

Sri Ramakrishna: The ‘New Man’ of the Age

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SECTION I

PB January 2011

Eṣeche nūtan mānuṣ dekhbi jadi āy cale.

A New Man has come; if you wish to see him, come, let us go.

This is the opening line of a beautiful Bengali song on Sri Ramakrishna, which is set to a lilting tune and sung in many Ramakrishna ashramas, especially on Sri Ramakrishna's birthdays. The song was composed about a hundred years ago. The young people who used to sing this song and dance to its tune grew old and passed on. In subsequent years, generation after generation, thousands of people have sung this song and have grown old or passed on. For all of them Sri Ramakrishna was the New Man. Men and women come and go, but Sri Ramakrishna abides as the New Man, and will apparently continue to do so for centuries to come. The reason for this timeless newness of Sri Ramakrishna is that he represents the archetypal or prototypal man of the present age.

The Epochs

Anybody who studies history can see that human culture passes through several stages of development. These stages are known as epochs, ages, or eras. An epoch refers to a certain period in human history during which a certain zeitgeist prevails in society. By zeitgeist—a term popularized by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel—is meant the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era; the ideas, beliefs, and values that dominate the collective mind of the people during a given period.

As regards the nature of the succession of epochs, there are two main views. According to one view, historical progression is linear: human culture goes on progressing from a primitive or less developed stage to more and more advanced stages—Hegel, Karl Marx, and several others held this view. According to the other view, the succession of epochs takes place in a cyclic way.

The cyclic theory of the succession of different epochs is found in several ancient cultures such as Indian, Greek, and Chinese. In Indian culture these epochs are called *yugas*, which are enumerated as Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali. These *yugas* are believed to recur in long cycles in the same sequential order. The ancient Greeks and Romans also conceived human history as consisting of ever-recurring cycles of four ages, which they defined as Golden, Silver, Copper, and Iron. In the writings of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca it is described how history begins with the Golden Age, which is an age of innocence and simplicity, and how increase in wealth and luxury leads to vices and degeneration.

The theory of cycles was revived in the nineteenth century by Nietzsche and, later on, by Oswald Spengler and other thinkers. Spengler regarded culture as a living organism: just as human life has the four stages of childhood, youth, old age, and death, so has culture four stages. He believed that Western culture is in a state of irremediable

decline. Arnold Toynbee, Pitrim Sorokin, Carroll Quigly, and other thinkers have also held the view that human history passes through periods of growth, prosperity, and decline and that Western culture is in a state of decline. But according to them, after the decline a resurgence of culture may take place.

Paradigm Shifts

Even without accepting any of the above theories, if we carefully study human history, we can see that it consists of a series of epochs, each one being characterized by a set of dominant thoughts, a certain belief pattern, values, and outlook on life. A paradigm shift in all these elements of culture takes place when an epoch gives way to another epoch. This paradigm shift starts with a fundamental epochal question or set of questions.

Western culture has its roots deep in Greek culture. Around the sixth century bce a new epoch began in Greek culture when several thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, Empedocles, and others raised the question: what is the ultimate substance of which the universe is made up? Three hundred years later came Socrates, who opened a new epoch with the basic question: what is virtue? The answer he gave was: virtue is knowledge. Three hundred years later there arose in Palestine a young carpenter's son named Jesus, who gave a different answer to the above question. His answer was: virtue is love— love for man and love for God. With this answer a new millennium began in Europe. The questions raised by the ancient Greek philosophers were taken up again in the sixteenth century.

At the dawn of Indian culture the Vedic Rishis raised some basic questions: What is the nature of the ultimate Reality? What is the real nature of man? What is life? What is the root from which life springs again and again? What is the real source of all happiness? With these questions began a new epoch in the history of Indian culture.

Around the sixth century bce, Buddha raised the question: what is the root-cause of all human suffering? With that he inaugurated another epoch. The Vedic and Buddhist paradigms continued as parallel streams in India for about a thousand years, until Acharya Shankara arose in the eighth century ce and established the supremacy of Advaita Vedanta, thereby opening a new epoch. With the introduction of Islam in the eleventh century another major paradigm shift took place in Indian culture.

The greatest paradigm shift in Indian culture began in the eighteenth century, when it encountered Western culture. Three aspects of Western culture posed challenges to Indian culture: materialistic science, which called in question traditional religious beliefs; open society based on equality and social justice, which was in contrast to the caste-bound Indian society based on inequality and social injustice; and the concept of God as the saviour of sinners, the poor, the downtrodden, and the sick. It was at that critical juncture that Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda arose and met these challenges.

In the year 1881 Swami Vivekananda—then a college student known as Narendra—went to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar and put to him the question, 'Sir, have you seen God?' Without a moment's hesitation Sri Ramakrishna answered, 'Yes, I see him as

clearly as I see you, in fact more intensely.' Sri Ramakrishna also told him, on a later occasion, that he saw God in him and in all human beings. With the above question and answer Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda opened a new epoch in the history of human culture.

For all their apparent simplicity, the above question and answer have epochal significance.

In the first place, they have enabled countless people to recover their faith in God. Secondly, they have freed religion from the constraints of scriptures and have paved the way for establishing harmony among world religions. Thirdly, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda separated spirituality from traditional religions, making spirituality an independent personal quest for the ultimate Truth in the depths of one's soul. They further showed that this inner quest, which had formerly been confined only to a small class of contemplatives, is possible for all people and should indeed become an essential dimension of everyone's life. It was this separation of spiritual-

More than fifty years before science began to confirm such views [about the unity of matter and spirit] tentatively, Ramakrishna realized these truths in his own being and gave them to the world. He is a great prophet who ushered in the new age some time before the doctrines and the structures of the age of dualism began to give way and break down. Ramakrishna himself is a symbol of such richness and depth that he has to be realized to be understood. No man can bring him to us. Only he himself can make us know him. —Dr Gualtherus H Mees, - 'Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Symbolism', *Vedanta for East and West*, 11/3, 81-2.

ity from the cultic, ritualistic, and institutional matrix of religion that in due course developed into a universal spiritual movement that has been growing strong in recent years, especially in Western countries, under such names as 'New Age Movement', 'secular spirituality', 'global spirituality', and 'spiritual revolution'.

The Power of Ideas

The nineteenth-century novelist and thinker Victor Hugo said, 'Nothing in this world is so powerful as an idea whose time has come.' An idea is the linguistic expression of a piece of knowledge. Ideas expressed in a logical form constitute what is known as 'reason'. Just as animals are guided by instincts, human beings are guided by ideas. Hegel, Toynbee, and other philosophers of history have shown that ideas have played an important role in determining the course of human history. In a sense, human history may be regarded as the history of ideas. However, the popular understanding of ideas is superficial. To have a deeper understanding of ideas it is necessary to study the views of great thinkers.

It was in the fourth century bce that the Greek philosopher Plato first postulated the self-existence of 'ideas', independent of human minds and external objects. Every object in the universe is only a copy or shadow of an eternal Idea or Form or Archetype. This Idea cannot be perceived or known by ordinary thinking. All these 'ideas' constitute a well-ordered, perfectly logical, eternal system known as the Logos, which is the basis of true reason. Plato's student Aristotle taught the reality of external objects and denied the eternity of Platonic 'ideas'. From that time Western philosophers have been divided into two groups: idealists, who hold that 'ideas' constitute the sole reality,

and realists, who hold that external objects constitute the sole reality.

In Indian philosophy the third century bce philosopher Bhartrihari first propounded the self-existence of knowledge independent of mind. Knowledge exists as independent units called *sphoṭa*. The function of words and sentences is to reveal the knowledge, *sphoṭa*, which they symbolize. Words are perishable and unreal, whereas *sphoṭa* is unchanging and eternal. All individual *sphoṭas* are parts of a universal *sphoṭa* known as Shabda Brahman.

The Mimamsakas reject the theory of *sphoṭa* and hold the opposite view, that letters and words are eternal. Vedantins also reject the *sphoṭa* theory. According to Advaitins, Brahman alone is eternal. Letters and words may also be regarded as eternal, but only in the sense that they are created at the beginning of each *kalpa*, cycle of creation, exactly in the same way they existed in the previous *kalpa*. Knowledge is in the mind; it does not exist independently. Atman is the ultimate source of consciousness or awareness. But to know anything the medium of a *vṛtti*, mental modification, is necessary. Knowledge is the result of the illumination of *vṛttis* by the light of the Atman. *Vṛttis* may be produced by external perception, by reading books, or by thinking. *Vṛttis* are of two main kinds: *nāma-vṛtti*, which produces words, and *rūpa-vṛtti*, which produces images in the mind. Knowledge gained through *vṛttis* gives rise to ideas.

In recent years ideas have gained great importance in all fields. One reason for this is the explosion of knowledge caused by the ongoing electronic revolution. All over the world nations are moving from 'agricultural society' or 'industrial society' to 'knowledge society'. India is trying to leapfrog from an agricultural economy to a knowledge-based economy. In a knowledge society nothing is more important than new ideas. Hence, innovation and creativity have become important aspects of present-day education.

Another factor that has contributed to the importance of ideas in recent years is the new line of thinking that considers ideas, concepts, values, and other elements of cultural information to be self-propagating units termed 'meme'. Meme is compared to the gene embedded in a chromosome. Just as genes determine the physical traits of a living organism, memes determine the ideas, beliefs, and culture of a human being. It is also held that memes undergo evolution following the same Darwinian principles of variation, competition, and natural selection. Just as genes combine to form complexes, which determine physical traits, so memes combine to form 'meme complexes', which determine the nature of a culture. A whole new branch of social science known as 'memetics', on the lines of genetics, has come into existence.¹

It is in the light of the ancient and modern streams of thought mentioned above that we have to understand Swami Vivekananda's views on ideas as determinants of cultural epochs.

Swamiji's Concept of Epochal Ideas

Swami Vivekananda attempted to reconcile and unify Bhartrihari's concept of *sphoṭa* and Shabda Brahman with the Vedantic concept of Hiranyagarbha, the Sankhyan concept of Mahat, and the ancient Greek idea of Logos. In his discourse on bhakti yoga, Swamiji

writes:

In the universe, Brahma or Hiranyagarbha or the Cosmic Mahat first manifested himself as name, and then as form, i.e. as this universe. All this expressed sensible universe is the form, behind which stands the eternal inexpressible Sphota, the manifester as *Logos* or Word. This eternal Sphota, the essential eternal material of all ideas or names, is the power through which the Lord creates the universe; nay, the Lord first becomes conditioned as the Sphota, and then evolves Himself out as the yet more concrete sensible universe.²

Vedanta holds that the microcosm and the macrocosm, the individual and the universal, are built on the same plane, in structure and function. Thought vibrations arising in individual minds travel like radio waves and influence other minds. In fact, the mind of each person acts like a broadcasting centre and also as a radio receiving set.

Regarding this Swamiji says:

Good and evil thoughts are each a potent power, and they fill the universe. As vibration continues so thought remains in the form of thought until translated into action. ... We are the heirs to good and evil thought. If we make ourselves pure and the instruments of good thoughts, these will enter us. The good soul will not be receptive to evil thoughts. Evil thoughts find the best field in evil people; they are like microbes which germinate and increase only when they find a suitable soil (6.134).

Apart from the thoughts of individuals, there are also universal thought waves. These arise in the Mahat, cosmic mind, and are the expressions of cosmic *sphota* known as Shabda Brahman. These universal thoughts arise periodically and spread all over the world, creating new epochs in human history. They determine the zeitgeist of an epoch. Regarding this Swami Vivekananda says:

'Mere [human] thoughts are like little wavelets; fresh impulses to vibration come to them simultaneously, until at last one great wave seems to stand up and swallow up the rest. These universal thought-waves seem to recur every five hundred years, when invariably the great wave typifies and swallows up the others (ibid.).

Role of the Prophet

Arnold Toynbee, in his twelve-volume *Study of History*, says that when wealth and vices increase a civilization undergoes decline. At that critical juncture a small group of thinkers who have new ideas and are inspired by new ideals arise and rejuvenate the culture by inaugurating a new epoch. He calls this group the 'creative minority'. How does this creative minority arise, and how does it get its motivating ideas? After examining several alternatives Toynbee comes to the conclusion that a group of people associated with a spiritual leader, such as a prophet or incarnation of God, alone succeeds in inaugurating a new epoch in the cultural history of humanity.

Swami Vivekananda's ideas, expressed forty years before Toynbee's, are in accord with the above view. According to Swamiji, the prophet comes riding the crest of the universal thought wave. By 'prophet' is meant an illumined world teacher who comes

with a new message for the whole humanity. All the world religions accept the concept of world teacher. Hinduism and Christianity have the idea of incarnation of God. In Christianity God is believed to incarnate only once in human history, whereas in Hinduism God is believed to incarnate again and again as an avatara 'whenever virtue declines and evil prevails'.

Whatever be the name by which the world teacher is known, the universal thought waves, the epochal ideas, originate from him. He originates, energizes, spreads, and sustains the universal spiritual ideas that create the zeitgeist of the epoch. Speaking about this Swamiji said:

It is this which constitutes a prophet. He focuses in his own mind the thought of the age in which he is living and gives it back to mankind in concrete form. Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Mohammad, and Luther may be instanced as the great waves that stood up above their fellows (with a probable lapse of five hundred years between them). Always the wave that is backed by the greatest purity and the noblest character is what breaks upon the world as a movement of social reform (ibid.).

The prophet or world teacher inspires a group of disciples who spread the master's message among a 'creative minority'. The prophet and his disciples function something like a humongous hydroelectric dam. The waters of an ordinary river do not have much power apart from their use in irrigation and transport. But when the waters flow through the giant turbines of a hydroelectric dam, they produce tremendous energy in the form of electricity. In a similar way, the prophet or avatara generates universal spiritual ideas and, by applying them in his own life through his sadhana, imparts tremendous power to those ideas and gives them to the world as his message. Like high tension power lines, which carry electricity from the power plant to various parts of the country, the disciples of the prophet serve as carriers of his message and as the main channel for the flow of his power to the common people.

Swamiji has stated that universal, epochal thought waves occur approximately every five hundred years. This means a world teacher or prophet or incarnation appears on the world scene once in five centuries or so. The history of world religions shows that this, to a great extent, is true. According to Swamiji, Sri Ramakrishna is the latest of these generators of universal thought waves. Swamiji said: 'Once again in our day there is a vibration of the waves of thought and the central idea is that of the Immanent God, and this is everywhere cropping up in every form and every sect (ibid.).

The Epochal 'New Man'

Sri Ramakrishna is regarded as the avatara of the modern age by millions of people. This popular adoration is not the result of any propaganda. There are thousands of homes, some even in the most unlikely places, in which Sri Ramakrishna is worshipped by people who know little about him. In spite of his homely appearance, there is something in his personality that radiates divinity. Nearly a century ago a senior monk of our Order once showed a photograph of Sri Ramakrishna to Sri Narayan Guru, the great saint and social reformer of Kerala, and asked him, 'What do you think of this person?' After looking at the picture intently for a minute or two the Guru replied, 'If Brahman be

given a Form, it would be like this'. He then asked the swami whose picture it was, and was immensely pleased to know that it was the picture of the guru of Swami Vivekananda.

For a person who was to be regarded as the modern incarnation, Sri Ramakrishna was born in a most favourable place, time, and culture. It is doubtful whether there was any better part of the globe for an avatara to be born in than India and, more particularly, Bengal. India is, in the words of Swami Vivekananda, 'the land where humanity has attained the highest towards gentleness, towards generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, above all, the land of introspection and of spirituality' (3.105). The Indian ethos provides the most favourable soil for saintliness and spirituality to flourish, flower, and fructify. This is the land where saints, sages, and spiritual teachers are venerated as gods. Hinduism is a vast conglomeration of sects, cults, beliefs, philosophies, practices, and traditions and is an inexhaustible storehouse of vast spiritual power accumulated by thousands of rishis, yogis, munis, jñanis, bhaktas, monks, lay people, saints, and sages through several millennia. The whole of this vast spiritual power was available to the new avatara to draw upon.

The world could not bear a second birth like that of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, in five hundred years.

The mass of thought that he has left, has first to be transformed into experience; the spiritual energy given forth has to be converted into achievement. Until this is done, what right have we to ask for more? What could we do with more? – Sri Aurobindo Ghosh.

Prabuddha Bharata, 41/2, 144

Bengali society, culture, and ethos were particularly favourable to the advent of a new avatara. The cultural homogeneity of Bengali society cutting across caste barriers, the great work of liberalizing social attitudes and uplifting the masses carried on by Sri Chaitanya and his followers, the *kula-guru*, hereditary system of spiritual instruction, the popularization of congregational singing, *saṅkīrtan*, and of meditation and yogic practices by tantric followers among the masses, the worship of God as the Mother of the universe, mother-centred family life—all these factors had prepared the socio-cultural ambience for the work of the avatara of the age. Moreover, since Calcutta was the capital of the then British India, the awakening of the Indian mind consequent upon the impact of Western culture began in Bengal, and this had made the minds of people more receptive to new ideas of religious harmony, universalism, and divinity of humankind taught by Sri Ramakrishna.

