common Man'

Neglect of the masses is a national sin, said Swami Vivekananda. One should feel for

the poor and the downtrodden. This feeling for others is one of the main features of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ideology. It has the common man as its central focus. Sri Ramakrishna literally went and sat among the deprived and the lowly. When he went to Deoghar, he saw a number of poor people and was moved by their malnourished and unkempt looks. He immediately asked Mathur Babu to feed and clothe them before proceeding further in his pilgrimage.

Swami Vivekananda gave the call of serving God in Man. Thus came to being *daridra devo bhava* ('Let the poor be your God'), the mantra of the Age. It was like giving a touch of 'commonness' to religion and spirituality. Feeling for the common men and women is what makes the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda so appealing and contemporary.

Let us look at the type of devotees and disciples who gathered around Sri Ramakrishna and the nature of their relationship with him. Though they belonged to different classes, castes and social backgrounds, they were either very 'common' or had the courage to put aside their 'uncommon' traits and mingle with the common folk spontaneously.

Nor did Sri Ramakrishna sit on a high pedestal among his devotees. No rules and regulations were laid down regarding others' coming and meeting him. Moreover he maintained no privacy! To top it all, if he wanted to meet somebody he would himself go to him without waiting for any formalities. Even the way he greeted others won over the common people to him. He would be the first to greet others by the Indian custom of *namaskar*. If the other person reciprocated by another *namaskar* and a slight bend forward, Sri Ramakrishna would again bow down. 'Sri Ramakrishna captured all by his weapon of

salutation (*namaska-astra*)!' exclaimed Girish Chandra Ghosh. Such was the sweetness of Sri Ramakrishna's temperament!

Spiritual Commonness

Through his spiritual disciplines, Sri Ramakrishna reached the heights of uncommon spiritual experiences. To ascend to the highest state of consciousness (*samadhi*) was to him as natural as breathing. Many a time he would forcibly bring his mind to the normal plane. In spite of this, the way he chose to communicate with the people was commonest to the core. He had no scholarship in Sanskrit. He never gave lectures from a dais quoting from Vedas and Upanishads. The only thing he did was to converse with those who came into contact with him in a way that was most common and ordinary. Conversation is possible only when 'commonness' is recognized. Because, in scholastic gatherings, the common cannot open their mouth!

Seen from this point of view, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is a special book. It has a metaphorical significance of its own because of its 'participatory mode'. Other religious texts were written 'then' and 'there'; they belong to a different space and time. In that sense the present-day readers are only 'consumers' since they are at the receiving end. By their very nature these texts are 'closed-ended'. But this is not the case with the *Gospel*.

Everything in the *Gospel* is happening 'now' and 'here'. The world that we enter by reading the *Gospel* is an extension of our daily, familiar world and we find nothing alien in it. Moreover, whatever we find there are entries in a diary of a person who just lived like anyone of us. Date, month, year, place—everything is specific and nothing is abstract. We can find one-to-one relationship between the way in which Sri Ramakrishna lived his life

and the structure in which his *Gospel* took shape. Both are essentially human, in every sense of the term.

Sri Ramakrishna delivered his ideas in common man's language. It is a wonderful world of commons, so to say. Most ordinary details of our day-to-day world get transformed into a highest philosophy without a least tinge of artificiality. The similes, parables and anecdotes, which are vivid expressions of rural experience, ensure us that it is not a creation of an ordinary commoner. Only an 'uncommon' commoner like Sri Ramakrishna could create such a unique world.

Conclusion

We live in the Age of Media. Rightly or wrongly, magnification of facts has come to occupy a central place in the functioning of

media. Anything that is 'normal' or 'common' is sidelined and there is a big hankering for whatever seems uncommon. The media believes in stealing the show somehow, though this is against the spirit of democracy where common man matters most.

The life of Sri Ramakrishna, however, is an eye-opener. He never aspired to be in the news. Never cared for name and fame; never occupied a seat of importance in the social or religious gatherings. He would rather sit in a dusty corner and eat whatever that is being served without any complaint. This is what he demonstrated in his incarnation as a 'commoner'. He lived as a commoner for the sake of us, commoners.

Let us learn to be an 'uncommon' commoner like him! This is the true ideal of inclusive growth. □

References:

1. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 665

2. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, p. 160

The greatness, the uniqueness. . . of Sree Ramakrishna was this, that he was a cent per cent Hindu. He did not pose as a philosopher or a scholar. He was a common Hindu.

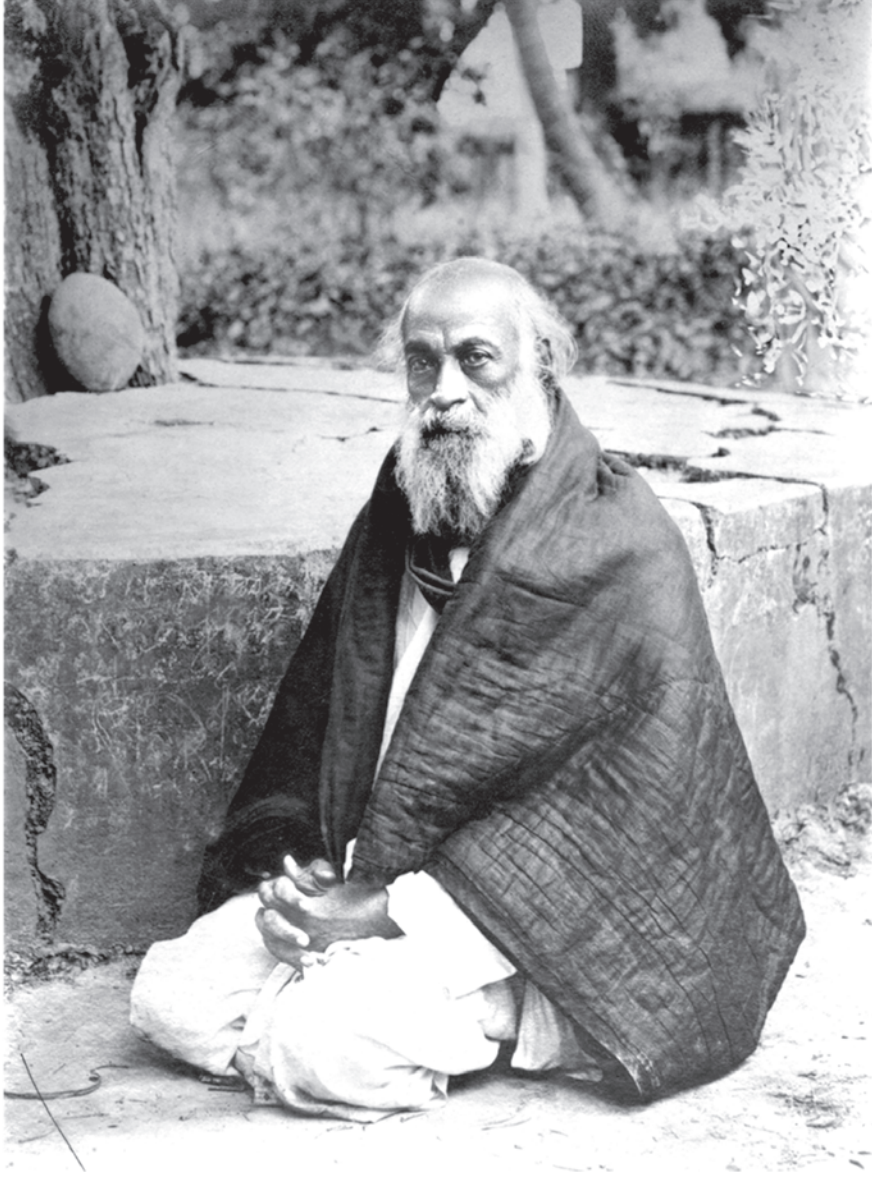
We follow all the common practices, and we are like one another. We are like grass growing everywhere on the soil and there is no distinction between the grass growing in the Himalayas or the Cape Comorin. Now, Sree Ramakrishna was just one blade of grass like any other blade of grass. He was like the grass that grows on earth, but which yields rice. Sree Ramakrishna was the type of grass which yielded fruit and food in the form of true religion. He was truly a rice plant. May we grow more and more of grass of that variety in our country, and yet more of them.