Naturally endowed with many extraordinary qualities and capacities, Sri Ramakrishna was out from the ordinary run of people. From his childhood, he seemed to have an awareness of his inherent divine nature and the uniqueness of his personality; he also had the awareness that he was born with a great mission in life. This awareness made him think independently and not follow the herd, while maintaining at the same time an uncompromising adherence to truth all through his life. Since he knew the limitations of secular knowledge, he refused to have more than two or three years of formal schooling. He had a sharp intellect, gigantic willpower, equality of vision, equanimity of mind, unconditional love for all, deep compassion for suffering people, openness to diverse views, and an attitude of harmony and acceptance towards life.

There are other features that make Sri Ramakrishna stand out even among the elite

group of prophets and avatars. One of these is the superhuman spiritual power that he displayed in following the different spiritual paths of different Hindu sects and different world religions.

Normally, all spiritual persons, including great prophets, confine themselves to their own unique spiritual paths discovered or traversed by them. But Sri Ramakrishna not only followed different spiritual paths with ease, he also attained peak after peak of transcendental experience in each path with incredible rapidity. This has no parallel in hagiography. About this extraordinary spiritual feat, Sri Aurobindo writes:

In the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, we see a colossal spiritual capacity, first driving straight to the divine realisation, taking, as it were, the kingdom of heaven by violence, and then seizing upon one Yogic method after another and extracting the substance out of it with an incredible rapidity, always to return to the heart of the whole matter, the realisation and possession of God by the power of love, by the extension of inborn spirituality into various experience and by the spontaneous play of an intuitive knowledge. *Such an example cannot be generalised.*³

The other extraordinary feature of Sri Ramakrishna's personality was the tremendous, unprecedented, and unparalleled degree of intensity of love for God that he displayed in his life. After Chaitanya Mahaprabhu the world has never seen such an unimaginable intensity of thirst for the experience of God. It was this spiritual thirst that made him follow different pathways to God.

Yet another unique feature seen in the later life of Sri Ramakrishna was the ease and facility with which he could frequently ascend to the superconscious state of communion with God, known as *bhāva samadhi*, thereby losing consciousness of the external world even in the midst of people.

One unique aspect of the lives of almost all prophets and incarnations of God is their great charisma to draw a group of disciples, who are generally found to be men of high spiritual calibre, and inspire lifelong allegiance and loyalty in them. After the passing away of the prophet, his disciples serve as his apostles or messengers, interpreting and carrying his message to people living in nearby and far off places. Sri Ramakrishna had sixteen young disciples whom he trained from their early youth and who later formed a monastic order in his name. He had several enlightened householder disciples as well. The foremost of his disciples was Narendra, who spread his master's message in different parts of India and the world.

The discipleship of Swami Vivekananda was Sri Ramakrishna's greatest asset. No other prophet in human history ever had such a brilliant, learned, loving, devoted, multi-faceted genius and visionary like Swami Vivekananda as his disciple. However, it is to be noted here that though Narendra accepted Sri Ramakrishna as his guru at the impressionable age of eighteen, he had difficulty in accepting Sri Ramakrishna as an avatara till Sri Ramakrishna's last days on earth. One day during his terminal illness at Cossipore, Sri Ramakrishna told Narendra, 'Some people call me God'. Narendra told him bluntly, 'Let a thousand people call you God, but I will certainly not call you God as long as I do not know it to be true.'⁴ Later on Narendra must have obtained incontrovertible proof of

the avatahood of Sri Ramakrishna through some direct transcendental experience, which he never divulged to anybody. This is clear from the fact that the same Sri Ramakrishna whom he doubted to be an avatara was later described by him as '*Jṛmbhita yuga īśvara, jagadīśvara*; God of the new age, God of the world' and as '*avatāravariṣṭha*; the greatest of all incarnations' in sublime hymns and songs that are now sung in hundreds of homes and ashramas.

What was the reason behind Narendra's hesitation in accepting Sri Ramakrishna as an avatara? It should be pointed out in this context that the avatahood of Sri Ramakrishna was not a dogma propounded by his disciples. Long before the disciples started gathering around him, he had been openly declared to be the new avatara by several eminent scholars like Vaishnavacharan, Narayan Sastri, Gauri Pandit of Indesh, and others. Narendra knew all this, he was also aware of the supernatural events in the Great Master's life. One day the well-known Brahmo Samaj leader Vijaykrishna Goswami had a vision of Sri Ramakrishna in Dhaka, and by actually touching the figure he was seeing, he checked that it was not an illusion. Later, when he narrated the event before Sri Ramakrishna at Cossipore in Calcutta, Narendra was also present and said, 'I too have seen him many times. How can I say I do not believe your words?' (885).⁵

From the above facts it is reasonable to assume that the real cause behind Narendra's hesitation was that he was trying to understand the deeper implications of the avatara doctrine and wanted to have certitude regarding the truth of it. Whereas the other disciples thought of Sri Ramakrishna in relation to their own personal salvation, Narendra thought of him in relation to the implications of avatahood for Hinduism as a whole and for the well-being of humanity.

However, once he gained the certitude he was seeking, Narendra used his insights to work out the religious, national, and global implications of Sri Ramakrishna's avatahood. One of the great contributions Swami Vivekananda made to the modern world was his new interpretation of the concept of avatara and his exposition of the significance of Sri Ramakrishna's unique life.

In this regard Swamiji's work was somewhat similar to that of St Paul. St Paul did not attempt to expound the teachings of Jesus, of which there is hardly any mention in his epistles; his great work was to expound the significance of Jesus's life and death as well as to give a new interpretation of the Jewish concept of Messiah, the relevance and purpose of God's incarnation.

Similarly, Swamiji's main effort was not so much to explain Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, for he knew that, since they are based on the eternal truths of the spiritual realm, they had the force of a new revelation and the intrinsic power to create their own irresistible impact on the lives of millions of people.

Notes and References

1. The concept of 'meme' was introduced in 1976 by Richard Dawkins through his book *The Selfish Gene*, and was popularized by the American philosopher Daniel Dennet in 1991 through his book *Consciousness Explained*.
2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.57.

3. Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2005), 36. Emphasis added.
4. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 962.
5. This kind of supersensuous experience belongs to the category of what Christian mystics call 'corporeal vision'.



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Swami Vivekananda's main work was to expound the true significance and importance of Sri Ramakrishna's great life. In the course of this work Swamiji gave a new interpretation of the avatara doctrine.

Significance of Sri Ramakrishna's Avatarahood

The significance of the avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna cannot be considered in isolation. It has to be understood in the light of the lives and functions of other avatars, prophets, and world teachers. What are the functions of an avatara or world teacher? What role does he play in the advancement of human culture, in the spiritual elevation of humanity, in the enhancement of human welfare, in the promotion of peace, unity, and love among people? Above all, how does he help people in attaining the ultimate goal of life, in attaining salvation or liberation? Hereby some of these issues are dealt with briefly.

Avatara as Kapāla-mocana

Swami Vivekananda was once asked in a question-and-answer session, 'How to recognize God when He has assumed a human form?' Swamiji replied, 'One who can alter the doom of people is the Lord. No Sadhu, however advanced, can claim this unique position.' 6 'Avatars are Kapalamochanas, that is, they can alter the doom of people' (323-4).

What did Swamiji mean by 'doom of people' and *kapāla-mocana*? By 'doom' Swamiji meant a person's destiny, his future life. According to the belief held by Indian religions, a person's future is determined by his karma. Every good or bad action produces, apart from its visible physical effect in this world, an unseen cosmic effect or 'karmic residue' known as *sancita-karma*. Patanjali, in his *Yoga Sutra*, calls it *karmāśaya*. It is 'unseen', *adr̥ṣṭa*, in the sense that nobody knows where *sancita-karma* is stored. According to popular belief, it is 'written in one's *lalāta* or *kapāla*, forehead'—Vyasa, in his commentary on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, states that *karmāśaya* is stored in a person's *buddhi*. It is the fructification or activation, *vipāka*, of *sancita-karma* that leads to rebirth. In the next birth it comes back to the person as *prārabdha-karma*, which determines the person's birth, death, experiences, and circumstances in that life. This is what is popularly known as 'destiny' or 'doom'. It is also believed that once the *sancita-karma* is stored no human being can change or prevent it from fructification; it *will* fructify and *will* cause rebirth.

According to Hindu belief, only God or the avatara can destroy a person's *sanc-*

ita-karma; in that case, the person will not be born again and will be freed from the bondage to the wheel of samsara, transmigratory existence. In the case of a person who is already born, God or the avatara can modify or alter the course of his *prārabdha*. This means that if a person is destined to suffer, God alone can mitigate or prevent it. This is the reason why Swamiji described the avatara as *kapāla-mocana*, one who can 'alter another person's doom'.

Freedom from the bondage to the wheel of samsara is known as *mukti*, final liberation. All theistic schools hold that only Ishvara or the avatara can give this final liberation.⁷ This is what corresponds to the Christian concept of salvation. In the Bhagavadgita Sri Krishna declares: 'Those who surrender all their karmas to me and meditate on me with unswerving devotion, I lift them up out of the ocean of transmigratory existence.'⁸ Krishna gives this assurance to Arjuna: 'Give up all your obligations and take refuge in me alone; I will liberate you from all your sins (and their consequences); grieve not' (18.66). Christ gave a similar assurance: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'⁹ Only an avatara can give this kind of divine assurance.

According to Swami Vivekananda, it is this power to give ultimate Liberation that is the chief characteristic of the avatara. And it was the faith that Sri Ramakrishna was endowed with this power that made him accept and declare Sri Ramakrishna as the avatara of the present age. In fact, Swamiji begins his magnificent vesper hymn with the words, '*Khaṇḍana-bhavabandhana ... vandi tomāy; O, breaker of bonds ... we adore thee!*'

How does the avatara break the bonds of the jivas? Swamiji has indicated this in the two lines that form the climax of the vesper hymn. Bonds of samsara are not like ropes; they are nothing but different forms of ignorance. The avatara removes the darkness of ignorance from the core of the heart by illuminating it with the light of knowledge: *jyotira jyoti ujala hṛdikandara; tumi tamabhanjanhār*. In the Gita Sri Krishna also states: 'Out of compassion for them alone, I, residing in their hearts, destroy the darkness of ignorance with the brilliant lamp of knowledge.'¹⁰

The Avatara as the Door to the Infinite

We have seen that the main function of the avatara is to give liberation to those who look to him for help. To fulfil this function the avatara must serve as a door to the absolute Reality on the one hand, and should be accessible to all people in the relative world on the other. This means he should occupy a position between the Absolute and the relative, the *nitya* and the *lila*, as Sri Ramakrishna put it. During the latter half of his life on earth, Sri Ramakrishna dwelt habitually at this borderland, which he described as *bhāva* or *bhāvamukha*.

After attaining the realization of the non-dual impersonal Nirguna Brahman and remaining in that state for nearly six months, when he returned to the ordinary world, he continued to have visions of the personal God, Saguna Brahman, in various forms. Then, the Divine Mother appeared to him and gave this command: 'Do thou remain in bhava.'¹¹ Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who calls this state *bhāvamukha*, has given a detailed explanation of it. According to him:

It is the universal I-ness existing between the aspects of Saguna and Nirguna that is called Bhavamukha. ... This universal I is the I of Isvara [God] or the Mother. In their attempt to describe the nature of this immense I, the Vaishnava teachers of Bengal have called it the divine Sri Krishna, the embodiment of pure consciousness, which is of the nature of an 'inconceivable difference in non-difference (Achintya-bhedabheda)' 12

Sri Ramakrishna identified himself with this universal 'I', which he called 'ripe I'. All individual 'I'-s or egos, which he called 'unripe I', are false manifestations of the one real, supreme, universal 'I'. In that state of *bhāvamukha*, 'the world appeared to him as an "immense mind" in which innumerable waves of ideas were rising, surging and merging' (543).

In his *Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali states: 'To a yogi who is established in the realization of the distinction between *puruṣa* and *buddhi* come omnipotence and omniscience.' 13 If this can be true in the case of a human yogi, how much more it should be in the case of a divine personality like the avatara.

Throughout the Gita Sri Krishna is referred to as Bhagavan. Acharya Shankara, in his commentary on the Gita, quotes a passage from the *Vishnu Purana* to indicate the meaning of the term Bhagavan: 'A person who knows the creation and dissolution of the universe, the coming and going of beings, and their knowledge and ignorance, is called Bhagavan.' 14 Swami Vivekananda added the appellation 'Bhagavan' to the name of Sri Ramakrishna. Moreover, he composed a hymn in Sanskrit each line of which begins with the first letter of the salutatory mantra *Om namo bhagavate rāmakṛṣṇāya*. The hymn is an expression of the soul's total surrender to the Divine Master.

The whole cultus, tradition of worship and adoration, of Sri Ramakrishna, which is now the main spiritual power sustaining and holding together the whole Ramakrishna movement, is based on the faith that Sri Ramakrishna, by his intense spiritual practices and experiences, has opened a new doorway to salvation or liberation, and that by his grace anyone can attain it. In the New Testament Jesus speaks of himself as the door to salvation. He says, 'I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.' 15

Sri Ramakrishna gave a similar example to explain the role of an incarnation. He said:

Take the case of a man who stands by a wall on both sides of which there are meadows stretching to infinity. If there is a hole in the wall, through it he can see everything on the other side. ... The ego of Incarnations and Ishvarakotis is like the wall with a hole. Though they remain on this side of the wall, still they can see the endless meadow on the other side. That is to say, though they have a human body, they are always united with God. ... And if the hole is big enough, they can go through it and come back again. 16

Sri Ramakrishna was obviously referring to his own life here. On another occasion, after giving the same illustration, he asked a disciple, 'Tell me what that hole is'. When the disciple answered, 'You are that hole', he was very much pleased (826).

The Avatara as the Revelation of the Noumenon

In the Gita the main purpose of God's descent as avatara is stated to be 'protection of the virtuous and destruction of the wicked'. 17 In the present-day world this idea does

not seem to have much relevance. As a matter of fact, some of the great medieval commentators themselves have expressed the view that destruction of the wicked cannot be regarded as the primary purpose of God's incarnation. Madhvacharya states that God can punish the wicked even without taking birth. According to him, God's incarnation is a part of his lila, divine sport. Earlier to Madhva, Ramanuja also held that destruction of the wicked can be only of secondary importance, for God is compassionate even to his enemies. According to Ramanuja, the primary purpose of God's incarnation is '*ārādhyā svarūpa pradarsāna*; to reveal an adorable form'.

In the socio-religious context of today, Ramanuja's idea that the main purpose of God's incarnation is to reveal himself through his adorable divine image seems to be quite relevant. The world is now in need of a new theanthropic idea, that is, an anthropomorphic representation of God that is in harmony with the norms, ideals, and ethos of contemporary society. Especially in India there has been a long-felt need for a new spiritual ideal, the divine form of a new *iṣṭa devatā*, Chosen Deity, whom people can adore as their own, and with whom they can establish a deeply personal relationship.

The days of kings and royal splendour are over, not only in the secular realm but in the religious realm as well. The modern world needs a new paradigm of spiritual life centred on a new theanthropic template. Especially in India there has been a long-standing need for an incarnation of God who belongs to the common people, lives their life, understands them, and gives them unconditional love irrespective of the distinctions created by wealth, caste, sect, religion, region, or race. Sri Ramakrishna has fulfilled this need.

In this context Swami Vivekananda's prophetic words are worth quoting.

'And as the sure pledge of this glorious future, the all-merciful Lord has manifested in the present age, as stated above, an incarnation which in point of completeness in revelation, its synthetic harmonising of all ideals, and its promoting of every sphere of spiritual culture, surpasses the manifestation of all past ages.' 18

The significance of God's assuming a human form as the avatara is that it is a means of revelation of the noumenon. As stated by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, reality has two aspects: a manifested aspect, which can be perceived by the senses and is known as phenomenon, and an unmanifested aspect, which is beyond sense perception and is known as the noumenon. According to Kant, the noumenon, which is the 'thing-in-itself', can never be known.

In Vedanta noumenon refers to Brahman, which is beyond ordinary thought and speech. If Brahman is absolutely transcendent, then how can we know about Brahman at all? The answer is, although Brahman cannot be perceived *directly as an object*, Brahman reveals itself to all people in three ways. In the first place, everyone knows that oneself exists; no one can doubt one's own existence. This self-evident direct experience needs no proof. According to Acharya Shankara, this experience has its source in Brahman.¹⁹

Brahman also reveals itself in two other ways: one through words and the other through forms or images.

Brahman's revelation through words constitutes what is known as Shrutis. The Upanishads are the records of Shrutis. Most of the statements in the Upanishads give only indirect knowledge of Brahman. But there are a few mantras known as *mahāvākyas* that can give rise to the direct experience of Brahman in a highly qualified person. This direct experience of Brahman produced by words is known as *śabdaaparokṣa*, direct experience [of Brahman] through words.

The third way Brahman reveals itself is through avatars. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'Seeing an Incarnation of God is the same as seeing God Himself.' 20 One day Narendra argued with Girish, the famous dramatist of Bengal, that God being infinite it is not possible to know all of God. Coming to know of this Sri Ramakrishna remarked: 'What need is there to know everything about God? It is enough if we only realize Him. And we see God Himself if we but see His Incarnation. Suppose a person goes to the Ganges and touches its water. He will then say, "Yes, I have seen and touched the Ganges." To say this it is not necessary for him to touch the whole length of the river from Hardwar to Gangasagar' (725-6).

Almost a similar idea occurs in the New Testament.

A disciple of Jesus by name Philip one day told him, 'Lord, show us the Father [the Godhead] and it sufficeth us.' In reply Jesus told him, 'Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, show us the father?' 21

The Avatara as Iṣṭa Devatā

The concept of *iṣṭa devatā* is one of the features of Hinduism that distinguishes it from all other religions. Hinduism's capacity to accommodate diverse creeds, cults, and sects within its fold as well as its capacity to accommodate other religions and even secular philosophies is chiefly due to the fact that the whole Hindu outlook on life is based on the principle of unity in diversity. The concept of *iṣṭa devatā* is a symbolic expression of this principle of unity in diversity.

The concept of *iṣṭa devatā* is the faith that God, although one, can assume several forms, and every person has the freedom to choose any of these forms in accordance with his or her temperament and spiritual inclination. The form of God that a person chooses—it may be that of an eternal divinity like Shiva, Vishnu, Saraswati, Kali or an avatara like Rama, Krishna, and others—is known as that person's *iṣṭa devatā*, which literally means the god or goddess that is desired, cherished, or chosen. The Chosen Deity is adored either as the Supreme Deity or as a manifestation of the Supreme Godhead. But what is more important is the intensely personal relationship one establishes with that particular form of God. The Chosen Deity becomes one's all in all, dominating one's thoughts, emotions, outlook, relationships with other people, and actions. This idea has been graphically expressed in a beautiful song 'Thou art my All in All, O Lord!', which Swami Vivekananda used to sing before Sri Ramakrishna.22

The origin of the concept of *iṣṭa devatā* may be traced to Vedic times. The Vedic Aryans worshipped several deities such as Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Aditya, Vishnu, Rudra, and

others. This does not, however, mean that Vedic religion was polytheistic, for the Vedic sages also realized that all these divinities were the manifestations of one Supreme Godhead. This understanding found expression in the famous Vedic dictum '*Ekam- sat viprā bahudhā vadanti*; Truth is one, sages call It by different names'.²³ The nineteenth-century orientalist Max Müller called this principle 'Henotheism', which the Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines as 'The worship of one god without denying the existence of other gods'.

The *iṣṭa devatā* is not a mere symbol of the Supreme God, but its real manifestation. Sri Ramakrishna has repeatedly stressed that 'God with form is as real as God without form',²⁴ and has also explained the relation between the forms of God and the formless God in the following way: 'Do you know what I mean? Satchidananda is like an infinite ocean. Intense cold freezes the water into ice, which floats on the ocean in blocks of various forms. Likewise, through the cooling influence of bhakti, one sees forms of God in the Ocean of the Absolute. These forms are meant for the bhaktas, the lovers of God. But when the Sun of Knowledge rises, the ice melts; it becomes the same water it was before' (191).

In Bengal Vaishnavism the form of Sri Krishna is regarded as eternal. According to this school, the highest transcendental level of Reality is the eternal abode of Sri Krishna, which is of the nature of pure Consciousness. In that eternal abode the eternal Krishna is eternally engaged in his eternal *rāsa-līlā*, divine sport. The ultimate goal of spiritual life for a Vaishnava devotee is not mukti, but the everlasting experience of the transcendental joy of eternal participation in this eternal divine sport. Confirming this Sri Ramakrishna said: 'It can't be said that bhaktas need Nirvāna. According to some books there is an eternal Krishna and there are also His eternal devotees. Krishna is Spirit embodied, and His Abode also is Spirit embodied. Krishna is eternal and the devotees are also eternal' (779). Sri Ramakrishna explains this transcendental experience by extending his illustration of water and ice: 'But you may say that for certain devotees God assumes eternal forms. There are places in the ocean where the ice doesn't melt at all. It assumes the form of quartz' (191).

Another spiritual principle associated with the concept of *iṣṭa devatā* is *iṣṭa mantra*. Every *iṣṭa devatā*, whether a deity or an avatara, has his or her own mantra. What is a mantra? It is a special combination of words with the power to reveal the transcendental aspect of a deity. These mantras are revealed to seers in the depths of contemplation.

Why have we discussed this topic here? The reason is that Sri Ramakrishna has been accepted as the *iṣṭa devatā* by hundreds of thousands of people, and what we have written above about *iṣṭa devatā* applies to Sri Ramakrishna as well. Mantras pertaining to him have also been evolved and are being widely used. All avataras or incarnations are regarded as divine, as manifestations of the Supreme Godhead. In fact, this is what distinguishes an avatara in Hinduism or incarnation in Christianity from a prophet. A prophet only reveals transcendental truths about God, but is not himself regarded as divine; he is a messenger of God and is far superior to the ordinary run of humankind.

Any discussion on the avatahood of Sri Ramakrishna must necessarily take into account his status as *iṣṭa devatā*. This aspect of his real nature is not thrust upon people

by dint of authority. The acceptance of Sri Ramakrishna as *iṣṭa devatā* by people is a spontaneous response based on some vague intuitive perception they themselves may not understand.

Om Hrīm Ṛtam

Swami Vivekananda opens his Sanskrit hymn on Sri Ramakrishna with these three words. Here the word 'Om' stands for the infinite, universal dimension of Brahman—as both the impersonal, Nirguna, and the personal, Saguna.

When seen through the narrow channels of human understanding, the undifferentiated universal dimension of Brahman appears to be differentiated into certain divine entities or deities. These differentiated, *khaṇḍa*, aspects of Brahman are symbolized by certain cryptic words known collectively as 'seed', *bīja*. It is this *khaṇḍa* form of Brahman that assumes the anthropomorphic forms of various gods and goddesses such as Shiva, Kali, Vishnu, and others. This means that each deity has his or her own *bīja*. One of the most universal and powerful *bīja* is *hrīm*, which represents the universal Mother-Power, *matṛ-śakti*. Sri Ramakrishna was the embodiment of this Mother-Power; hence Swamiji has used *hrīm* to indicate the spiritual power of Sri Ramakrishna.

Speaking about the akhaṇḍa and khaṇḍa aspects of Brahman, Swami Vivekananda says: 'And as Om represents the Akhanda, the undifferentiated Brahman, the others [bījas] represent the khanda or the differentiated views of the same Being; and they are all helpful to divine meditation and the acquisition of true knowledge.' 25

The third word *ṛtam* etymologically means 'truth'. In the Vedas it is used in the sense of cosmic order governing the universe. This cosmic order has several dimensions—physical, moral, social, and spiritual. That is to say, all the physical laws, moral laws, social laws, and spiritual laws are manifestations of one great universal cosmic order known as *ṛtam*. In this sense it is similar to the ancient Greek idea of Logos and the ancient Chinese idea of Tao. In the post-Vedic period the word *ṛtam* came to be replaced by the word 'dharma'.

Virtuous life means to live in harmony with *ṛtam*; violation of *ṛtam* is vice. This shows that by *ṛtam* is meant the true way of life, *ṛtapath*, as Swamiji himself has put it. By identifying Sri Ramakrishna with *ṛtam* what Swamiji has implied is that Sri Ramakrishna is the true way to the Divine, the direct means, *upāya*, of realizing God.²⁶

According to Ramanuja, the means of realizing God is of two kinds: *siddhopāya* and *sādhyopāya*. By *siddhopāya* is meant the 'ever-available perfect means'. This is a direct path. According to Ramanuja, God's grace is the *siddhopāya*; it is not created by man and it is always available to all people. By *sādhyopāya* is meant the 'means which is to be achieved through effort, which involves human effort'. This effort includes purification, prayer, worship, meditation, and other practices. It is an indirect path. Sri Ramakrishna is obviously the *siddhopāya* of the present age. This is the essential meaning of *Om hrīm ṛtam*.

In the Bengali vesper hymn 'Khandana-bhavabandhana' Swami Vivekananda has described Sri Ramakrishna as the Goal, whereas in the Sanskrit hymn 'Om Hrim Ritam' he

has described Sri Ramakrishna as the Way.

Notes and References

6. *Complete Works*, 5.325.
7. According to Advaita Vedanta, both karma and karmic residue, *sapcita-karma*, are only products of *ajñāna* or *avidya*, ignorance. When the primordial causal ignorance, *kāraṇa-ajñāna* or *mūla-avidyā*, is destroyed by the knowledge of Brahman, *sapcita-karma* automatically gets destroyed and the person attains final liberation; this alone is true mukti.
8. Bhagavadgita, 12.6-7.
9. Matthew, 11.28.
10. Bhagavadgita, 10.11.
11. *Gospel*, 175.
12. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2010), 544.
13. *Sattva-puruṣānyatā-khyāti-mātrasya sarvabhāvādhiṣṭhātṛtvaṁ sarva-jñātṛtvaṁ ca*. Patanjali, *Yoga Sutra*, 3.50.
14. *Utpattim pralayaṁ caiva bhūtānām-āgatim gatim. Vetti vidyām-avidyām ca sa vācya bhagavān-iti*. *Vishnu Purana*, 6.5.78, quoted by Acharya Shankara in his commentary on Gita 3.36.
15. John, 10.9.
16. *Gospel*, 760.
17. Bhagavadgita, 4.8.
18. *Complete Works*, 6.185.
19. *Sarvo hyātmāstitvaṁ pratyeti ... ātmā ca brahma*. Acharya Shankara's commentary on *Brahma Sutra*, 1.1.1.
20. *Gospel*, 186.
21. John, 14.8-9.
22. 'Nātha Tumi Sarvasva Āmār', composed by Trailokyanath Sanyal, the famous poet and singer of Brahmo Samaj. See *Gospel*, 207.
23. Rig Veda, 1.164.46.
24. *Gospel*, 217.
25. *Complete Works*, 3.59.
26. Cf. Christ's statement: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.' John, 14.6.



SECTION II

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Next to food what every human being seeks most is love. Love is a hunger that no amount of wealth or knowledge can satisfy. What is love? According to Swami Vivekananda, love is an expression of the sense of unity, identification, the relationship of a soul with another soul. Says Swamiji: 'Love binds, love makes for that oneness. You become one, the mother with the child, families with the city, the world becomes one. ... For love is existence, God Himself; and all this is the manifestation of that One Love, more or less expressed. The difference is only in degree, but it is the manifestation of that one love throughout.'¹

Premārpaṇa

The Upanishads speak of unity at two levels: the level of *prāṇa* and the level of Consciousness.

Prāṇa is the universal vital force sustaining all life. Ordinary human love is an expression of the unifying force of *prāṇa*. Love between parents and children, between husband and wife, between friends—all human relationships are expressions of the unity of *prāṇa*. But ordinary human love has several limitations. It is usually found to be self-centred and based on certain conditions. It causes attachment and often changes into hatred. Even if in some cases love is found to be pure and unconditional, it also is impermanent, for human life itself is impermanent. The human soul, however, hungers for boundless, pure, unconditional, eternal, and everlasting love. Enquiry into the true nature of love led the sages of the Upanishads to the discovery of a higher level of love that was based on the unity of Consciousness. The sages discovered that behind the ever-changing, impermanent, phenomenal world there is the unchanging, eternal, ultimate Reality, which is of the nature of infinite Consciousness known as Brahman. Brahman exists in all beings as the Atman or *pratyagātman*, inner self. This means all individual selves are parts or aspects of Brahman.

Love based on this unity of Consciousness is pure, unchanging, unconditional, and eternal. This spiritual love forms the real basis of even ordinary worldly love, although owing to ignorance most people are not aware of this fact.

This great idea of the oneness of all selves in the supreme Self as the real basis of human love was propounded more than three thousand years ago by the sage Yajñavalkya. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* he teaches his wife Maitreyi: 'The husband is loved, not for the sake of the husband, but for the sake of the (supreme) Self; the wife is loved, not for the sake of the wife, but for the sake of the (supreme) Self.'² This idea means that human love is an expression of God's love. True love is divine.³ This noble, enlightening, and liberating idea remained locked for centuries in sacred scriptures, which were in the possession of a class of privileged people who themselves never applied that idea in practical life. As a result some of the worst forms of social inequality and injustice prevailed in Indian society for centuries until modern times.

It was Sri Ramakrishna who recovered for the modern world the ancient Vedic ideal of love based on the oneness of all selves in the supreme Self or God. He first of all applied it in his own life, in his relationship with his spiritual spouse and his disciples, and in his attitude towards all people. Without making any distinctions of caste or creed he loved all people. It was the divine love emanating from him that drew people to him like a magnet. The rich and the poor, the saintly and the sinful, men and women, Hindus, Brahmos, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs—all felt alike his pure love and benediction. That is why Swami Vivekananda has described Sri Ramakrishna as *premārpaṇa*, one who showered his love on all .

From time immemorial the ideal of God realization has been so much stressed in Indian culture that it has fostered a general tendency to neglect social awareness, concern for the suffering of others, and undervaluation of human love.

Sages and saints have taught all through the centuries that love for human beings leads to bondage and is a major obstacle to God realization.

Even Buddha warned against *prīti*, love, and advised people to cultivate only *maitri* or *metta*, friendliness. Such an attitude makes spiritual life self-centred and weakens family bonds and social unity. By recovering the ancient Vedic concept of the spiritual foundation of love Sri Ramakrishna has shown the way to harmonize human love and divine love. He made love for man an expression of love for God; human beings are to be loved not as human beings but as embodiments or manifestations of God. Human relationships should be divinized.

Divinization of human relationships is an important contribution of Sri Ramakrishna to world culture. This principle of divinization of human relationships can be applied to all areas of social interaction—between parents and children, between employers and employees, between teachers and students, between doctors and patients, among fellow travellers, among neighbours, and so on. Divinization of relationships prevents misunderstandings, quarrels, and conflicts and fosters friendly cooperation, mutual help, and love.

Prāṇārpaṇa

The truth that the unity of all selves in the supreme Self is the ultimate basis of human love does not mean that love is mere knowledge. Love expresses itself through action. The famous Lebanese writer and artist Kahlil Gibran wrote: 'Work is love made visible.'⁴ It is through work that love manifests itself, validates itself, and authenticates itself. Work done with love is service.

Sri Ramakrishna has revolutionized the whole field of service in India with his concept: '*Śiva jñāne jīva sevā*; serve the jiva knowing it to be Shiva'. Service is generally done with the attitude of compassion, or pity, or out of a sense of duty. Service done with the attitude of compassion creates a sense of superiority and egoism in the person who serves, and a sense of inferiority in the person who is served. But when service is done with the attitude of worship of the living God—worship of God in the human being—it elevates both the doer and the beneficiary. It is this idea that forms the basis of Swami Vivekananda's gospel of social service.

Apart from egolessness and the attitude of worship, the spirit of service also implies the readiness to undergo sacrifice. If one wants to serve people—especially those who are in distress, who are old, sick, poor—one has to sacrifice personal comforts, wealth, time, and energy. Great men and great women are those who sacrifice their all for the welfare of humanity. The greatness of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda lies not only in what they taught, but also in the tremendous spirit of sacrifice that they showed throughout their lives.

Popular biographical accounts of Sri Ramakrishna's life may give the impression that he lived a happy life giving talks, singing, and dancing. But the tremendous concern he had for the welfare of other people, his eagerness to help suffering people, and the difficulties he had to endure for this are seldom noticed.

From early in the morning till late in the night Sri Ramakrishna spent most of his time advising, guiding, inspiring, and awakening people who thronged to him. Anybody could walk into his room at any time of the day or night.

And nobody who went to him ever returned without receiving something life-transforming, awakening, or strengthening. In the process of redeeming sinners and bohemians he had to undergo vicarious suffering.

Swami Vivekananda as young Naren had noticed all this and that is why he described Sri Ramakrishna as *prāṇārpaṇa*, one who gave his life for others. Referring to Sri Ramakrishna's incessant work of spiritual ministrations, Swami Vivekananda stated in his lecture 'My Master': 'So 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.' 5

Divine Yoga, Divine Tapas, Divine Lila

The real salvific work of the avatara—his work of liberating the jivas—may be said to begin only after he gives up his physical body. He continues to 'work' for the spiritual elevation and guidance of humanity even in the unseen realms. In the Bhagavadgita Sri Krishna states: 'In all the three worlds, O Partha, there is no duty whatever for Me (to fulfil); nothing remains unachieved or to be achieved. (Still) do I continue in action.' 6 The 'work' of the avatara is not like the physical labour of human beings. The Gita itself describes it in two places as *yogam-aiśvaram*, divine yoga (9.5, 11.8).