Sree Ramakrishna lived a life and thought and said things which people have recorded—people who were with him and who lived in an atmosphere which made them feel that they must record these things for other people and we have these records.

I have after much thinking, told all of them, both the foreigners who wanted to understand the doctrines of Hinduism and the many Hindu friends and relations who wished to become better men, 'I could not find anything better than this: go and get from, the Ramakrishna Mission a book called *Sayings of Sree Ramakrishna*, and whether it is in English, Tamil or any other language you like, read that and you will understand Hinduism and you will become a better man.'

—C. Rajagopalachari

the first Indian Governor General of independent India



*Mahendranath Gupta or 'M', the recorder of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna—
a classic which has been inspiring and continues to inspire, generations of monks
and devotees throughout the world*

Do You Long for God? Read Ramakrishna's Life

V. SIVARAMA SASTRY

Veluri Sivarama Sastry (1892-1967), one of the most versatile and original figures of modern Telugu literature, was also an accomplished translator (his translation of Gandhiji's Autobiography is a classic and, he also pioneered the translation of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's novels). His books on spiritual themes are exceptionally original. The one translated here is part of his Preface to Sri Ramakrishna's life in Telugu, by Swami Chirantananda, published by Ramakrishna Math. These extracts have been translated by M. Sivaramkrishna, Hyderabad.

Sri Ramakrishna is a poet. The poet of poets. Just as his sayings are authoritative as those of a guru, from the point of view of a *kavya*, they are sayings brimming with aesthetic delight (*rasa*); like lightning illumining the darkness, in wakeful state, it is a rain of joy. Like Buddha, Ramakrishna teaches in the language of the common people spoken by the many. That language is sharp on both sides like fencing with swords in both the hands. It is as understandable and appealing to reason as it is intuitively illuminating. It is because he realised the magic of this language that Swami Vivekananda ignored the classical language and opted for Ramakrishna's colloquial dialect.

Each story that Ramakrishna told is a poem evoking aesthetic relish. Even while immersed in ecstatic consciousness, he surfaces to the waking state and showers enlightenment on us. Now immersing us in ecstasy, he surfaces in waking consciousness, drenching, drowning us in joy. He says: 'Mother! Drown me in ecstasy (*rasa*) but keep me conscious, alert, awake' (*vasam* in Telugu language!), and, don't make me a dry ascetic! Bereft of *rasa*, we

dry up, that is certain, inspite of ourselves. But, not able to control, this doll made of sugar invariably becomes one with *rasa*.

This Supreme Poet's [language] is poetic prose. It twangs like a bow. Like an arrow, it pierces through to its target (*lakshya*). Analogy and example: these are its two eyes. They make in the mirror of your mind, an un-manifest, uncomprehendable something that transcends mind and language and, literally leaves you breath taking.

The *upamas* (analogies) of Sri Ramakrishna vanquish those of Valmiki and Kalidasa. Sri Ramakrishna gave flesh and blood to some of the *upamanas* in the *Yoga Vasishtha* (for instance, Mumukshu Prakarana 18. 50-67). *Upama Kalidasasya* ['In similes, Kalidas is the example'] was extant in the past, Now *Upama Ramakrishnasya* ['In similes, Sri Ramakrishna is the example']!

His words (*paluku*) are a call for the young, the old, all, including children, the learned and the illiterate. It is a 'wake-up' call of Primeval Power, Adishakti. Every word of his is a spring of joy (*navvulata*), every saying is a song of aesthetic relish, *rasapata*. Beyond com-

prehension is Ishwara, the Resplendent One, but for the devotee, Ishwara is a fountain of rasa, steeped in it, said Ramakrishna, in one context. Then, how much of a connoisseur of aesthetic relish he must be! Full of joy, he is!

Sri Ramakrishna is a *Siddha*, an adept in the reality of *bhavana*.

A poet imagines a thing in the substratum of another. He creates a certain space, for, in the case of Bhava Kavi (Sri Ramakrishna), whatever he thinks/imagines surely should become a truth.

In the attitude of a servant (*dasya bhava*), he imagined himself as Hanuman to such an extent that a tail grew. In the Beloved's attitude (*madhura bhava*), he thought of himself as

Radha and, womanhood blossomed in him. . . He made the Divine Mother Amba herself as *his* Mother (*Amma*). And, he enchanted Gopaler Ma as her child. Again, he is father to Rakhali! How strange this creation is! Is this the unusual super creation Yogic? Who knows? In every particle of his imagination, name and form are assuming a manifest, palpable dimension.

Sri Ramakrishna is Divinity Incarnate.

Oh seeker! Do you need intense longing for God? Read this! Do you want to transcend the troubled times, Read this! Do you wish to shed ecstatic tears, Read this! Do you want to learn how *brahmavani* rains, read the life of Sri Ramakrishna! □



The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna is a veritable temple on one's palm, a veritable hermitage on one's palm, a veritable place of pilgrimage on one's palm. But unlike a temple or a place of pilgrimage, there is no chance of its getting polluted. Nor is there any chance of its getting dilapidated like the structure of a temple. The home that houses this *Gospel* will itself become a temple. The hand that holds it will be holding the very lotus feet of the Lord. The tongue on which its letters roll will be savouring nectar itself. The *Gospel* is the repository of bliss; it is the ocean of peace; it is the manna of divine knowledge. It is the friend that stands by you in the hour of trial; it is the Guru that at the moment of overwhelming joy counsels humility and devotion, and makes you feel that you are an offering at the Lord's feet. It is the torch that shows your way in darkness; it is the staff to lean upon while trudging on an uneven path. It is the pole star that guides you when you are lost in wilderness. It is the quintessence of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

—**Kuvempu**, eminent poet and writer in Kannada, in his introduction to *the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in Kannada



Cossipore Garden House, in Calcutta where Sri Ramakrishna spent his last days and left his mortal coil

Sri Ramakrishna's Presence Inspires Young Lives

Just as serious spirituality is not meant for the old age only, Sri Ramakrishna's message is not restricted to old people only; he appeals to the young as well. Sri Ramakrishna himself said several times that he loved young people because they are like fresh milk, not yet spoilt by time or life's experiences. They have an open mind and a fresh perspective. Many of them, when they come in touch with Sri Ramakrishna's words, are struck with their immense simplicity and to-the-point quality which transforms them, partially or completely, depending on their readiness and willingness to embrace higher ideal. The Vedanta Kesari requested some of the young professionals from different walks of life to express their views and opinions about how Sri Ramakrishna has influenced them and changed their lives. The following are their responses.

A Living Power

When I was a small boy, my mother used to tell me several stories from Hindu mythology. There were a lot of stories like the story of Dhruva, where God appears before the devotee. One day I asked my mother if we pray to God, will God appear before us? She replied, 'That used to happen only in ancient times. This is Kali Yuga. God does not appear before devotees in Kali Yuga.' This reply made me very unhappy.

If only my mother had known about Sri Ramakrishna's life, her answer would have been very different. Sri Ramakrishna lived in the suburbs of a bustling city in modern times. His life was full of spiritual experiences, visions and the constant company of God. The life of Sri Ramakrishna has a strong, fresh stamp of validity of the number of stories in the mythology of various religions of the world where God appears before devotees in the form that they chose to worship.

Worldly people give so much reality to the lower goals of life based on pleasure and possessions. This blocks the mind from seeing

the reality of higher goals like service and spirituality, devotion and knowledge, God and Truth.

To devotees, on the other hand, God is more real than the world. The world borrows its reality from God. Life itself has a meaning only because it involves God. Again, the relationship with God spans many lives. The worldly relationships are ephemeral. Grounded on the eternal and all-pervasive God, the devotee is able to face the ups and downs of material life with great ease. His life is one of joy and freedom.

Mukti is translated as 'freedom'. Freedom from what? Some people define it as freedom from repeated cycle of lives. That would be an escapist's answer. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda have said that they are ready to take a thousand lives to help one man. Sri Krishna defines a free-while-living-man (*jivanmukta*) as the one who is free from worldly attachments and is free from sorrow. The very opening of the teachings of Gita is an assertion '*na amushochanti panditaah*'—'Wise men don't grieve.'

In the words of Sri Ramakrishna, worldly attachment is nothing but lust and greed. When we read the life of Sri Ramakrishna we see how his freedom from lust and greed has just thrown open the doors of the spirit converting his presence into a mart of joy. Here, in his wonderful life, is the culmination of all the ideas of morality, religion and philosophy.

The advent of Sri Ramakrishna is the starting of a new chapter in the book of religion and spirituality in the world. The message is the same—the eternal message of the Vedas and the Gita. It is put into a language that we can understand. It is cast into a mould that we can follow. It is told in a way that we can appreciate. And practice.

—**Gokulmuthu N,**

Software Engineer, Bangalore

What Matters is Purity of Thoughts

‘Think of pure thoughts. What if you have not reached this state as yet? There is hope for everyone, without exception.’ This I believe is the central message of Sri Ramakrishna for one and all. His is an assuring presence. Living in today’s world of unbridled materialism, one often gets carried away by circumstances. Then one looks at Sri Ramakrishna’s words and feels reassured. Introduced to the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* at an early age, I love to read it. But not always do I find time for it! At times I might not even be a religious person, in terms of orthodox-practices. What more could be expected of a 24-year old, living amidst computers and technological madness called progress! Yet, having read Sri Ramakrishna, I feel secure and well-established in the idea that what matters is keeping one’s thoughts free from greed and lust and be free from all duplicity. It is not talking but living them in life which matters.

Though my reading of the *Gospel* is rather limited, whatever I have read has influenced me deeply. ‘Do not bother much about the externals’, Sri Ramakrishna seems to say, ‘take care of your mind, your motives and your ultimate goal of life.’ In the midst of conflicts and doubts that assail a naïve mind, there is this power of conviction in his wonderful words. The goal of Self-realisation may be far away, yet one need not lower the ideal. There is hope for all. One may falter at times but do not give up. This is what fills me with strength.

—**Anikethan RK,**

Software Engineer, Bangalore

Sri Ramakrishna for All Times

Time has failed to dim the power of Sri Ramakrishna’s words; rather, as the time passes one sees his message gaining greater strength and force. It is really amazing to see how a village boy with very little education, and later a temple priest, attracts millions while many ‘greats’ come and fade into oblivion!

Sri Ramakrishna’s devotees come from all quarters. His teachings appeal to intellectuals and simple-minded equally. He has such an accommodative approach to life that he is stranger to no one. Through his simple words, he teaches the message of God-consciousness and makes religion so easy to practice.

Sri Ramakrishna once asked a young professional what he thought of life. The youth replied that God being infinite cannot be measured and hence it is incorrect to ascribe attributes to his divine nature. Hearing him, Sri Ramakrishna remarked in his simple words: ‘You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes. Do that and be happy. The aim of human birth is to love god. Realise that and be at peace.’

Though simple, these words contain the whole secret of living. We often forget this.

No wonder we engage ourselves in various mundane and immaterial pursuits forgetting the real purpose of life. Students, for instance, are often more busy with the external traits of their teacher or elders than learning from them. In the same way, often people spend all their energies in discussing others' affairs or political, social or even religious issues and forget the real purpose of life—realisation of Self or God. Like the magnetic needle that always points to north, in the same way, one should be one-pointed in one's life. This ideal of Ekagrata or 'single-pointed' is one thing in Sri Ramakrishna that greatly inspires us.

—Arijit Ghosh,
CA Student, Chennai

A Source of Enduring Inner Peace

If one reads Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, one is struck with his intense love and inclusiveness. His heart-melting love is now available through *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*—a wonderful record of his teachings. Through reading the *Gospel*, I enjoy his presence, destroy my worries and become cheerful. Thinking of Sri Ramakrishna's unconditional compassion towards all soothes my heart for this raises the hope that I too will receive his compassion, no matter whatever samskaras I may have accumulated. It is this universal compassion of his personality which attracts us most. As a spiritual seeker, one has to struggle with one's mind. Despite all efforts, tricks of the undisciplined mind return to us over and again. In such moments, reading the *Gospel* opens up a new source of energy and hope. Peace of mind returns. Peace, after all, emanates from someone who has it, in the first place. Where else can one think of getting it except from those who live in constant communion with the all-pervasive divinity? In Sri Ramakrishna's *Gospel*, you are in the presence of such a source.

One has to live amidst many demands of today's competitive world. One has to face many distractions. Doing one's work with sincerity helps in warding off many problems but the dirty face of one's selfishness shows up now and then. At that time Sri Ramakrishna's counsel to pray to God sincerely helps very much. One can also pray for reducing such events and works which make one forget God. Sri Ramakrishna's divine life and charming parables drive home the timeless lessons of intense yearning for higher life and renunciation of self-centeredness. Sincerity alone prepares our minds best. Whatever be the state of mind one is in, even a passing reading of the *Gospel*, accompanied by a sincere desire for inner freedom, has a tremendous potential for anyone seeking peace and joy in life.