In the Upanishads God's work is referred to as tapas. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* states that before creating multiplicity: '*Sa tapo tapyata*; He (God) undertook tapas.' 7 The *Mundaka Upanishad* also states that before creation Brahman underwent tapas, explaining that '*yasya jñānamayam tapah*; whose tapas is of the nature of Knowledge.' 8 The *Chhandogya Upanishad* too speaks about the power of divine will: *kratumaya, satyas-amkalpa*.⁹ From the above it is clear that the work, the divine yoga, of the avatara is of the nature of knowledge or will. Shankaracharya compares the exercise of the will to the action of a king.

The king does not do any work, he only gives orders and his will is immediately carried out by others.

God's work is also regarded as lila, both in Vaishnava and Shakta traditions. About God's lila Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Nitya and Lila. The Nitya is the Indivisible Satchidananda, and the Lila, or Sport, takes various forms, such as the Lila as God, the Lila as the deities, the Lila as man, and the Lila as the Universe.'¹⁰ The avatara's life, activities, and mission on earth are all a part of God's divine yoga, divine tapas, and divine lila.

Identification with Divine Motherhood

One unique feature of the love that Sri Ramakrishna radiated was its association with

divine motherhood. This association took two forms. On the one hand he looked upon himself as a child of the Divine Mother; this attitude of the child towards its mother he called *mātṛbhāva*. On the other hand he identified himself with the Divine Mother and had a maternal attitude towards others, especially towards his young disciples—although this maternal attitude also can be regarded as *mātṛbhāva*, it is more commonly known as *vātsalyabhāva*. No contradiction is involved in this dual attitude, for the former is the attitude towards God and the latter is the attitude towards people. Every woman regards herself as the child of her mother and as the mother of her own child. The male and female elements of human personality—animus and anima—were equally developed in Sri Ramakrishna. Regarding Sri Ramakrishna's *mātṛbhāva* the following points are to be noted.

(i) The worship of God as the Divine Mother of the universe was prevalent in India from ancient times, perhaps from the pre-Vedic period. At first she was worshipped as one among the several deities. From the sixth century ce the cult of the Devi developed into a separate tradition or sect known as the Shakta tradition. In this tradition the Devi is identified with Shakti, the power of Brahman, and Brahman and Shakti together constitute one Reality, which is of the nature of *cit-śakti*, the supreme Spirit as Power. In Shankaracharya's philosophical works the Divine Mother is not given any place, but later Advaitic tradition identified the Divine Mother with Prakriti and maya. As far as one can gather from recorded conversations in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and from discussions in Swami Saradananda's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, Sri Ramakrishna's views on the Divine Mother do not belong exclusively to any of the above views. He confined his views within the framework of Vedanta, but he identified the Divine Mother with Brahman: 'That which is Brahman is Shakti, and That, again, is the Mother' (635). Furthermore, he considered the world to be the manifestation of Brahman as the Divine Mother (ibid.).

From the above it is clear that Sri Ramakrishna's adoration of the Divine Mother was not merely a matter of sentiment, but was based on his direct realization of its spiritual and metaphysical foundations.

ii) The Vaishnava tradition recognizes five *bhāvas*, attitudes, in establishing a personal relationship with God. These are: *sānta*, the calm attitude; *dāsya*, the attitude of a servant; *sakhya*, the attitude of a friend; *vātsalya*, the attitude of a mother; and *madhura*, the attitude of a lover. Of these the last one is held to be the highest *bhāva*. In the Shakta tradition, which is more widely prevalent in certain parts of India like Bengal, *mātṛbhāva*, the attitude of a child towards its mother, is the dominant spiritual attitude followed. Apart from this there are millions of Hindus who look upon God as the Divine Mother. Sri Ramakrishna gave the stamp of authenticity and authority to *mātṛbhāva* and established it as a universal attitude. He pointed out that it is the purest of relationships (572). It is generally held that *madhurabhāva* is the most intense form of devotional mood, but Sri Ramakrishna showed that *mātṛbhāva* can generate as much intensity, if not more.

Sri Ramakrishna spread broadcast the idea that, wherever you may be, the Divine Spirit is throbbing in you and waiting for an opportunity to manifest through you. You are all the children of God.
— Swami Bhuteshananda,
A Bridge to Eternity,

lii) Sri Ramakrishna's advocacy of *mātṛbhāva* has great social significance. He did not restrict this attitude to his relationship with God, but made it a universal attitude towards all women. Motherhood is the glorious aspect of womanhood. When this aspect is stressed every woman gets dignity and

self-respect. Moreover, as the nineteenth-century German anthropologist Bachofen showed, motherhood has great cohesive power and can be a unifying factor in social relationships. He states:

The relationship which stands at the origin of all culture, of every virtue, of every nobler aspect of existence, is that between mother and child. It operates in a world of violence as the divine principle of love, of union, of peace. ... Yet the love that arises from motherhood is not only more intense but also more universal. The paternal principle implies limitation to definite groups, but the maternal principle, like the life of nature, knows no barriers. The idea of motherhood provides a sense of universal fraternity among all men, which dies with the development of the idea of paternity.¹¹

Bachofen's ideas influenced Karl Marx, and he conceived the mother, not the family, as the basic unit of the communistic society that he envisioned. But, like his economic theories, his social theories also failed to take into account human limitations. The sense of motherhood of ordinary women is limited by their attachment to their families. If motherhood is to become a universal principle of social bonding and integration, it should be freed from human limitations and raised to the level of divine motherhood. Here comes the social significance of Sri Ramakrishna's worship of the Divine Mother.

iv) Swami Vivekananda used to say that Sri Ramakrishna has through his fervent prayers awakened the Divine Mother Power in the present age. The signs of this awakened Mother Power are there everywhere. All the divine apparitions that have taken place during the past one hundred and fifty years in the Western world—Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje, and other places, which attract millions of pilgrims every year—have been visions of the Divine Mother. After three millennia of suppression and exploitation of women the present age is witnessing the ascent of women. Swami Vivekananda believed that women would play a major role in the spiritual transformation of humanity in the future. He said: 'At the present time God should be worshipped as "Mother", the Infinite Energy. ... The new cycle must see the masses living Vedanta, and this will have to come through women.'¹²

It was stated earlier that Sri Ramakrishna's association with divine motherhood has two aspects. We now turn to the second aspect, namely, the maternal attitude towards others. This may also be called *mātr̥bhāva*, though it is more commonly known as *vātsalyabhāva*. Sri Ramakrishna not only worshipped the Divine Mother but also identified himself with her so completely that he himself came to embody divine motherhood.

He used to say that three words—guru, *kartā*, master, and *bābā*, father—pricked him like thorns.¹³ But he obviously had no objection to be regarded as mother. Indeed, several of his young disciples like Rakhai, Swami Brahmananda; Tarak, Swami Shivananda; and a few others looked upon him as their mother. While speaking about his *vātsalya*, affection, for Purna and other young disciples, Sri Ramakrishna once said: 'I now feel for Purna and other young boys as I once felt for Ramlala [child Rama whom he used to see as a living being in what mystics call "corporeal vision"]'. I used to bathe Ramlala, feed Him, put Him to bed, and take Him wherever I went. I used to weep for Ramlala. Now I have the same feeling for these young boys' (810). Another day he asked Mahendranath Gupta, the chronicler of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, to bring Narendra, Swami Vivekananda, in a horse-carriage and advised him to have *vātsalyabhāva* towards the youngster.

Notes and References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 2.304.
2. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 2.4.5, 4.5.6.
3. This concept is strikingly similar to the famous statement in the New Testament, 'God is love' (John 4.8).
4. Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (Middlesex: Echo Library, 2006), 12.
5. *Complete Works*, 4.185.
6. Bhagavadgita, 3.22.
7. *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.6.1.
8. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.1.8-9.
9. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 3.14.1-2.
10. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 392.
11. J J Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University, 1968), 85.
12. *Complete Works*, 7.95.
13. See *Gospel*, 633.



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The maternal aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's personality manifested itself fully through his spiritual consort Sri Sarada Devi, who came to be known as Holy Mother. During her stay at Dakshineswar Sri Ramakrishna trained and groomed her from a young age to look upon all people as her own children. After his passing away, universal motherhood bloomed fully in her immaculate heart and she became the mother of all—the young and the old, saints and sinners, the rich and the poor, illumined souls and robbers. About this universal motherhood she later told a disciple of hers: 'My boy, you must be aware that the Master looked upon all in the world as Mother. He left me behind for demonstrating that motherhood to the world.' 14

Culmination of Five Thousand Years of Indian Spirituality

Yet another unique feature of Sri Ramakrishna's incarnate life, pointed out by Swami Vivekananda, is that it represents the culmination of the millennia-old spirituality of India. Wrote Swamiji: 'This man had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life.'¹⁵ Romain Rolland also wrote: 'The man whose image I here evoke was the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people.'¹⁶ What does this 'consummation' of spirituality mean? At least three main tasks accomplished by Sri Ramakrishna are implied in it. These are: reliving scriptural truths, revitalization of spiritual paths and traditions, and integrating the spiritual consciousness of earlier prophets and deities into his own spiritual consciousness.

Living Commentary on the Scriptures

The first task Sri Ramakrishna accomplished was to revalidate, verify, and authenticate the eternal truths of the scriptures by reliving them. Thus he revealed their universal significance and showed their relevance in the modern world. From time immemorial countless sages and saints have realized the eternal truths of religion and thus borne

testimony to them. But they did it only with regard to some particular aspect of the ultimate Reality—*saguṇa*, personal, or *nirguṇa*, impersonal, *sākāra*, iconic, or *nirākāra*, an-iconic, or any particular deity. Sri Ramakrishna realized all the aspects of the ultimate Reality and made them a living force in his life. In this way his whole life became a living commentary on the scriptures.

The eternal truths of Hinduism lie deeply embedded in the Vedas. Sri Ramakrishna brought out their universal significance for all humanity. This task was completed by Swami Vivekananda, who made the eternal truths of Vedanta available to Hindus of all classes and castes as well as to all humanity.

The Vedas present two problems. Since the transcendental truths were discovered by different sages and recorded at different times, the Vedas contain diverse and often mutually inconsistent or contradictory concepts. The first problem was to reconcile or harmonize these diverse concepts. Traditional commentators such as Shankaracharya, Ramanuja, Madhva, and others tried to solve this problem by a one-sided interpretation of Vedic passages in such a way as to make the scriptures support their respective schools of philosophy. As a result several mutually contradictory and polemical interpretations of the scriptures have come into existence. It was left to Sri Ramakrishna to solve the problem.

Sri Ramakrishna pointed out that the ultimate Reality known as Brahman is beyond words and thought. As he put it: 'What Brahman is cannot be described. All things in this world ... have been defiled [*ucchiṣṭa*], like food that has been touched by the tongue, for they have been read or uttered by the tongue. Only one thing has not been defiled in this way, and that is Brahman. No one has been able to say what Brahman is.' 17 But Brahman, although one, manifests in many ways. The traditional commentators have only dealt with these expressions of Brahman; each of them has highlighted one particular aspect. Their views are all correct in their own universes of discourse. They are mutually complementary, for, to know the full glory of Brahman, we have to take all of them together, and also go beyond them and seek Brahman through direct realization. This is the approach Sri Ramakrishna followed in harmonizing different interpretations of the scriptures.

The second problem the Vedas present is that owing to their great antiquity and the discontinuity of Vedic tradition many of their passages have become obscure. Since traditional commentators are mainly interested in establishing the superiority of their own philosophical schools, they explained in detail only those passages that support their views. In some places they have even changed the original import of scriptural passages. In this confusing situation, which prevailed in India for several centuries, Sri Ramakrishna's life, experiences, and teachings have brought a new light in which all truths, principles, and concepts are seen in the right perspective. In Sri Ramakrishna's life Vedic truths come to life, they become living facts. Referring to the importance of Sri Ramakrishna's life in understanding scriptural passages and the universal significance of eternal truths inherent in them, Swami Vivekananda wrote in a letter to his disciple Alasinga Perumal, who was in Madras:

The life of Shri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is

able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. He was the objectless of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Shastras (scriptures). ... The Vedas can only be explained and the Shastras reconciled by his theory of Avastha or stages—that we must not only tolerate others, but positively embrace them, and that truth is the basis of all religions.¹⁸

In Sri Ramakrishna's life one can see the true significance of not only Vedantic truths, but also the spiritual truths of other Hindu scriptures such as the Gita, the Puranas, and the Agama literature. The eternal truths enshrined in the scriptures of other religions, such as the Bible, also become living realities in Sri Ramakrishna's life.

Revitalization of Spiritual Paths

The second task Sri Ramakrishna accomplished was the revitalization of diverse spiritual paths and methods. In the course of more than four thousand years of Indian culture innumerable spiritual paths, techniques, and disciplines were developed by many rishis, sages, and saints. But owing to several causes many of these spiritual traditions gradually ceased to be in vogue or were forgotten. Moreover, in their place some degenerate cults and immoral practices came to be introduced. These distortions of true religion cast long shadows on true spiritual paths. There were also new paths introduced by other religions, which came from outside India. This was the situation that prevailed in several parts of India when Sri Ramakrishna began his sadhanas at Dakshineswar.

From the time he came to Dakshineswar, at the age of nineteen, Sri Ramakrishna remained absorbed in spiritual practices for twelve years. During this period he followed the various spiritual paths of bhakti, yoga, tantra, and so on, which culminated in the practice of Advaita sadhana. He then followed, just for the delight of experiencing God in different ways, the spiritual paths of other religions such as Islam and Christianity. He practised all these sadhanas with extraordinary vigour and intensity and attained the goal of each sadhana in a very short time. In the history of hagiography this is the first and only instance of one person following so many spiritual paths and attaining success in all of them in an incredibly short time.

What are the consequences of Sri Ramakrishna's practice of various spiritual disciplines? What are the contributions Sri Ramakrishna made to the field of sadhana? The following are some of the major contributions made by Sri Ramakrishna to the sadhana aspect of spiritual life.

(i) He showed the validity of different paths of bhakti in realizing God. By practising the devotional moods or attitudes known as *śānta*, *dāsyā*, and so on, he demonstrated that all of them are equally effective as means of God realization, and one may choose any one of them according to one's temperament. He established that jñāna yoga and bhakti yoga are not mutually contradictory, and that the knowledge of Brahman can be attained through either of them. He followed the esoteric occult and slippery paths prescribed by the tantras and validated them as means of attaining spiritual illumination, but did not recommend them to others. He even practised the physical processes of hatha yoga.

Furthermore, he showed that the spiritual paths of other religions such as Christianity and Islam are also valid means for the realization of God. By attaining success through various spiritual disciplines Sri Ramakrishna not only established the validity of all paths, he also corrected the wrong notion that one's own path alone is true and all other paths

are wrong, which had prevailed all over the world for centuries.

(ii) By his uncompromising insistence on purity of mind and renunciation of lust and lucre, Sri Ramakrishna brought about a thorough cleansing of the whole field of sadhana. Owing mainly to the influence exerted by him and Swami Vivekananda—and also of course owing to the influence of modern education—many of the degenerate practices that had crept into Hinduism have been eliminated.

(iii) Another contribution of Sri Ramakrishna to the field of sadhana is the great importance he attached to *vyākulatā*—intense aspiration or deep longing for God—in attaining success in sadhana. Although Sri Ramakrishna taught that God can be realized through all paths, he also qualified that statement with the clause, provided 'people feel sincere longing ... for God'.¹⁹ It is intense aspiration that gives motive power to sadhana. With intense longing any path, any yoga—*jñāna*, *bhakti*, or even *karma yoga*—can lead to God realization. Without longing no yoga will be effective. He used to say: 'Longing is like the rosy dawn. After the dawn out comes the Sun. Longing is followed by the vision of God' (83). It should be noted here that what Sri Ramakrishna called *vyākulatā* is not ordinary aspiration, not a pious wish, but intense yearning for God. It is this intensity of aspiration, tremendous fervour or zeal that Sri Ramakrishna emphasized in Indian spirituality.

(iv) Along with aspiration, prayer was also given prime importance by Sri Ramakrishna. This is clear from the fact that in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, he has referred to prayer more than forty times. Prayer is a mental act of dependence on God. When a person realizes the limitations of his own inner resources, he or she seeks divine assistance, and God responds with his grace. The opening of the human heart to divine grace is what prayer means. Explaining prayer Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Through prayer all individual

It is to save sinners and the afflicted that the Master incarnated. If someone takes shelter under him with all sincerity, he just passes his hand of mercy over the supplicant and wipes away all his sins. By his divine touch, one becomes sinless then and there. What is wanted is sincere love for him and the absolute surrender to him. —Swami Shivananda, For Seekers of God

souls can be united to the Supreme Soul. Every house has a connection for gas, and gas can be obtained from the main storage-tank of the Gas Company. Apply to the Company, and it will arrange for your supply of gas. Then your house will be lighted' (205). And he gives this assurance: 'Let me assure you that a man can realize his Inner Self through sincere prayer' (256). 'One should pray to God with a longing heart. God certainly listens to prayer if it is sincere. There is no doubt about it' (256-7). Only an avatara can give such a divine assurance.