—Balasubramaniam S,
PhD. Student, USA

Sri Ramakrishna and Modern Youth

Youth is the time where there is unbounded energy trying to gush forth to find a purpose for itself. This energy, if put into right use, can change the whole direction of a person's life. Or, the vice-a-versa can happen.

What could someone who lived more than a century ago teach the modern youth! Clarity of thinking. Yes, Sri Ramakrishna had a unique capacity to make matters clear and transparent. His life shows the youth how to make right choices. Bombarded with endless choices from all directions, from choosing what brand of toothpaste to use to which is the safest God to worship during the exams, today's youth is a confused lot. They need words, which carry conviction and validity. Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the thinking youth not because his words are highly philosophical but because they are very practical. In an era where

people believe that spirituality is meant only for a few renunciates, Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings make spiritual living available to all. Even a commoner has a hope. It is never late. 'As long as I live so do I learn', as Sri Ramakrishna said. A beacon light of strength and purity!

—**Vinay M Birader**,
Software engineer, Hyderabad

He Made Religion a 'Fun'

Most people think of religion as a serious matter. They rarely associate religion with fun and laughter. Though Swami Vivekananda says that religion is the most joyful thing in this world, many think religion is for losers. Religion needs to be understood rightly. Sri Ramakrishna has shown that religion is not only bliss and peace, it is fun and adventure too.

A casual glance at *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* shows some interesting statistics. While Sri Ramakrishna converses with devotees and visitors, he makes many statements that bring laughter to all present. The words 'all laugh' appears 234 times, sending the devotees into peals of laughter. Similarly, there are other words such as laughter (88), joy (576), bliss (294) and Ananda (200+) which are strewn across the book. Surely, statistics can be used to prove many things, sometimes even the truth!

Of course, life is not always milk and honey; in the *Gospel*, Sri Ramakrishna's life often reflects on human struggles and sufferings, and the hope to transcend them. One can immediately recollect his last days, when he suffered from bodily pains, which prompted a young man to ask why a devotee suffers. Despite his ill-health Sri Ramakrishna was extremely compassionate to his devotees, often giving spiritual instructions. Even Dr. Mahen-

dralal Sarkar, a sworn atheist, could feel the warmth of his grace and would think of him for hours. Perhaps, it is difficult to accept the greatness of an individual unless we see how he faces difficulties and suffering. Sri Ramakrishna lived at a spiritually elevated plane, irrespective of the circumstances and company he found himself in. A great inspiration for all of us!

—**Ramnath S. Kini**,
Research Scholar, USA

It is Life that Matters. And Inspires

Blessed with a good reading-habit, I was given to reading wide range of books. I also happened to read a few lectures from the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, and the ideas contained in it came like a refreshing breeze to a traveller lost in a desert. This came at a time when I was confused, having read from several other philosophies. In his lectures, Swamiji maintains that none of the words echoed are his ideas and he is only trying to voice of his master, Sri Ramakrishna. Thus I imagined Sri Ramakrishna to be a great philosopher, because only a philosopher could impart such great life-giving ideas!

First introduction of his life through the *Gospel*, however, was rather a pleasant surprise, and I had to change my notions. Sri Ramakrishna was the simplest of living beings! He was far from being a dry philosopher. He rather *practised* all the philosophies that he taught. His simplicity and love for all beings was indeed striking. It is this authenticity of his life that impresses one beyond words and generates an inner urge to understand and practise his profound words. I am ever grateful to the person who sent me the copies of his life and teachings!

—**Sandeep S**,
Research Scholar, Thiruvananthapuram.

Sticking to the Essentials

What does Sri Ramakrishna stand for? God *IS*. His life is, as if, designed to demonstrate the existence of God. Anyone who reads his life is amazed by his intensely God-centred life. His actions and thoughts in day-to-day life revealed God's presence in many ways. He saw God everywhere—in temples and images, in human beings and animals and even in lifeless objects.

To him God alone was and is and will be the only reality. That is the great lesson we learn from his life. His was an intense life and that we have to learn—if we put our heart and soul into what we want, we get that. But what do we want? Most people do not know what they want and thus keep dissipating their precious time, energy and resources. Sri Ramakrishna taught through his life one thing repeatedly—seek God first. Keep Him as the pole star of your life, cling to Him and do the duty. When we cling to God firmly, pray to him intensely, all worldly junk fails to affect us. The best way to overcome our baser tendencies is, he said, keep walking towards your goal, God. 'When we proceed towards east, west is automatically left behind.'

Finally, what appeals most in Sri Ramakrishna is his wonderful life. His message was: fix your spiritual goal, and keep striving to attain it. He has done sixteen parts, full; we might succeed in doing one-sixteenth of it. By his grace!

—Dr. Kishor V Bandagar,
Medical Student, Belgaum, Karnataka

How to Live in the World

What is that in Sri Ramakrishna's teachings that has inspired countless men and women down the generations? Of course, he was a spiritual giant whose practical wisdom has shaped spiritual aspirations of numerous

persons. Personally, I am thankful for having been introduced to his teachings while in school. It has gone a long way in guiding the way I look and try to live life.

One of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings to working people is the need to balance our lives; do your duties and leave the rest to God. 'Live in the world but, in order to realize God, hold fast to His Lotus Feet with one hand and with the other do your duties. . . .' Sri Ramakrishna said. This is perhaps the most practical approach to work and not becoming a victim of the rat race for money and all material things of life. It opens up a bigger picture of life which gives us hope and strength to move on. No need to dwell on the ups and downs of life: hold on God or your divine nature.

Remember Sri Ramakrishna's words: a fire-fly thinks it is full of light till moon rises and then moon too pales into insignificance when sun comes on the horizon. So are our thoughts about our achievements or problems, full of self-importance or self-pity. Sri Ramakrishna reminds us to do our duties but remain non-attached or anxious about the results. That is the message of Bhagavad Gita as well. Thus, the mantra is to do our duties with all attention, giving it our best, and dedicating the fruits of the efforts to God. Sri Ramakrishna goes on to say, '. . . When you get a respite from your duties, cling to God's Lotus Feet with both hands—live in solitude and meditate on Him and serve Him ceaselessly.'

—Harsha P.,
Software Engineer, Bangalore

Surrender the 'self' to Know the Self!

How to work unaffected by the ups and downs? Says Sri Krishna in the Gita (5.12): 'A person, who is disciplined in karma yoga, renounces the fruit of action and attains ultimate peace. A person who does not practice

karma yoga remains attached to the fruits of his labour and is entangled to the fruits of his actions.'