Vyākulatā and *prārthanā*, prayer, occupy a central place in Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. The larger, universal significance of Sri Ramakrishna's emphasis on longing and prayer is not widely appreciated or understood yet. The Rig Veda and other Samhitas, which constitute the earliest part of the Vedas, are full of prayers. But in later centuries when *jñāna-mārga*, yoga, and other direct paths were developed, prayer came to be neglected. By reviving prayer Sri Ramakrishna has recovered for the modern world the original spiritual ambience of Vedic India.

Sri Ramakrishna's revival of prayer has another significance. Western spirituality is basically Christian spirituality, and Christian spirituality is centred on prayer. Most of the

spiritual practices and experiences in Christianity come under the term 'prayer'. Therefore, it may be said that by reviving prayer in Hinduism Sri Ramakrishna has built a bridge between Indian and Western forms of spirituality.

(v) Yet another contribution of Sri Ramakrishna to spirituality is his strong advocacy of individual freedom in choosing a spiritual path. Everyone is born with certain samskaras, latent tendencies, which determine a person's temperament, attitude, and feelings. One should choose a spiritual path that is in accord with one's temperament and attitudes. If one chooses a wrong path, one's spiritual progress will be retarded. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: '*Kokhano kāhāro bhāva naṣṭa korite nai*; nobody's spiritual attitude should be destroyed.' He would give spiritual instruction according to each person's inherent spiritual tendencies. As people are in different stages of mental development, Sri Ramakrishna would help each person to lift himself or herself up from whichever level he or she was at.

Integration of Spiritual Experiences of the Past

We have been discussing the grounds, for describing Sri Ramakrishna's life as the culmination of five thousand years of spiritual life of the Indian people. We have examined two reasons for it: that he relived the truths of the scriptures and that he rejuvenated the spiritual paths and traditions. We now come to the third ground: he integrated into his own consciousness the spiritual consciousness of earlier prophets, incarnations, and deities. Sri Ramakrishna was the first and only person to realize the transcendental reality of different avatars, prophets, and Hindu deities. The unique feature of his experiences was that each transcendental vision culminated in the merger of the being of the avatara or prophet into the person of Sri Ramakrishna. In this way Sri Ramakrishna came to embody in himself the spiritual consciousness of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Christ, Muhammed, and also Hindu deities. What is the significance of this strange phenomenon? Swami Vivekananda has offered an explanation. He said:

Now, I shall tell you a theory, which I will not argue now, but simply place before you the conclusion. Each man in his childhood runs through the stages through which his race has come up; only the race took thousands of years to do it, while the child takes a few years. The child is first the old savage man—and he crushes a butterfly under his feet. The child is at first like the primitive ancestors of his race. As he grows, he passes through different stages until he reaches the development of his race. Only he does it swiftly and quickly.²⁰

This theory that Swamiji is expounding is similar to, or an extension of, the well-known biological theory called the 'Theory of Recapitulation' or 'Biogenetic Law', originally propounded by Von Baer and restated by Ernst Haeckel, both nineteenth-century German zoologists. The theory is tersely worded as follows: 'Ontogeny is a recapitulation of phylogeny'. It means that the individual development of an organism is a repetition of its evolutionary history. What actually happens is that every animal in its embryonic state passes through the embryonic stages of its evolutionary ancestors. According to the modern theory of evolution, vertebrates evolved from fishes to amphibians to reptiles to mammals to human beings. It has been observed that the human body in its embryonic state passes through the embryonic states of fish, amphibian, reptile, and primitive mammal.²¹

Though not discussed much in recent times, the above theory was quite well-known at

the end of the nineteenth century, and it is possible that Swamiji was familiar with it. Swamiji's theory applies to the mental level. At the mental level a human being from its childhood passes through the stages through which the early human beings have passed. Exceptions to this rule may be seen in several individual cases, but Swamiji's theory applies to the human race taken as an organic whole. Swamiji continues his above discourse: 'Now, take the whole humanity as a race, or take the whole of the animal creation, man and the lower animals, as one whole. There is an end towards which the whole is moving. Let us call it perfection.' 22

Swamiji extends his view to the spiritual level and holds that the spiritual evolution of human beings also follows a similar pattern. He continues: 'Some men and women are born who anticipate the whole progress of mankind. Instead of waiting and being reborn over and over again for ages until the whole human race has attained to that perfection, they, as it were, rush through them in a few short years of their life. And we know we can hasten these processes ... by additional means' (2.18).

By 'additional means' Swamiji means yoga. We have already discussed Swamiji's view that yoga is a process of speeding up evolution—yoga is spiritual revolution. Swamiji explains further:

Can we put a limit to the hastening? We cannot say how much a man can grow in one life. You have no reason to say that this much a man can do and no more. Circumstances can hasten him wonderfully. Can there be any limit then, till you come to perfection? So, what comes of it?—That a perfect man, that is to say, the type that is to come of this race, perhaps of millions of years hence, that man can come today. And this is what the Yogis say, that all great incarnations and prophets are such men; that they reached perfection in this one life (2.18-9).

Swamiji now applies his theory of speeding up spiritual evolution to the lives of the great incarnations and prophets, including Sri Ramakrishna. Referring to Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual attainments, Swamiji continues: 'We have had such men at all periods of the world's history and at all times. Quite recently, there was such a man who lived the life of the whole human race and reached the end—even in this life' (2.19).

In the light of the above explanation we can understand the significance of Sri Ramakrishna's transcendental experience of world prophets and their merging into his own being. Each avatara and prophet represents a state of transcendental consciousness—Sri Krishna represents Krishna-consciousness, Buddha represents Buddha-consciousness, Jesus represents Christconsciousness, and so on. By realizing the earlier avatars and prophets Sri Ramakrishna passed through their states of consciousness as stages of the spiritual growth of his inner being and integrated them all into his own spiritual consciousness. Thereby he vastly enlarged and enriched his own spiritual knowledge and power. He did not, however, stop with this accomplishment. He went further and attained an integral state of consciousness that was more advanced than the states of consciousness attained by all previous prophets. It was for this reason that Swami Vivekananda spoke of Sri Ramakrishna as the culmination of 'five thousand years of national spiritual life', and described him as *avatāra variṣṭha*, the best of the avatars.

Each of the Hindu deities represents a particular manifestation of divine consciousness. By realizing these deities Sri Ramakrishna came to embody their states of divine

consciousness. This is the reason why Sri Ramakrishna is worshipped in the Ramakrishna movement as *sarvadeva- devī-svarūpa*, embodiment of all gods and goddesses. For this reason it is believed in the Ramakrishna movement that any deity or avatara can be worshipped through Sri Ramakrishna. He is like a gate that opens to many mansions of the supreme Divine.

Notes and References

14. Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2004), 120.
15. *Complete Works*, 5.53.
16. Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, trans. E F Malcolm-Smith (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), xxii.
17. *Gospel*, 102.
18. *Complete Works*, 5.53.
19. *Gospel*, 222.
20. *Complete Works*, 2.18.
21. More than fifty years ago J B S Haldane, the noted British scientist, wrote an article in which he pointed out the striking similarity of the Hindu concept of *dashavatara*, ten avataras, of Vishnu with the modern scientific concept of evolution of vertebrate animals—from the *matsya*, fish, through the *kurma*, reptile, to the *varaha*, mammal, and the emergence of man from the savage, *narasimha*, through the levels of hominid, hunter, farmer, and civilized man.
22. *Complete Works*, 2.18.



SECTION III

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Among the functions of an avatara or prophet, the most widely recognized is his function as world teacher. From time immemorial the guru-disciple relationship has been regarded in India as the closest, highest, and most sacred of human relationships. Nowhere else in the world is the institution of the guru given so much importance and has been so much glorified as it is in India. In modern times this relationship found its most striking and convincing expression in the relationship between Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples. Their relationship was so deep, strong, supramundane, and divine that ordinary people cannot have a proper understanding of it.

A true guru helps the disciple in several ways. He gives true knowledge, instructs the disciple about the path he has to follow, corrects him when he goes wrong, guides him as he advances on the spiritual path, and lastly awakens the spiritual consciousness of his disciple. Unlike secular knowledge, which can be received by the ordinary mind and can be gained from books, spiritual knowledge can be received only by the higher *buddhi*, intuitive faculty, that lies dormant in ordinary people and has to be awakened by the guru. Regarding this role of the guru, Swami Vivekananda says in his *Bhakti Yoga*:

In the vast majority of cases such help [from the guru] is absolutely necessary. When it comes, the higher powers and possibilities of the soul are quickened, spiritual life is awakened, growth is animated, and man becomes holy and perfect in the end.

This quickening impulse cannot be derived from books. The soul can only receive impulses from another soul, and from nothing else.¹

Sri Ramakrishna performed all the above-mentioned functions of a guru to such an extent of thoroughness that it has become a shining example of the important role that the guru plays in spiritual life. Through his example he has reinstated the guru tradition.

The spiritual impulse imparted by a human guru can influence only a small number of spiritual seekers. The spiritual impulse generated by the avatara sets in motion a mighty spiritual current that transforms the lives of thousands of people for centuries. The power of this spiritual current is sustained by a succession of gurus, *guru-parampara*. It is this unbroken line of guru power that forms the spiritual base of the Ramakrishna movement.

The avatara not only awakens the souls of those who surrender themselves to him, but also guides them through the turmoil and uncertainty of life. He becomes the spiritual seeker's eternal companion. In a hymn to Sri Ramakrishna as guru Swami Abhedananda writes: '*Saṁsārārṇava-ghore yaḥ karṇadhārasvarūpakāḥ, namo'stu rāmakṛṣṇāya tasmai śrīgurave namaḥ*'; salutations to Sri Ramakrishna, the guru, who serves as the helmsman of my life's boat, steering it across the turbulent ocean of trans-migratory existence.'²

The avatara as world teacher comes with a new message for the whole humanity and for a whole age. The message of Sri Ramakrishna is particularly suited to the present age because it is in tune with the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age, which is characterized by modernity, universality, and positive outlook. The message of Sri Ramakrishna is *modern* in its expression and relevant to the present-day social situation; it is *universal* in its scope as it is meant for all people; it is *positive* in its approach to the problems of today's world.

Considering the importance of this message, it is being treated separately in the next section.

Message of Sri Ramakrishna as World Teacher

What is the basic message of Sri Ramakrishna? What is its meaning for the modern man? What are its promises? Sri Ramakrishna's message is a message of faith and hope, purity and strength, love and service, harmony and peace.

Message of Faith and Hope

'God realization is the real purpose of human life.' This is the quintessential teaching of Sri Ramakrishna. This of course is not a new idea; it has been with Indian culture from time immemorial. What is new in Sri Ramakrishna's message is that it induces the faith that God exists; that God realization is possible for all people irrespective of their caste, religion, race, or gender; and that God realization is possible in all places and in all the situations of life, even in the midst of household duties.

Furthermore, Sri Ramakrishna's message infuses the hope that even bohemians, drunkards, and the worst sinners can realize God. After Sri Krishna in the Bhagavadgita, this may be the first time that an avatara has given such a divine assurance of redemption in India—the practical implications of Sri Ramakrishna's concept of God realization

will be discussed further in a later part of this article.

Message of Purity and Strength

Morality forms the foundation of every religion, and all incarnations and prophets have given primary importance to it. Although there is much common ground among religions with regard to morality, there are also several differences. Some of these differences are caused by doctrinal differences, whereas the others are caused by differences in social conventions and external observances. These differences in moral codes and conduct have created several areas of conflict among religions.

Sri Ramakrishna went beyond conventional morality and stressed purity, which is the real basis and aim of all moral codes and conduct.

The difference between conventional morality and purity is to be noted in this: that morality is the basis of religion, whereas purity is the basis of spirituality. Morality is how we appear to other people; purity is how we appear to God. Morality is conformity to codes and conduct of behaviour, whereas purity is freedom from the hold of past *samskaras* of desires and instinctual drives.

Among these drives and desires, the sex drive, *kāma*, and the drive to acquire wealth, *artha* or *kāncana*, are the more powerful ones. These drives drain away a major part of a person's psychic energy and are the main cause of bondage.

Therefore, as long as they remain strong it is not possible for a spiritual seeker to transcend his sense-bound life and experience higher freedom, joy, and peace. Even to attain and retain success in worldly pursuits it is necessary that one should keep these powerful drives under control and not be a slave to them.

The meaning and implications of Sri Ramakrishna's advocacy of renunciation of *kāma* and *kāncana*, lust and lucre, are to be understood in a larger context. For Sri Ramakrishna purity meant freedom from the hold of *kāma-kāncana*. This is an ever-recurring theme in his teachings. The great relevance of this teaching in the present-day society all over the world can hardly be exaggerated.

Almost all the evils of society have their root-cause in the two drives for sex and wealth. Until modern times they had been kept under some degree of restraint imposed by religion, higher values, and strong family bond. But these restraints are being removed owing to the erosion of faith in traditional religions and the spread of materialistic ideas.

It is obvious that if the human race is to survive for a very long period of time, it will have to learn to control its instinctive drives. Several historians and sociologists have pointed out that unrestrained indulgence in sensual pleasures and luxury reduces the physical and moral energy and power of endurance of people, and this was one of the factors that caused the decline and death of some civilizations of the past. At the individual level millions of people have brought ruin upon their families by their uncontrolled pursuit of sex and money. At the social level the alarming increase in crime, violence, immorality, drug abuse, and so forth in recent years are the direct or indirect

results of the promotion of sensuality and competition in the present-day world. The socio-economic revolutions that took place in Russia and China, inspired by Marxist ideology, and the socio-religious revolutions that took place in Iran and Afghanistan, inspired by Islamic ideology, are collective reactions to free indulgence in wealth and sensual enjoyment by a small group of privileged people.

The important point to note here is that Sri Ramakrishna's advocacy of purity of mind was not based on negative considerations; it was wholly positive. Sri Ramakrishna taught two positive approaches to purity. In the first place purity is not something to be acquired from outside. It is our true inherent nature. One difficulty about strict observance of purity in life is the popular belief that to yield to one's instincts and impulses is a natural way of life, whereas to be pure and holy is something artificial and unnatural. The truth is, according to Vedanta, that our true nature is the Atman, which is pure self-luminous consciousness. Impurities and sinful tendencies belong to the mind; the Atman is untouched by them. To lead a pure life a person has only to identify himself with his Atman and detach himself from the impurities of the mind. Thus, leading a pure life is the most natural way of life, whereas an impure life is a fall from the natural way. Women being embodiments of divine motherhood, should always be treated with respect.

The second positive approach to purity that Sri Ramakrishna taught is to have faith in the sanctifying and saving power of divine grace as well as in the power of the divine name. He never liked the self-demeaning, self-deprecating attitude of a sinner, to look upon oneself as a worthless sinner. He pointed out that by constantly dwelling upon the negative side of one's personality and by constantly talking about and brooding over the mistakes one had committed in the past, the evil tendencies in the mind become all the more strengthened and deep-rooted. By filling the mind with positive, purifying ideas, by regarding oneself as pure and free, the nobler tendencies in the mind are strengthened and these will keep the lower tendencies under check. But in order to maintain such a positive attitude one needs to have strength and courage, which comes by having faith in divine grace, in the saving power of God. Statements such as the following are quite common in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*:

The wretch who constantly says 'I am bound, I am bound' only succeeds in being bound. He who says day and night, 'I am a sinner, I am a sinner' verily becomes a sinner. One should have such burning faith in God that one can say: 'What? I have repeated the name of God, and can sin still cling to me? How can I be a sinner any more? How can I be in bondage any more?'

If a man repeats the name of God, his body, mind, and everything becomes pure. Why should one talk only about sin and hell, and such things? Say but once, 'O Lord, I have undoubtedly done wicked things, but I won't repeat them.' And have faith in His name.³

We have seen that Sri Ramakrishna taught two positive approaches to purity of mind. The first one, based on Self-knowledge, belongs to the path of knowledge, and the second one, based on divine grace, belongs to the path of devotion. These approaches support each other, and so one may follow both of them. Both the approaches generate strength and courage in the mind, or rather, they rouse the power and strength already inherent in the mind. Purity and strength thus constitute an important aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's message.

Message of Love and Service

In the previous instalment of this series—under the subtitle *Premārpaṇa* and *Prāṇārpaṇa*⁴—we discussed Sri Ramakrishna's life as the embodiment of divine love and the spirit of service. Love and service too form an essential aspect of his message. Some salient points of his message of love are briefly stated below.