The idea is fine but where is the illustration? In search of an example, one invariably comes to Sri Ramakrishna whose whole life was a continuous offering to the Divine Mother. Reading Sri Ramakrishna's life is an act of instant inspiration. One feels spiritually inspired, as it were. How deeply dependent he was on his 'mother', the Divine Mother! A Karma Yogi *par excellence*! No wonder Swami Vivekananda called him *karma-kathor*, one who worked hard.

Spiritual progress means journey from temporary happiness to ever-lasting happiness. The path of the ultimate state is what is called yoga. Sri Ramakrishna taught that one should do what one is expected to do but do it in a spirit of dedication and worship. As no one can escape work, one should learn to act in a way that will set one free from all its negative influences. 'Hold on to God's feet with one hand and carry on your duties. After the work is over, hold His feet with both hands,' said Sri Ramakrishna. That is the most practical counsel for all those who want to practice Karma Yoga.

—Dr. Puneeth N.,
Medical Student, Chennai.

Solving the Mystery of Life

Of the numerous aspects of Sri Ramakrishna, what appeals most to me is his ability to make spiritual truths so simple and easy to follow. He taught through parables and anecdotes, using most commonplace examples. This makes his teachings easily understandable and accessible. Let us take some samples from his *Gospel*:

Explaining the idea that God can assume various forms and all these forms are of the

forms of the Supreme Reality, Sri Ramakrishna cites the example of a chameleon. (As is well-known, the skin colour of chameleon changes.) Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Only the man who lives under the tree knows that the chameleon can appear in various colours, and he knows, further, that the animal at times has no colour at all. It is the others who suffer the agony of futile argument.' In other words, if one knows the divine chameleon called God, one will not dispute about Him.

We are generally lost while we try to bring 'balance' in our life. As if divining our predicament, Sri Ramakrishna said this years ago: 'Take a pair of scales for example. If a weight is placed on one side, the lower needle moves away from the upper one. The lower needle is the mind, and the upper one, God. The meeting of the two is yoga. Unless the mind becomes steady there cannot be yoga. It is the wind of worldliness that always disturbs the mind, which may be likened to a candle flame. If that flame doesn't move at all, then one is said to have attained yoga. Lust and greed alone is the obstacle to yoga. Always analyse what you see. What is there in the body of a woman? Only such things as blood, flesh, fat, entrails, and the like. Why should one love such a body?'

Sri Ramakrishna always spoke of the need for Japa and meditation in the beginning of the spiritual journey. He supported the idea that an aspirant needs to be protected from all worldly influences. He said, 'While the trees on the footpath are young, they must be fenced around; otherwise they will be destroyed by cattle. The fence is necessary when the tree is young, but it be taken away when the trunk is thick and strong. Then the tree won't be hurt even if an elephant is tied to it.'

These, and many more of his sayings, give a peep into Sri Ramakrishna's practical

wisdom. As once Sri Ramakrishna himself said, 'After attaining God, there is no lack of knowledge. Then the Divine Mother supplies it without fail.' Yes, one should reach that state in order to solve the mystery of life.

—Gaurav,
Graduate Research Student, USA

Three Lessons from Sri Ramakrishna

Having read Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings, I find the following three principles inspiring and elevating.

Approach God: We face many problems in our life. Most of our energies are spent brooding on how to overcome these problems. We tend to forget the laws of nature, that everyone cannot overcome every problem and cannot have all the desires to be satisfied in a single life span. In this context, Sri Ramakrishna's attitude is an inspiring example for leading a stress-free life. Whenever Sri Ramakrishna needed anything, he asked Mother Kali for it. He thus depended on God under all circumstances. This is the first thing to learn: no need to worry; do your best and leave the rest to God; approach God in all circumstances.

Love God. By repeatedly chanting the name of God and remembering his qualities, Sri Ramakrishna told us, one can develop love for God. This love for God or bhakti is what is essential. When one loves God truly, one develops a larger perspective of life. He can then easily appreciate the fact that what one needs in life is higher values, and not just competence or skill in secular aspects of life. One needs divine love to make life complete.

Be Concerned about Others. One sees this in Sri Ramakrishna's life—his intense concern for others. This is the real practice of Vedanta in life. Everyone is potentially divine for divinity is our real nature. When we help others, we help ourselves for what we call

'others' is actually 'we' in another form. To love God, therefore, is to love others.

These three ideas or principles are amply illustrated in Sri Ramakrishna's life and this is what constitutes guidelines for healthy living.

—Viswanath KS,
Quantitative Analyst, Mumbai

Harmony Comes through Renunciation

We live in a world of disharmony. Anywhere we turn to we find disharmony—social disharmony, religious disharmony, family disharmony and personal disharmony. We feel so ill at ease when there is disharmony in life. We squabble, misunderstand and are anguished when things are out of harmony. But what is the way out? How to bring harmony in life? Sri Ramakrishna's words drive home an important point when he says that spirituality chiefly means tyaga or giving up. But he does not speak of formal sanyassa for everyone. He tells us to practice giving up all fruits of actions to God and live a life of dedication and joy. His is a method of slow and silent growth. 'Give up all greed and pleasure-drive and you will see God', assures Sri Ramakrishna on and on. Harmony comes from our mind being freed from thoughts of egoism, desire for name and popularity and so on. But one should seek God intensely. 'If one can combine the intensity of love that a miser has for money, a chaste woman for her husband and a mother has for her child,' said Sri Ramakrishna. It is like a modern example on how to amplify the energy.

Renunciation means giving up ego and desire for physical pleasures. It means loving God instead. That is whole of religion, too. We should be grateful to Sri Ramakrishna for stating it so clearly.

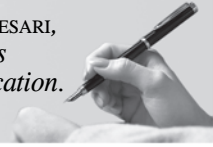
—Raja M,
Teacher, Chennai.

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Book Review

For review in THE VEDANTA KESARI,
publishers need to send us
two copies of their latest publication.



SRI RAMAKRISHNA: THE PERSONIFICATION OF GODS AND GODDESSES.

By **Rasipuram Ramabadrana** with a foreword by **Swami Tapasyananda**

Published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai - 600 004. 2010, paperback, Pp.521 + xii, Rs.90.

Sri Ramakrishna was a living encyclopaedia of religions. A faithful record of all his life events including his *sadhana*, visions, and moods is very well preserved, thereby allowing many of his devotees to experiment with their imaginative skills and produce inspiring, thought-provoking literature. One such attempt has culminated in the publication of the book under review, wherein the author has tried to compare different traits of Sri Ramakrishna and his spiritual consort Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi with those of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. It enables the readers to view their life in novel and varied perspectives, and at the end, get convinced that Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother do embody unique characteristics of all deities. The book actually authenticates Swami Vivekananda's utterance that 'Sri Ramakrishna is the embodiment of infinite spiritual ideas capable of development in infinite ways.'