(i) Sri Ramakrishna removed the barrier between love for human beings and love for God. For him the former is an expression of the latter. It is the unity of all selves with the supreme Self, Paramatman, that is the true basis of human love. We should love people not for the sake of their bodies and minds but for the sake of the supreme Spirit that dwells in them. When love is spiritualized or divinized in this way, it does not cause bondage.

This spiritual love is universal. It is not confined to the members of one's family but extends to all people without any distinctions of caste, religion, or race.

However, although the same God dwells in all people, the manifestation of divine power varies from person to person. If a person is endowed with extraordinary unselfishness, deep knowledge, and other talents it is an indication that there is a greater manifestation of the Divine in that person, and as a consequence he or she is generally treated with greater regard.

(ii) Sri Ramakrishna removed the barrier between service to God and service to man. Since God dwells in all people, service to man should be regarded as service to God—*śiva-jñāne jīva seva*. Service is usually done either out of a sense of duty or out of pity or compassion. Duty implies obligation and compulsion, and so service done as duty is not voluntary service. When service is done out of pity or compassion, it lowers the position of the beneficiary, the person who is served. But when service is rendered as worship, it elevates both the server and the person who is served. Rendering service then becomes a privilege.

Other benefits this doctrine confers are: (a) it frees a person from egoism; (b) it makes social service a spiritual discipline; and (c) it makes moral life natural and spontaneous.

Morality is usually forced upon people either by the power of secular laws or by religious sermonizing. But when work is done as worship, all the virtues such as truthfulness, non-violence, chastity, non-exploitation, and the like come to be spontaneously fulfilled in a person's life.

Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of service as worship forms the basis of Swami Vivekananda's gospel of social service. Swamiji's contribution to the doctrine lies in extending its application to the field of service to the poor, the downtrodden, and the sick.

(iii) In the field of love for God, known as bhakti, Sri Ramakrishna has provided several original insights as well.

He taught that in the present age, known as Kali Yuga, bhakti yoga is the best spiritual path for the majority of people.⁵ It is generally believed that full knowledge of Brahman can be attained only by following the path of jñāna. But Sri Ramakrishna held that full knowledge of Brahman can be attained through the path of bhakti as well. By the grace of God it is possible even to attain the non-dual state of oneness with Brahman, but devotees of God do not generally like to have it. 'They want to taste sugar, not

to become sugar.' That is, they want to enjoy the bliss of Brahman by retaining their individuality, not to become one with the bliss of Brahman (171-2, 637).

However, it is not ordinary bhakti, which Sri Ramakrishna called 'unripe' bhakti, that leads to the highest knowledge. To attain the highest knowledge it is necessary to have what Sri Ramakrishna called 'ripe' bhakti, which is of the nature of pure *ekāngi*, one-pointed, intense devotion known as *prema-bhakti* or *rāga-bhakti* (172-3).

Sri Ramakrishna also taught that jñāna and bhakti are not contradictory to each other but support each other. In fact, he held that jñāna is a great help in attaining higher bhakti. In this syncretic path of jñāna-bhakti the spiritual seeker looks upon himself as the Atman and God as the Paramatman, and regards bhakti as the 'eternal relation between the eternal soul and eternal God'. Depending upon the degree of realization attained by seekers, they may be said to belong to three groups, as Sri Ramakrishna pointed out: 'There are three classes of devotees. The lowest one says, "God is up there." That is, he points to heaven. The mediocre devotee says that God dwells in the heart as the "Inner Controller". But the highest devotee says: "God alone has become everything. All that we perceive is so many forms of God" ' (396).

By jñāna Sri Ramakrishna meant not mere book knowledge but true insight or understanding, which is the result of an inner awakening or realization. At the highest level of realization jñāna and bhakti become one. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'Perfect jñāna and perfect devotion are one and the same thing' (811).

In this context another teaching of Sri Ramakrishna deserves special mention here: 'Bhakti may be likened to a woman who has access to the inner court of a house. jñāna can go only as far as the outer rooms' (858; see also 610, 719). In the path of jñāna followed by Advaita Vedanta the seeker negates the world as maya by the method of *neti, neti*—not this, not this—before realizing Brahman. By contrast, in the path of bhakti the seeker accepts the reality of the world and sees that it is pervaded by Brahman. Hence the bhakta's view is more inclusive; it speaks more about the glory of Brahman. The importance of this teaching lies in the fact that it is strikingly similar to the teaching of the Gita. In the eleventh chapter of the Gita Sri Krishna says: 'Only through one-pointed bhakti can my true nature be known, seen, and entered into.' 6 Again, in the last chapter (18.55), a similar idea is reiterated. The acharyas have explained these two verses to suit their own schools of thought. The words *praveṣṭum* and *viśate* in these two verses represent a more advanced stage of experience than mere 'seeing'. They can be understood in a better way in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine that bhakti leads to the 'inner court'.

Message of Acceptance and Harmony

Sri Ramakrishna is known all over the world as the prophet of harmony of religions. He was actually the prophet of several other types of harmony as well. He said: 'He is indeed a real man who has harmonized everything.'⁷ Harmony therefore forms an important aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's message.

Before discussing this we have to take note of three important points on which Sri Ra-

makrishna's message of harmony is based.

Firstly, Sri Ramakrishna's whole outlook on life was characterized by an all-embracing vision of harmony. This vision of harmony found expression in his own life. His whole life was a symphony of diverse patterns of thinking, feeling, *bhavās*—spiritual moods—attitudes, interests, capacities, and so forth. He was by nature very gentle, kind, sweet, and affectionate and could establish friendly relationships with people belonging to different walks of life, different religions and sects. Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs—all were happy in his company. However, he himself stood far above all sects and groups.

Regarding this Swami Abhedananda wrote about Sri Ramakrishna in a hymn: '*Pūjitā yena vai śāśvat sarve'apī sāmpradāyikāḥ, sampradāyavihīno yaḥ sampradāyaṁ na nindati*; he showed respect to all traditions and sects, he never criticized any sect, but he himself remained free of all sectarian affiliations.' 8

Secondly, the outlook of harmony that characterized Sri Ramakrishna's life was not a mere 'outlook' or attitude, it was deeply rooted in the realization that behind all the diversities of life there is a basic unity of consciousness, which is unchanging and eternal. It is the realization of the principle of 'unity in diversity' that forms the basis of Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of harmony.

The third characteristic of Sri Ramakrishna's outlook on life is the principle of acceptance. He accepted diversity as a natural phenomenon. Diversity does not necessarily mean conflict or contradiction. Diversity can also mean harmony. Conflict comes only when people refuse to accept diversity as the natural state and try to put everyone into a Procrustean bed.

Sri Ramakrishna's Types of Harmony

Swami Ghanananda, in his book *Sri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message*, discusses in detail seven types of harmony that Sri Ramakrishna has brought about through his life and teachings.⁹ Here we wish to discuss briefly five types of harmony. These are: harmony of religions, harmony of sects within Hinduism, harmony of spiritual paths, harmony of the ancient and the modern—or harmony of the East and West— and harmony of spiritual life and social life.

Harmony of Religions

Every religion has three main levels or dimensions: social, doctrinal, and spiritual. The phrase 'harmony of religions' covers harmony at all these three levels.

The social dimension of religion consists of customs, festivals, and social institutions such as church, mosque, temple, community, caste, and the like. It is at this level that religions show maximum diversity. It is also about this dimension of religion that most of the quarrels among the followers of different religions take place.

'Harmony of religions' at this level means the living together of people belonging to different religions in a spirit of tolerance and amity. This tolerance and social amity is

usually ensured by the laws of the country, and have often to be enforced by the police.

It is at this level that Sri Ramakrishna's life assumes significance. He had a wonderful capacity to identify himself with each and every religion. For instance, when he followed Islamic sadhana, he dressed and lived like a Muslim and used to go to a nearby mosque to offer namaz there. However, this does not mean we should imitate Sri Ramakrishna in this regard. What Sri Ramakrishna's life teaches us is that we should not judge other religions by our narrow views and prejudices, but should see each religion through the eyes of its followers, and we should respect the right of everyone to follow his own religious customs and institutions.

Sri Ramakrishna taught that it is not enough to somehow 'tolerate' other religions, but we should recognize the good and positive aspects of other religions and maintain a brotherly or friendly relationship with their followers. His advice on this matter given to Vijay Goswami, one of the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal, deserves to be written in letters of gold in the heart of everyone. He said:

When you mix with people outside your Samaj, love them all. When in their company be one of them. Don't harbour malice towards them. Don't turn up your nose in hatred and say: 'Oh! This man believes in God with form and not in the formless God. That man believes in the formless God and not in God with form. This man is a Christian. This man is a Hindu. This man is a Musalman.' It is God alone who makes people see things in different ways. Know that people have different natures. Realize this and mix with them as much as you can. And love all. But enter your own inner chamber to enjoy peace and bliss. ...

The cowherds take the cows to graze in the pasture. There the cattle mix. They all form one herd. But on returning to their sheds in the evening they are separated. Then each stays by itself in its own stall.¹⁰

After the completion of his sadhanas, Sri Ramakrishna began to preach openly his doctrine of *dharma-samanvaya*, harmony of religions. Attracted by his spiritual aura, love, and wide sympathy people belonging to various religions and denominations began to visit him, and his life itself became a veritable parliament of religions. Swami Vivekananda, in his reply to the address of welcome given to him in Calcutta in 1897, pointed out that unlike the world parliament of religions held in Chicago in 1893, which was only an outer show, Sri Ramakrishna's life itself at Dakshineswar was a real parliament of religions. To quote Swamiji's words: 'Here, in sight of the city, had been living a man whose whole life was a Parliament of Religions *as it should be*.'¹¹

The second level or dimension of religion consists of doctrines. This is the plane of ideas, the plane where religious doctrines, ideas, and concepts take shape and influence the minds and actions of people. These doctrines originate in the main revealed scripture of each religion, such as the Vedas, the Bible, the Quran, and others. The original doctrines are explained and developed further by subsequent teachers. In this way creeds, dogmas, moral principles, codes of conduct, philosophical schools come into existence. All these doctrinal formulations together constitute the theoretical or philosophical edifice of each religion.

The followers of each religion confine themselves to the conceptual edifice of their own religions and see the world through its windows. They are either ignorant of or re-

fuse to know about the doctrinal edifices of other religions. Hence, they conclude that their own religion is the only true religion and all other religions are false. Such a narrow attitude is known as exclusivism.

It is at the doctrinal plane that theologians, priests, mullahs, religious teachers, and preachers play a major role. They thrust their narrow, dogmatic views on common people and often create religious controversies and quarrels. Nowadays some of them have come to hold a slightly more liberal view. They say: 'Yes, our religion alone is true, but other religions are not false, because they are all *included* in our religion. Other religions are only preparations to understand and accept our religion.' According to this view, one's own religion is like a big mansion and other religions are like unimportant rooms in it. This view is known as inclusivism.

In this global situation Sri Ramakrishna's life and message assume great significance. He had the courage and broadness of mind to *live* for a time in the doctrinal edifices of several religions and establish the truth that they all have the same foundation and they all open to the same ultimate Reality. That is, religions of the world are different pathways to the same ultimate goal and hence they are all true. This view is nowadays known as pluralism.

As an inter-religious attitude pluralism is being held by an increasing number of Christian religious leaders, in spite of the official disapproval of Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Churches. More importantly, it is becoming popular among the younger generation in the West. Through the Internet and other electronic media the youth gain access to the rich treasures of world religions and, since they are free to think independently, naturally adopt the pluralistic attitude. But not many are aware that it was Sri Ramakrishna who, for the first time in human history, verified the truth of religious pluralism through actual experience and established its authenticity by putting it into practice in his own life.¹²

The main principles of religious pluralism that Sri Ramakrishna taught are briefly stated below.

(i) The ultimate Reality is only one, but is known by different names in different religions. Sri Ramakrishna explains this principle as follows: 'Rama is one, but He has a thousand names. He who is called "God" by the Christians is addressed by the Hindus as Rama, Krishna, Ishvara and by other names. A lake has many ghats. The Hindus drink water at one ghat and call it "jal"; the Christians at another, and call it "water"; the Mussalmans at a third, and call it "pani". Likewise, He who is God to the Christians is Allah to the Mussalmans.' ¹³

(ii) The ultimate Reality is beyond the reach of the ordinary mind and words. Hence, the real nature of the ultimate Reality can never be expressed in words. As Sri Ramakrishna has put it, other than Brahman—the ultimate Reality— everything in the world has been made *ucchiṣṭa*, defiled, by uttering it, but nobody has been able to tell what Brahman is. In this connection it should be noted that the transcendent nature of God is accepted in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. Buddha's concept of *sūnya*, emptiness, may also indicate the same truth. The views expressed in different scriptures are only 'opinions'. This is an axiomatic principle in Advaita Vedanta. Even the so-called definition of Brahman—such as 'Satyam, jñānam, anantam brahma; Brahman is

truth, knowledge, and infinity'—is only a lakṣaṇam, a verbal mark or indicator, and does not reveal the true nature of Brahman.

However, the 'opinions' expressed in different scriptures are not false, because they reveal some aspect of the ultimate Reality. Nor are the different views found in different scriptures mutually contradictory. Rather, they are mutually complementary, since they together give greater understanding of the ultimate Reality.

(iii) Although the true nature of the ultimate Reality cannot be understood by the ordinary mind, it is possible to transcend the ordinary mind through appropriate spiritual disciplines and divine grace, and thus achieve superconscious realization of the true nature of the ultimate Reality.

This superconscious realization can be attained through several paths. Religions of the world are different pathways to the same ultimate Reality. As Sri Ramakrishna has put it: '*Yato mat, tato path*; as many faiths so many paths.'

Realization of the ultimate Reality forms the essential core and goal of every religion. Dogmas, customs, rituals, festivals, and the like are only secondary details.

(iv) Since all world religions lead to the same ultimate goal, they are all to be regarded as true and valid. This does not mean that all the religions are one and the same. Religions are different pathways. Differences among religions can and will remain, and are to be respected.

Knowing that the differences among religions pertain only to the outer shells of religions, we should live in harmony and fellowship with the followers of different religions.

Unity at the transcendent level and harmony at the empirical level—this is in essence Sri Ramakrishna's message of harmony of religions.

(v) Each person should remain steadfast in one's own path in a spirit of *iṣṭaniṣṭhā*, steadfastness to one's ideal, without thinking that one's path alone is true and perfect. The fact that Sri Ramakrishna followed different religious paths does not mean that everyone is expected to imitate him in this respect. Sri Ramakrishna greatly encouraged everyone to follow one's own path sincerely with an unswerving faith. He compared trying different paths to the attempt to dig a well in different places without going deeper in any one place.

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3. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 138.
4. See Swami Bhajanananda, 'Sri Ramakrishna: The 'New Man' of the Age - II ', *Prabuddha Bharata*, 116/4 (April 2011), 360-2.
5. See *Gospel* 452, 468.
6. *Bhagavadgita*, 11.54.
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8. *Complete Works of Swami Abhedananda*, 7.360.
9. Swami Ghanananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2005), 116-33.
10. *Gospel*, 637.
11. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 3.315. Emphasis added.
12. For a detailed discussion on Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of harmony of religions see Swami Bhajanananda, *Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda*

(Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2008).

13. *Gospel*, 922.



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At the beginning of our discussion on harmony of religions it was pointed out that every religion has three levels or dimensions: the social, the doctrinal, and the spiritual. It was also pointed out that harmony of religions should mean harmony at all the three levels. We have discussed so far only the first two levels, namely the social and the doctrinal. We now come to the third level, the spiritual or mystical. It is at this level that Sri Ramakrishna made the greatest contribution to the understanding of religion.

It is generally believed that religions differ only in their external and doctrinal aspects such as rituals, mythologies, institutions, creeds, dogmas, whereas at the transcendental or mystical level they do not differ. But if we study the mystical experiences described in different scriptures or described by saints of different religions, we find there is great variation in the descriptions. The mystical experiences of the Hindu Mira, the Christian Teresa, and the Muslim Rabia are not the same. Even within Hinduism the transcendental experiences described in Advaita treatises, in Vaishnava scriptures, in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, in the tantras, and in other texts show wide variation. In the Vedanta system itself there are different schools such as Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, Advaita, and each school has its own view of transcendental experience.

This means that harmony of religions has to be established at the transcendent experiential level as well. Harmony at this level can be established only by a person who has had different types of transcendent mystic experiences. In the history of humanity Sri Ramakrishna is the only person who traversed the spiritual paths of different religions and sects and attained transcendent experiences through all of them. How has he established harmony at the level of transcendent experience? He did not stop with those experiences; he went beyond all of them and saw that all transcendent experiences described in books or by illumined sages are only varied expressions of the knowledge of the ultimate Reality, which cannot be described in words. He gave the example of the salt doll. A salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean, but got dissolved in the process. Similarly, at the highest state of realization of the ultimate Reality, all distinctions disappear; it is a state that can never be described. And this state can be attained through all paths.