The book has sixty chapters. Twenty-nine chapters portray Sri Ramakrishna as Ganesha, Brahma, Vishnu, Rama, Raghuvir, Hanuman, Krishna, Gopala, Chaitanya, Nityananda, Gadadhar, Jagannath, Narayana, Vasudeva, Hari, Narasimha, Vishwanath, Gangadhara, Nammalwar, Dakshina-

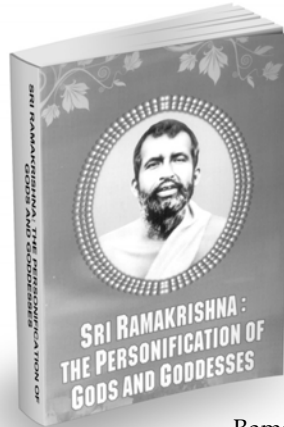
murty, Ramanuja, Shankara, Buddha, Christ, Prophet Mohammad, etc. Four chapters depict Sri Ramakrishna as four Goddesses—Sita, Radha, Kali and Durga, whereas, twenty-seven chapters identify Sri Sarada Devi with different goddesses and holy personalities including Radha, Vishnupriya, Uma, Parvati, Bhavatarini, Phalaharini, Jagaddhatri, Durga, Jagadamba, Mahamaya, Sati, Ganga, Andal, and so on.

In order to find the exact parallels between Hindu Gods and Goddesses with Sri Ramakrishna as well as Sri Sarada Devi, one requires exhaustive exposure to Puranic lore as also deep study, devotion, constant reflection and meditation on the divine personalities of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi. The author is well-equipped with all these. This has enabled him to smoothly juxtapose the incidents and messages of Sri

Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi with those of a specific God or Goddess, and create an interesting and elevating reading material. Each chapter can take the readers into a profound state of spiritual understanding.

The book surely can whet the moral and spiritual appetite of every religious-minded and spiritually-inclined individual. One can feel that the work is the outcome of author's pure adoration of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, written with overwhelming love and devotion. The devotees of Sri Ramakrishna will surely experience upsurge in their devotion. A very thought-provoking and inspiring publication indeed.

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To be continued . . .

India's Timeless Wisdom

अनंतशास्त्रं बहुवेदितव्यं अल्पश्च कालो बहवश्च विघ्नाः।

यत्सारभूतं तदुपासितव्यं हंसो यथा क्षीरमिवाम्बुमिश्रम्॥

Endless are the scriptures and endless are the things to be known, and obstacles in life. But life is short. [Therefore] like a swan separates milk from water, in the same way one should [separate] and know the essentials, and leave the non-essentials.

—Traditional Saying



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January–December 2011

‘Let the Lion of Vedanta roar,
the foxes will fly to their holes.’

—*Swami Vivekananda*

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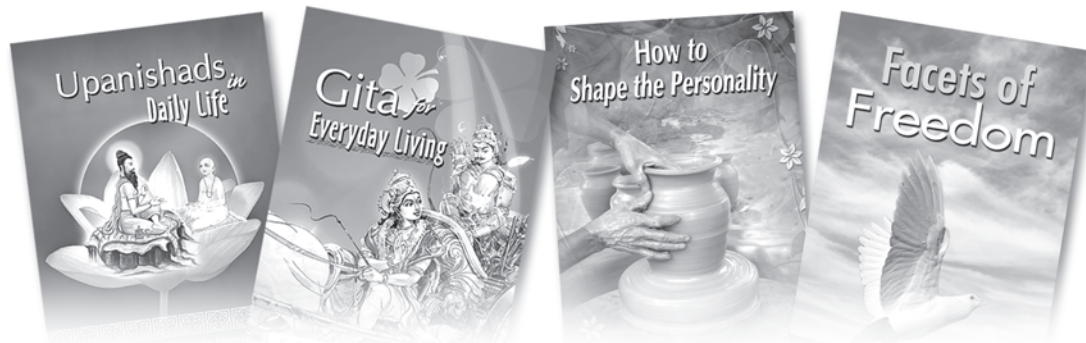


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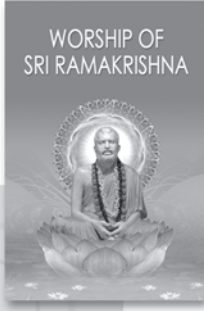


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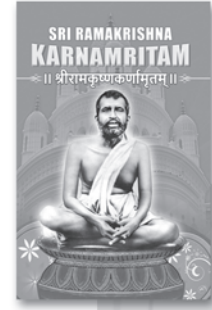


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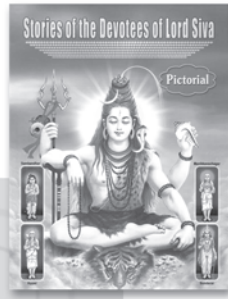
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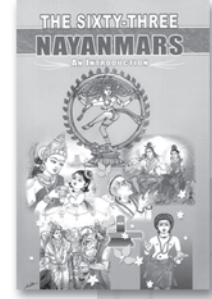


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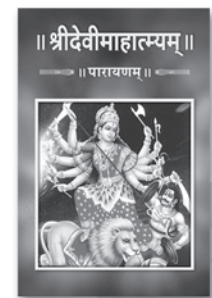


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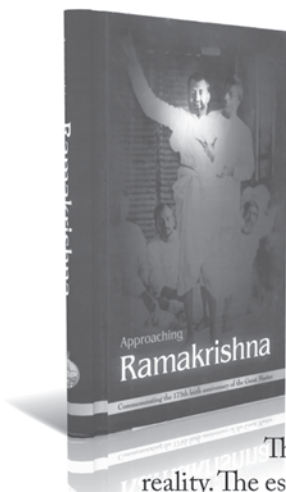