Harmony within Hinduism

Among the religions of the world Hinduism is a wonder. It has no beginning and no founder. It has great capacity for adaptation and for absorbing cultures and races, and is an ever-growing religion. Even after more than five thousand years of history it is still quite young and full of vitality. Its diversity is mind-boggling. In fact, it is not a single religion but a conglomeration of several religions, sects, cults, and philosophies. It has been compared to a vast sprawling banyan tree that has, apart from a main stem, several other stems and hundreds of branches. However, all the diverse elements of Hinduism are held together by a mystic sense of unity and by an attitude of reconcili-

ation, acceptance, and harmony maintained by its followers.

This sense of unity and harmony prevailed in Hinduism till the Middle Ages, when it was disrupted partly by foreign invasions and the resulting loss of political power and freedom, and partly by the rise of several sects and systems of philosophy. Disharmony and conflicts appeared at three levels: the religious, the philosophical, and the social.

Religious conflicts came to the fore with the rise of sects, especially Vaishnava and Shaiva sects in North India and South India. Philosophical conflicts appeared when different systems of Hindu philosophy such as Buddhist, Mimamsa, and Nyaya-Vaisheshika came into existence. Acharya Shankara's establishment of the supremacy of Advaita Vedanta sparked the rise of several dualistic schools within Vedanta itself. At the social level large-scale conversion of Hindus into other religions and the rigidification of the caste system were the main cause of conflicts.

To remedy the above situation several autocorrective social movements, such as the Arya Samaj, the Brahma Samaj, the Theosophical Society, and others came into operation in the early part of the nineteenth century. But these reform movements did not take Hinduism as a whole. Their work instead of unifying Hinduism only led to further splintering of the religion and the creation of new sects. This was the situation that prevailed in India in the middle of the nineteenth century when Sri Ramakrishna appeared on the scene. The actual task of bringing about the unification of Hinduism was accomplished by Swami Vivekananda.

Swamiji presented Sri Ramakrishna to the world not as the propounder of a new doctrine or as the founder of a new sect, but as the rejuvenator of the whole Hinduism. Swamiji showed how the eternal truths of the Hindu religion found their verification in the life of Sri Ramakrishna, how Sri Ramakrishna relived the experiences of the sages and saints of the past, and how Sri Ramakrishna's message reconciled the philosophical standpoints of all Hindu sects. In this way, with Sri Ramakrishna as the centre, Swami Vivekananda has brought about an overall unification of Hinduism.

As regards the caste problem Swami Vivekananda held that, although caste is associated with the Hindu religion, it is not a religious problem but a social one. The solution of the problem lies not in pulling down those who are higher in the caste hierarchy, but in raising up those who are lower to the highest level. The 'brahmana' represents an ideal, an ideal person who has attained purity of mind, spiritual knowledge, and unselfishness and devotes his life to the welfare of all. The aim of social life should be to raise everyone, from the lowest to the highest caste, including the brahmanas, to become the ideal 'brahmana'. This is Swami Vivekananda's solution to the caste problem.

This is not an impractical proposition. It is being actively put into practice in the Ramakrishna movement. Modern education is also helping to remove caste barriers. As a matter of fact, right before our eyes a new casteless society is taking shape in India. Although its members are not many, it is bound to become a major trend in future decades.

About caste distinction Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'Devotees have no caste.' About the solution to the caste problem he said:

The caste-system can be removed by one means only, and that is the love of God. Lovers of God do not belong to any caste. The mind, body, and soul of a man become purified through divine love. Chaitanya and Nityananda scattered the name of Hari to everyone, including the pariah, and embraced them all. A brahmin without this love is no longer a brahmin. And a pariah with the love of God is no longer a pariah. Through bhakti an untouchable becomes pure and elevated.¹⁴

Harmony of Spiritual Paths

Through his life and message, Sri Ramakrishna has brought about not only harmony among religions as well as harmony and integration within Hinduism, but also harmony of spiritual paths. In Hinduism the term 'spiritual path' is indicated by two words: yoga and *mārga*. By yoga is meant any technique of transformation of human consciousness into divine consciousness. Vedanta teachers accept three yogas: *jñāna* yoga, bhakti yoga, and karma yoga. To this Swami Vivekananda added a fourth one: raja yoga. By *mārga* is meant *mukti-mārga*, the highway to mukti, liberation. Vedanta teachers recognize only two *mārgas*: *jñāna-mārga* and *bhakti-mārga*—a third highway, known as *karma-mārga*, was started by the Mimamsakas in the early centuries of the Christian Era, but as a result of the polemical attacks on it by Acharya Shankara and other Vedanta teachers it did not survive long.

The two highways are based on different premises. In *jñāna-mārga* the ultimate Reality, Brahman, is regarded as impersonal, without any attributes, *nirguṇa*. In *bhakti-mārga* Brahman is regarded as personal, endowed with attributes, *saguṇa*. In *jñāna-mārga*, mukti is regarded as a state in which individuality, I-consciousness, is completely lost and the individual Self becomes one with the supreme Self, Brahman. In *bhakti-mārga* mukti is regarded as a state of union of the individual Self with the supreme Self, in which individuality remains distinct and enjoys the bliss of divine communion for ever. In *jñāna-mārga* knowledge is regarded as the only direct means of attaining mukti. In *bhakti-mārga* devotion is regarded as the only means of attaining mukti.

Advaitic teachers regard *jñāna-mārga* as the only true highway to mukti, whereas the dualistic teachers regard *bhakti-mārga* as the only true pathway to mukti. The first attempt to reconcile the two *mārgas* was made by Sri Krishna in the Gita. But later Vedantic teachers interpreted the Gita in such a way as to make the scripture appear to support their own respective views. The second great attempt to reconcile *jñāna-mārga* and *bhakti-mārga* was made by Sri Ramakrishna. From his own realization, Sri Ramakrishna taught that at the highest transcendent level *jñāna* and bhakti lose their distinctions and become one; the same happens with the distinction between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*. These distinctions are created by the human mind at the lower level and have no meaning at the highest transcendent level. Furthermore, Sri Ramakrishna taught that through divine grace even a bhakta who follows *bhakti-mārga* can have knowledge of Brahman as the impersonal Absolute.

Sri Ramakrishna has spoken on this subject several times. Once he said: 'The path of knowledge leads to Truth, as does the path that combines knowledge and love. The path of love, too, leads to this goal. The way of love is as true as the way of knowledge. All

paths ultimately lead to the same Truth' (104).

As regards the controversy about the nature of Reality, attained through different paths, Sri Ramakrishna said: 'He who is called Brahman by the jñanis is known as Atman by the yogis and as Bhagavan by the bhaktas. The same brahmin is called priest, when worshipping in the temple, and cook, when preparing a meal in the kitchen. ... But the Reality is one and the same. The difference is only in name. He who is Brahman is verily the Atman, and again, He is Bhagavan' (133-4). In another place Sri Ramakrishna said: 'God has form and He is formless too. Further, He is beyond both form and formlessness. No one can limit Him' (192).

It is important to keep in mind the distinction between *mārga* and yoga. All the four yogas find application in both the *mārgas*. In bhakti-mārga the bhakta practises karma yoga; raja yoga, in the form of meditation; jñāna yoga, in the form of discrimination between the Atman and the world; and finally bhakti yoga. Similarly, in *jñāna-mārga* the jñani also has his own karma yoga, raja yoga, bhakti yoga, and jñāna yoga.

But when it is stated that through any one yoga it is possible to realize God and attain mukti, then it should be understood that the term 'yoga' is used in the sense of *mārga*. When, for instance, Swami Vivekananda states that karma yoga by itself can lead to mukti, here 'karma yoga' is used in the sense of *karma-mārga*.

One noteworthy point in Sri Ramakrishna's views on spiritual paths is that he never condemned any path as wrong. Even about the Kartabhaja sect, which followed certain immoral practices in the name of sadhana, Sri Ramakrishna said it was like entering a house by the small door at the back of a house formerly used by scavengers to enter the house. According to him, any path, if sincerely followed, can lead ultimately to the supreme Goal. The one thing he insisted on was sincerity, *āntarikatā*.

Harmony of Spiritual Life and Social Life

Sri Ramakrishna's repeated references to *kāmini-kāncan*, woman and gold, as maya and the main cause of bondage may give the impression that he was against householder's life and social obligations. But the truth is that he fully understood and approved the necessity of marriage for most people and the importance of fulfilling family obligations. He could have avoided his own marriage if he had been against it. But he not only gave his consent to it, he even chose his bride. Apparently, he did so in order to set a new ideal for householders. Although he trained a group of young men to become monks and gave them a different type of advice, he never allowed or encouraged any of his householder disciples, including the great Nag Mahashay, to renounce the world.

Sri Ramakrishna was full of praise for householders who lived a spiritual life facing innumerable challenges and difficulties in life, as the following extract shows:

Addressing Ishan, a householder devotee, the Master said: 'Blessed indeed is the householder who performs his duties in the world, at the same time cherishing love for the Lotus Feet of God. He is indeed a hero. He is like a man who carries a heavy load of two maunds on his head and at the same time watches a bridal procession. One cannot lead such a life without great spiritual power. Again, such a man is like the mudfish, which lives in the mud but is not stained by it. Further, such a householder may be compared to a waterfowl. It is constantly diving un-

der water; yet, by fluttering its wings only once, it shakes off all trace of wet (856).

The major parts of his recorded conversations were held with householders, and the bulk of his teachings were addressed to them. How to lead an intensely spiritual life while discharging the duties of a householder is the central theme of his talks. It is true that he greatly stressed the need for spiritual practices such as prayer, japa, meditation, discrimination, and so forth. But he was also a great teacher of karma yoga. He has repeatedly pointed out that unless one is very much advanced on the spiritual path or has developed intense love for God, one cannot give up work. Work, duties, and obligations of life drop off naturally when a person is advanced on the spiritual path. As he put it: 'When the fruit appears the blossom drops off. Love of God is the fruit, and rituals are the blossom. When the daughter-in-law of the house becomes pregnant, she cannot do much work. Her mother-in-law gradually lessens her duties in the house' (465). The original word used in Bengali is 'karma', which means both 'rituals' and 'work'.

All work should be done selflessly by surrendering the fruit of one's actions to God. Furthermore, one should live in the world without becoming attached to anybody. How to live in the world without becoming attached? This question was put to Sri Ramakrishna on several occasions, and he answered using illustrations to support his explanation. He said:

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.

A maidservant in the house of a rich man performs all the household duties, but her thoughts are fixed on her own home in her native village. She brings up her master's children as if they were her own. ... But in her own mind she knows very well that they do not belong to her at all (81).

Sri Ramakrishna taught that it is possible to lead an intensely spiritual life along with discharging one's duties of life. But this needs practice.

He calls it *abhyāsa-yoga*, the yoga of practice, about which Sri Krishna also speaks in the twelfth chapter of the Gita. For this Sri Ramakrishna gives the illustration of the rice-flakes seller. With one hand she operates the wooden pestle, with the other hand she nurses her child, and along with this she sells rice-flakes and bargains with the customers. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that one should hold on to the lotus feet of the Lord with one hand and do worldly duties with the other hand.

Sri Ramakrishna also taught that spiritual life can be lived even under unfavourable circumstances, even when one has to live with unfriendly or hostile people. But for this one needs inner strength and an unshakable *buddhi*, will or determination. Regarding this the Master once told Vijay Goswami:

'He who is a devotee of God must have an understanding that cannot be shaken under any conditions. He must be like the anvil in a blacksmith's shop. It is constantly being struck by the hammer; still it is unshaken. Bad people may abuse you very much and speak ill of you; but you must bear with them all if you sincerely seek God. Isn't it possible to think of God in the midst of the wicked?' (560).

Sri Ramakrishna's attitude towards wealth is to be understood in the right perspective. It is true that his mind had become so sensitive that he could not touch money. But this does not mean that he was against the earning of wealth by householders. What he condemned was excessive attachment to wealth. He said: 'He alone is a true man who has made money his servant. But those who do not know the use of money are not men even though they have human forms' (637).

About the proper use of money Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Money enables a man to get food and drink, build a house, worship the Deity, serve devotees and holy men, and help the poor when he happens to meet them. These are the good uses of money. Money is not meant for luxuries or creature comfort or for buying a position in society' (285). In other words, money should be invested and used wisely, and should not be wasted foolishly.

Sri Ramakrishna also never approved of householders' neglecting their duties towards the household life under the pretext of leading a spiritual life. He scolded some of the men who came to stay at Dakshineswar leaving their wives and children to the mercies of friends and relatives.

Sri Ramakrishna spoke of two kinds of yoga or means of attaining union with God: *mano* yoga, which means mental disciplines such as meditation, japa, and the like; and karma yoga, which means performance of selfless work. He has stated clearly: 'If a householder or a man belonging to the other stages of life performs action without attachment, then he is united with God through such action' (388).

How does karma yoga bring about union with God? Selfless work, *niṣkāma-karma*, purifies the mind, and in the purified mind dawns love for God, which leads to God realization. However, Sri Ramakrishna has pointed out that it is very difficult to do work selflessly.

The above discussion shows how Sri Ramakrishna has harmonized spiritual life with the fulfilment of the duties of life and social obligations. It is possible to lead a completely God-centred life even while living in society as an active member of it and convert one's whole life into an undivided consecration to God. This aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings was fully manifested in the life of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi.

Harmony of the Ancient and the Modern

In an earlier section of this article we discussed Sri Ramakrishna's life as the culmination of five thousand years of the spiritual life of the Indian people. He relived the whole range of spiritual experiences of the sages and saints of India, from Vedic times to the modern age, and integrated into his soul the spiritual consciousness of not only the avatars and deities of Hinduism but also of the founders of other religions. Hence, Sri Ramakrishna's inner life may be said to be an epitome of ancient spirituality.

It should be noted here that this reliving or 'recapitulation' of ancient spirituality was achieved not in the middle of a forest or in an inaccessible mountain cave, but in modern times in a modern society, in the environs of a modern temple. Outwardly, in his

food, dress, and other habits such as smoking, chewing betel leaves, using of footwear, mode of travelling, manners and way of talking, there was nothing to distinguish Sri Ramakrishna from the average middle-class Bengali of his times. His inner spirituality was in perfect harmony with his outer life.

He was quite modern in his outlook, views, and approach to the problems of life. He was in sympathy with the spirit of the modern age. He had no difficulty in dealing with agnosticism, rationalism, humanism, non-conformism, liberalism with regard to social life, and other aspects of the modern spirit. Some of his disciples—like Narendra, Mahendra Nath Gupta, and the physician and scientist Dr Mahendra Lal Sarkar—were adherents of the modern spirit. Sri Ramakrishna did not disapprove their attitudes or try to change them. On the contrary, he encouraged them to hold to their own beliefs, attitudes, and convictions. This was because he knew that behind their apparent agnosticism and rationalism there was a sincere quest for the ultimate Truth and everlasting peace. Sri Ramakrishna also knew only too well that the spirit will ultimately triumph over matter—spiritual truths have the intrinsic power to manifest themselves, breaking through the veils of agnosticism, materialism, secularism, and other negative aspects of the modern age.

Thus we find that although Sri Ramakrishna was in his inner being an inexhaustible reservoir of ancient spiritual knowledge and wisdom he was quite modern and progressive in his outer life. He was internally ancient and externally modern. He is indeed the connecting link and symbol of the harmony between the ancient and the modern. It may not be out of place to mention here that, just as Sri Ramakrishna is the connecting link between the ancient and the modern, so is Swami Vivekananda the connecting link between the East and the West.

Principle of Acceptance

We have discussed above five types of harmony that Sri Ramakrishna lived and taught: harmony of religions, harmony of sects within Hinduism, harmony of spiritual paths, harmony of spiritual life and social life, and harmony of the ancient and the modern. As mentioned earlier these five types of harmony were not merely a matter of toleration and social accommodation. They were derived from a true vision and understanding of Reality and were based on two fundamental principles that Sri Ramakrishna seemed to have followed in his life.

The first principle is unity in diversity. Sri Ramakrishna had realized that underpinning all the diversity of the phenomenal world there is the substratum of infinite, unchanging, unbroken, non-dual consciousness. All the diversities finally lead to a basic unity. Having established himself in the basic unitary consciousness, Sri Ramakrishna could see harmony in all forms of diversity.

The second principle is of acceptance. Sri Ramakrishna accepted diversity as a part of the divine plan. It should be noted that Sri Ramakrishna did not try to find the common ground among religions or among the sects of Hinduism, nor did he try to 'harmonize' religions or sects. He simply accepted all religions and sects as they are, with all their differences. He did not try to iron out or reconcile those differences. He just accepted

them as the unique features of religions and sects.

Conflicts and quarrels arise only when people refuse to accept diversity—diversity of religions, diversity of sects, diversity of human temperaments, and so forth. Conflicts and quarrels arise when people take the stand that their religion alone is true and all other religions are false, that is, they are not religions at all. They claim that they believe in an omniscient and omnipotent God but, at the same time, they refuse to see that God himself must have created diverse religions and that diversity is a part of God's plan of the world.