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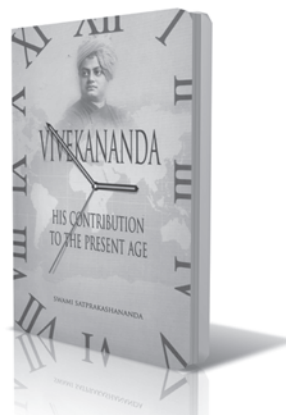
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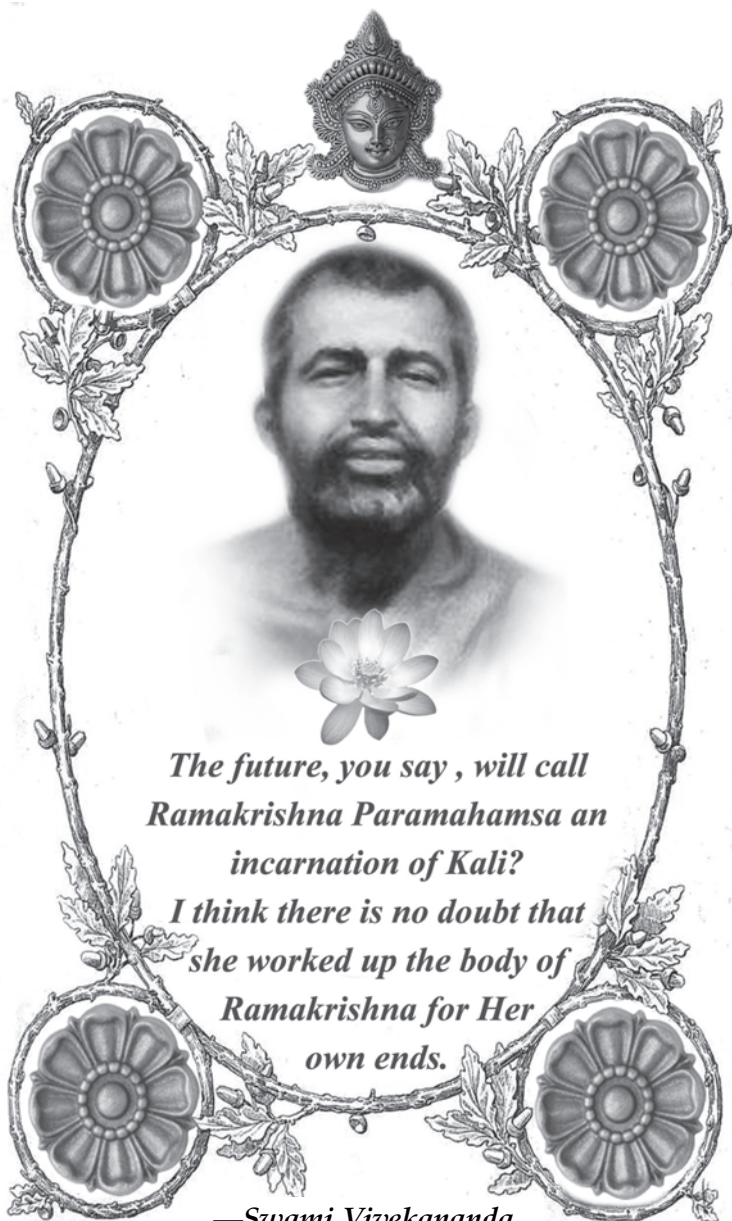
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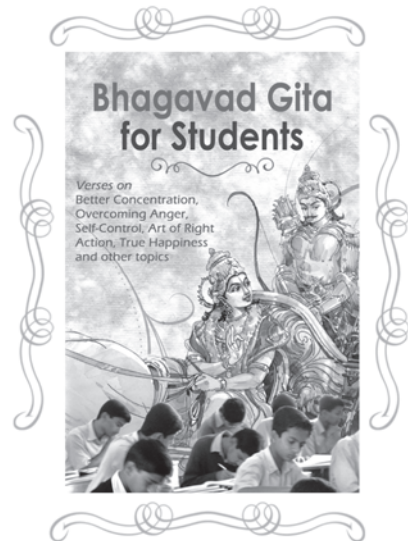
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Power and things like that will come by themselves. Put yourself to work and you will find such tremendous power coming to you that you will feel it hard to bear it. Even the least work done for others awakens the power within, gradually instils into the heart the strength of a lion. I love you all ever so much, but I would wish you all to die working for others—I should be rather glad to see you do that!

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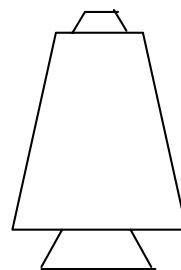
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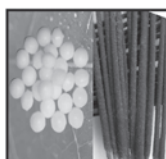
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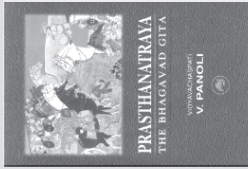
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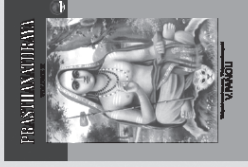


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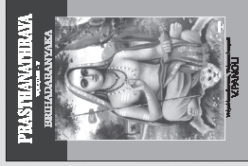
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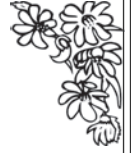
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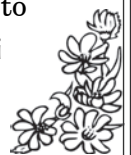
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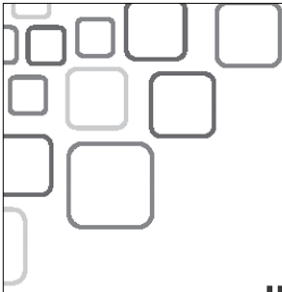
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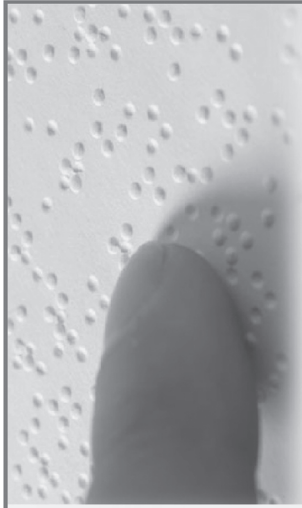
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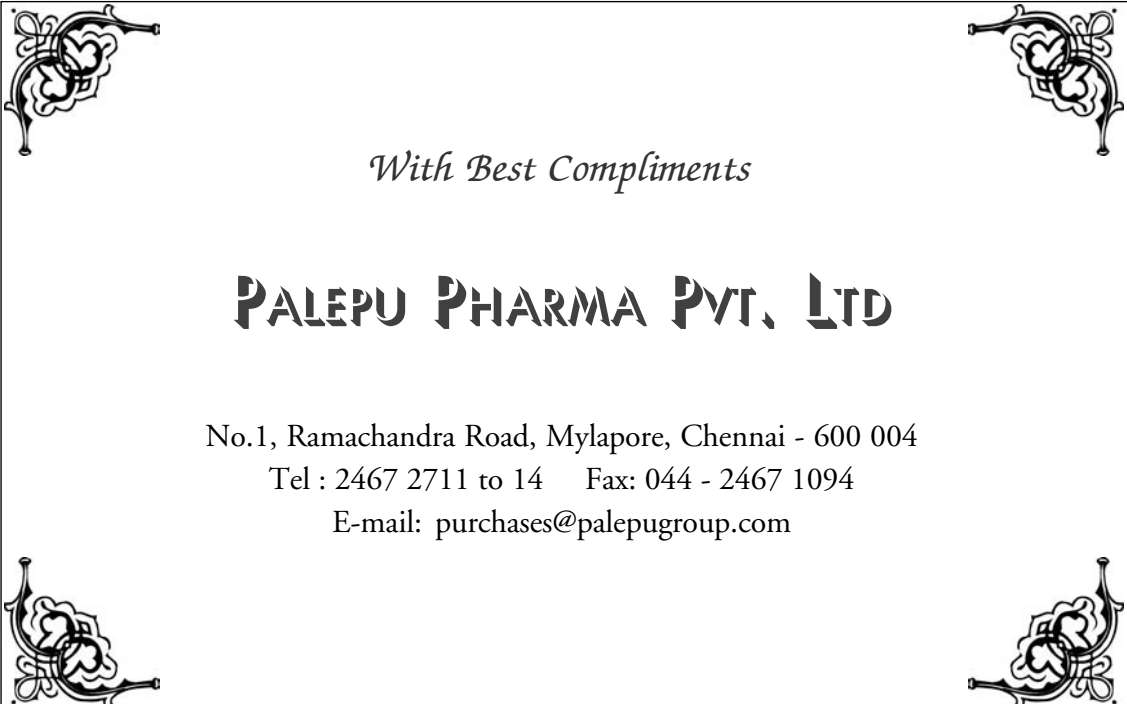
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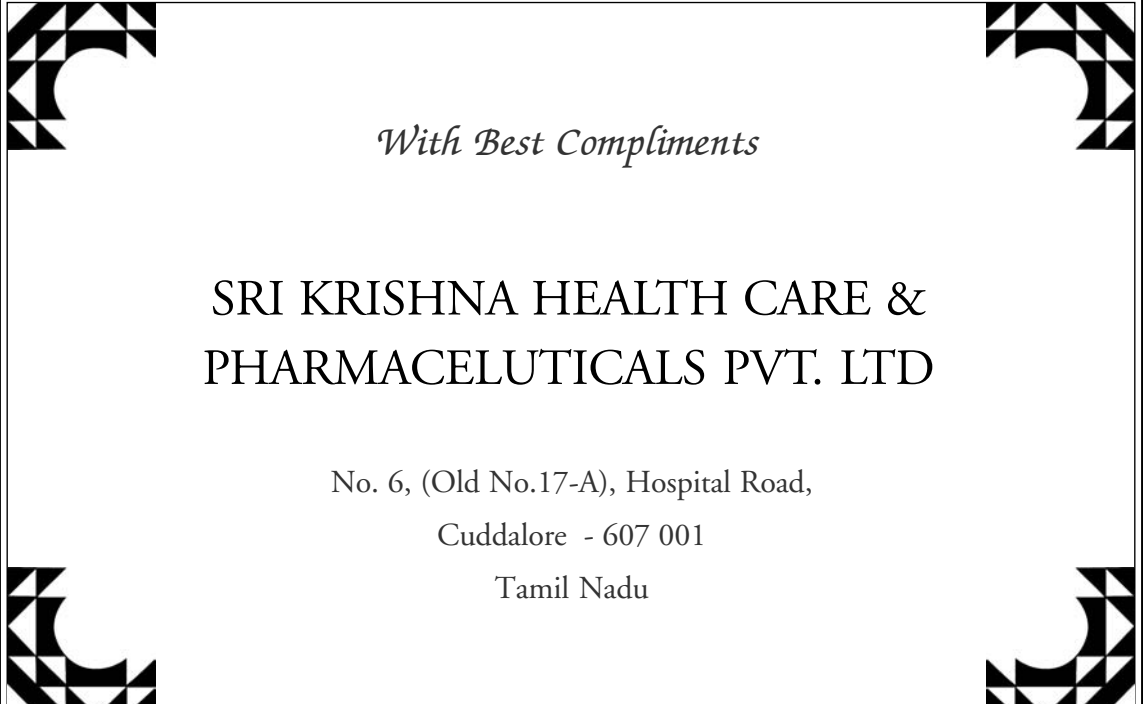
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—Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi



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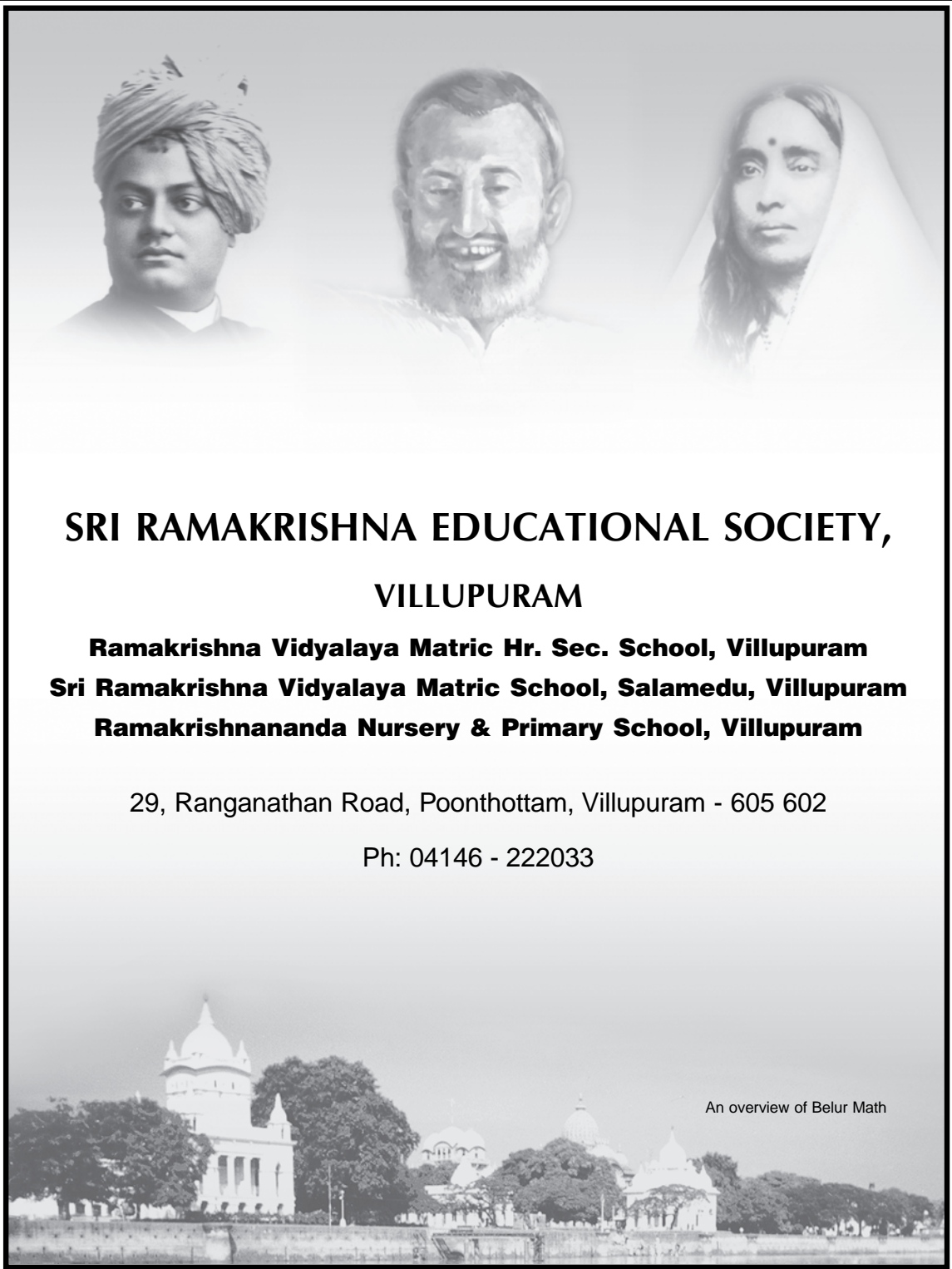
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—Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi



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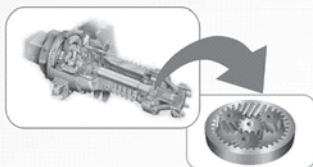
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