Sri Ramakrishna accepted religions and sects as they are. Where others saw conflicts, he saw harmony; where others saw error and falsehood, he saw truth and reality. To establish harmony among religions it is not necessary to formulate any big theories. All that is needed is to simply allow people to follow their own religions or sects without disturbing others. Religious conflicts arise when religious leaders with their narrow views and ignorance of other religions spread dogmatism and fanaticism among common people. In recent years religion has come to be associated with politics in many countries, especially in India. This has aggravated religious conflicts and made religion one of the chief causes of social violence and unrest. Regarding this Swami Vivekananda says: 'Now, in my little experience I have collected this knowledge— that for all the devilry that religion is blamed with, religion is not at all in fault: no religion ever persecuted men, no religion ever burnt witches, no religion ever did any of these things. What then incited people to do these things? Politics, but never religion; and if such politics takes the name of religion whose fault is that? ' 15

There are, however, signs that the situation is changing fast. The Internet is bringing people all over the world closer to one another. Through the Internet people are coming to know about other religions and are able to appreciate the good points in them. They are learning to think for themselves independent of the influence of religious leaders. Harmony of religions is no longer a matter to be decided by religious leaders. It is being taken up and practised by the common people. The ideas of harmony that Sri Ramakrishna lived and taught are now practised more and more by people in many countries, although many of them may not know about Sri Ramakrishna or his message of universal harmony.

References and Notes

14. *Gospel*, 155.
15. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 4.125.



SECTION IV

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In the preceding sections of this article we have discussed several functions that Sri Ramakrishna performed as the avatara of the present age. His most important function, the primary objective of his mission on earth, however, was the re-establishment of the spiritual ideal. One patent consequence of this work was the dawn of a spiritual renaiss-

sance in India.¹ The secret of the continued vitality of Indian culture for more than five thousand years lies in the fact that spirituality forms the foundation and motive power of Indian culture and, secondly, that this spirituality is periodically replenished and adapted to the changing conditions of society.

Indian Spirituality

At the outset it is necessary to understand the correct meaning of the term 'spiritual', which is nowadays being used widely in many contexts. 'Spirit' is an English word that refers to a particular dimension or aspect of the human personality. In all non-Indian philosophical and religious traditions the human personality is regarded as dichotomous, that is, as consisting of two entities: the body and the mind. It is the mind itself—or sometimes a higher part of it—that is called 'soul' and 'spirit'. Therefore, in these traditions there is not much difference between 'moral' and 'spiritual'.

In the Indian tradition the human personality is regarded as trichotomous, that is, it consists of three entities: body, mind, and Atman. A human being's true nature is neither the body nor the mind, which are changing and perishable, but the Atman, which is beginningless, self-existent, and everlasting. The Atman is of the nature of pure consciousness, which is a part or reflection of the infinite consciousness known as Brahman or Paramatman. In this tradition there is a basic difference between morality and spirituality, although they are mutually interdependent.

Swami Vivekananda has pointed out in several of his lectures and letters that religion forms the life-centre or lifeblood of Indian culture. By 'religion' Swamiji meant spirituality. And, as shown above, Indian spirituality is based not on mythology or on certain historical events or on the life of a single prophet, but on the eternal truths and laws of the world of the spirit, the limitless realm of consciousness. This is one of the two factors that have given an indestructible vitality to Indian culture.

The second factor is the capacity of Indian spirituality to integrate challenging forces and adapt itself to changing circumstances. This integration and adaptation seem to have followed a kind of dialectical pattern. But, unlike the violent and destructive dialectics of Hegel and Marx, Indian history has followed a peaceful and cooperative dialectic.

Peaceful Dialectics of Indian Culture

At the dawn of civilization, on the banks of the Indus and the Saraswati rivers, the Indian mind Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance awoke at the mystic touch of the sun of knowledge and opened to the glories and mysteries of life, existence, and reality. The first response of the Indian mind to this mystic awakening took the form of hymns and rituals, which formed the early part of the Vedas. This formed the primordial *thesis* of Indian culture. Soon there developed parallel lines of thinking based on reason and intuitive enquiry, which served as the *antithesis*. Out of a *synthesis* of these two approaches to Reality there emerged the Upanishads.

Next a new spiritual stream known as Bhagavata-dharma centred on the cult of Vas-

udeva Krishna developed. The synthesis of the jñāna of the Upanishads and the bhakti of this cult gave rise to the Bhagavadgita, a marvel of spiritual harmony and synthesis. Then arose Buddhism, which flourished as a parallel stream for a thousand years until the Mahayana logic was integrated into the Vedantic tradition by Acharya Shankara in the eighth century ce. The result of this synthesis was the Advaita Vedanta, considered by scholars to represent the highest pinnacle of philosophy attained by humanity. Several traditions of yoga—such as the Shaiva, the Patanjala, and the Hatha—which arose at different periods, were finally synthesized with Vedanta to give rise to the Shakta tradition.

When the influx of Islam took place in the eleventh and subsequent centuries, there arose in different parts of the country saints like Nanak and Kabir who attempted to integrate some of the good aspects of Islam into Indian culture—for various historical reasons this process of integration has perhaps not attained completion.

The greatest antithesis that Indian culture had to face was Western culture, which began to spread through the channels of education and missionary activity in the nineteenth century. Western culture introduced three main elements: materialistic science and reason, the idea of an open society, and the new concept of God as the saviour of sinners, the poor, and the social outcast. It was then that Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda appeared and harmonized these elements with Indian culture.

Their main work, however, was to re-establish the spiritual ideal, unify the different streams of spiritual life, and rejuvenate the spiritual foundations of Indian culture. This led to a general awakening of the collective mind of the Indian people, a flowering of the spiritual aspirations of the people, which has been described as a 'spiritual renaissance'. The re-establishment of the spiritual ideal had taken place in India on earlier occasions also, but the re-establishment of the spiritual ideal and the phenomenon of spiritual renaissance brought about by Sri Ramakrishna has certain unique features, some of which are mentioned below.

Unique Features of the Spiritual Renaissance

1. Universal Significance

We have seen that Indian culture has been able to sustain more than four thousand years of growth and development because of its inherent capacity to harmonize diverse thought currents and social forces in a peaceful way, and by re-establishing the spiritual ideal at different periods. The significance of these events remained confined to India till the time of Sri Ramakrishna. But with Sri Ramakrishna the re-establishment of the spiritual ideal began to assume global significance.

There are two reasons for this. In the first place the British occupation of India ended the country's political isolation from the rest of the world, and the work of Western orientalis and Swami Vivekananda's work of spreading Vedanta in the West ended the country's cultural isolation. As a result Indian culture has been drawn into the mainstream of world culture.

The second reason is the decline of spirituality in the West. The overwhelming influence of science and materialistic ideas, the two futile World Wars, and the enormous in-

crease in psychological and existential problems undermined the faith of the Western people in institutional religions. This situation has been made worse by several other factors. When Swami Vivekananda went to the West in 1893, he could see that in spite of the spectacular achievements of science and technology and the high standard of living of the people, there was a spiritual vacuum in the Western world. And Swamiji understood that Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings had much relevance to the lives of Western people.

2. Emphasis on Direct Experience

Self-realization or God-realization has been regarded as the highest ideal and ultimate goal of life in India from time immemorial. By re-establishing this ideal Sri Ramakrishna gave it a tremendous boost. He strengthened this ideal in three ways. In the first place he generated the faith that Self-realization or God-realization is possible for all people, even in the present-day world. It is not meant only for monks and recluses but also for householders, and that too without any distinctions of caste, religion, or race; and it is possible even while living in the present-day society. Only an avatara can give this assurance, and countless numbers of people have recovered their faith in God and spiritual life by reading the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. No less a person than Mahatma Gandhi has borne testimony to this fact. In his brief foreword to the standard biography of Sri Ramakrishna, Gandhiji wrote: '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.' 2

Secondly, Sri Ramakrishna taught that God realization is the ultimate goal of life, the very purpose of human existence. Man's true nature is divine and, unless he realizes it, he can never attain lasting fulfilment or peace. Man's alienation from God, that is, from his own true divine nature, is the basic cause of all the existential, social, and psychological problems of human beings. This idea is in consonance with modern trends of thought.

Thirdly, Sri Ramakrishna taught that direct, transcendent experience of the supreme Self is the only ultimate proof, *pramāṇa*, of the existence of God and is the only means of understanding the true nature of Atman and Brahman.

Transcendental spiritual truths are not mere matters of belief, they can be directly and personally tested and verified. This is an important principle Sri Ramakrishna taught and Swami Vivekananda propagated. Its importance lies in the fact that it is the only principle on which religion can remain firmly grounded and overcome the onslaughts of modern science. One of the basic principles of modern science is the principle of verification, which nowadays is more often rephrased as 'error elimination' or 'non-falsifiability' principle. What Sri Ramakrishna's teaching implies is that the verification principle can be applied in the field of religion as well. The main difference is that in the field of science the verification is done on sensory data in the external world, whereas in the field of religion the verification is done on super-sensory data in the inner world.

Sri Ramakrishna applied this principle not only in the field of his experiences of Hinduism, but also in the field of his experiences of other religions. In fact, it was on the

bedrock of the verifiability of spiritual experiences that Sri Ramakrishna built his doctrine of harmony of religions and Swami Vivekananda built his proposal for a universal religion. Thus, Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that direct transcendental experience is the only proof, test, and criterion for the validity of the truths claimed by different religions has universal significance.

3. Separation of Spirituality from Religion

We have seen that Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on direct experience as a principle of verification has enabled Vedanta to face the challenges of science and rational thought. This principle of direct experience also enabled Sri Ramakrishna to separate spirituality from religion.

By religion is meant a *way of life* based on faith in God and moral order; observance of rituals, customs, and the like; and allegiance to some institution. Spirituality is a personal quest for meaning based on *a view of the ultimate Reality* and aims at higher fulfilment through direct mystical experience of the ultimate Reality.

The outer aspects of religion, such as customs and rituals, show much diversity and are the main cause of quarrels and conflicts among religions. The spiritual aspects of the different religions present a good deal of uniformity. Sri Ramakrishna held that spirituality forms the most essential aspect of all religions. When he said that all religions lead to the same goal, what he meant was that the *spiritual paths* of all religions lead to the same ultimate goal. The separation of the essential spiritual aspects of religions from their outer forms that Sri Ramakrishna brought about has now become a widely accepted view. More and more people, especially in the West, now regard themselves as spiritual rather than as religious.

4. Harmony of Religions

Harmony of religions is a unique and well-known feature of the spiritual renaissance associated with the avatarhood of Sri Ramakrishna. No other spiritual or religious movement in the past had given so much importance to the doctrine of harmony of religions. It is true that a general outlook of religious harmony prevailed in India right from Vedic times. But it was more of the nature of religious liberalism and tolerance than a definite doctrine based on a metaphysical truth or verified experience. The oft-quoted Vedic dictum '*Ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*; Truth is one, sages call it by different names' in its original context indicated an identity of divinities, and it was not so well known until Swami Vivekananda popularized it as a Vedic authority for the principle of religious harmony.

In modern times, under the term 'religious pluralism',³ the doctrine of harmony of religions is being accepted by more and more people all over the world. It is followed in most of the spiritual movements that have sprung up in recent years. In this context two points regarding Sri Ramakrishna's concept of harmony of religions deserve special mention.

In the first place Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on harmony of religions is based on direct experience. We pointed out earlier that every religion has three levels of function: the social, the intellectual, and the mystical or spiritual. Most of the statements on pluralism or harmony of religions that we come across pertain only to harmony at the first two levels, namely the social and the intellectual. Sri Ramakrishna's message of harmony of

religions emphasizes harmony at the mystical or spiritual level. He was the only person who actually practised the spiritual methods of different religions, gaining thereby the direct experience that all paths lead to the realization of the same ultimate Reality, which is known by different names. Sri Ramakrishna alone attained the harmony of religions at the experiential level.

The importance of this fact is that pluralism is a way of deciding the validity of religions. World religions have different goals. To decide the validity of religions based on these goals would be 'religious relativism', not pluralism. To decide the validity of any universal phenomenon we need a fixed standard or unit. To determine distance we use the fixed unit of metre or foot, to measure we use the unit of second. Contrary to popular view Einstein's theory of relativity does not merely state everything is relative; what it states is that in spite of everything being relative, the velocity of light is invariant or fixed and, making use of this as a unit, it is possible to correlate the results in different frames of reference. In a somewhat similar way Sri Ramakrishna used the direct experience of the ultimate Reality as an invariable criterion to judge the validity of religions. He saw that although religions are quite different from one another, they all lead to the same ultimate experience and therefore they are all valid and true. It is Sri Ramakrishna's experience that gives validity to the theory of pluralism or harmony of religions. In this connection we may also note that Sri Ramakrishna spoke about harmony of religions not to show his liberal attitude or with the idea of getting name and fame. It was his intense love for God and his experience of God through different paths that made him proclaim the message of harmony of religions.

The second point is that Sri Ramakrishna lived what he taught. He showed through his life how harmony of religions could be put into practice in the individual as well as the collective life. His small room at Dakshineswar temple served as a mini parliament of religions. People belonging to different religions—Brahmos, Vaishnavas, Shaktas, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs—flocked to his room. He was perfectly at home with all of them, and they too felt that he belonged to them. The way of harmony of religions that Sri Ramakrishna lived and taught continues as a living tradition in the Ramakrishna Order and in the whole Ramakrishna movement.

The way of harmony shown by Sri Ramakrishna is based on two principles. One is the principle of acceptance. It is not enough to somehow tolerate other religions as a social or political expedient, as is usually done. What is really necessary is to accept the right of every religion to exist, to accept the differences of religions as natural social processes, to accept the right of everyone to follow one's own religion, to accept the good points of other religions and assimilate them in one's own life. The second point is the awareness of the underlying unity. It is necessary to understand that beneath all the differences of religions there is the unity of the divine consciousness, and that all religions are different means of realizing that unity in diversity, which is the basic principle of harmony. This principle of harmony can be applied not only in the field of religion but also in all fields of human interaction—in family relationships, in places of work, in social life, in national life, in international relationships.

5. A Universal Scripture

For any religion, sect, or movement to survive for centuries the destructive forces of history the support of a scripture is necessary. A scripture is an inexhaustible source of inspiration. It is also a great unifying force. Any religious movement that does not have the support of a scripture will soon peter out.

The modern world needed a new scripture in tune with the needs and conditions of the present-day world. The spiritual renaissance associated with Sri Ramakrishna brought into existence that new scripture. Even during his lifetime, a compilation of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings had been brought out by some Brahma leaders, who were not his disciples but admirers. Later on one or two other compilations of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings appeared in print. They were all, however, overshadowed by the magnum opus of Mahendranath Gupta, entitled *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, translated into English as the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. This is the new scripture of not only the Ramakrishna movement but also of the present-day world. It may indeed be regarded as a universal scripture. Some of its unique features, which also justify its claim to be the universal scripture for all, are mentioned below.

The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is not meant to supplant any other scripture. On the contrary, it helps the followers of different religions to strengthen their faith in their own scriptures. It enables them to see their scriptures in a broader spiritual perspective. In fact, it enables them to have a better understanding of their scriptures.

Each world scripture has its own historical, cultural, mythological, and hermeneutical presuppositions. Hence, the world scriptures appear to be mutually exclusive or incompatible. The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, however, helps us find harmony among them. It thus serves as a 'link scripture'. In this role it has an assured place among the great scriptures of the world.

An obvious feature of this new scripture of Sri Ramakrishna is its ambience of modernity. The people we meet in it are not strange or mythological people of bygone ages. They are not much different from the educated middle-class people of present times. The conversations, incidents, and occasions recorded; the various topics discussed; the description of the places; and other details given in this new scripture have the ring of familiarity in them. What is equally remarkable is the range of topics discussed in this astonishing scripture: concepts about God and the ultimate Reality; diverse means of realizing God; practices and traditions of various religious sects; different schools of Indian philosophy; ideas of modern Western philosophers; views of atheists, deists, and theists; duties of householders and duties of monks; love for all; selfless service; harmony of religions; and innumerable other topics. The most abstruse subjects are explained in the simplest way with the help of delightful parables, anecdotes, and stories that even a child can understand.

Equally striking is the positive outlook and the mood of love and joy that pervade the whole scripture. One can hear the echoes of lively discussions, soul-stirring music, and spiritual dancing on almost every page of the book. It infuses love for God and love for the human being, faith and courage to face the problems of life, and the determination to seek the ultimate goal of human life.

Above all, this new scripture is of mature wisdom, distilled out of years of struggle and experience, and filtered through the crystal clear mind of a fully illumined soul. What more does a book need to be regarded as a universal scripture? (*To be continued*)

Notes and References

1. For a detailed account of the historical and social background of this event see Swami Nirvedananda, 'Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance' in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, 7 vols (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1956), 4.653-728.
2. Swami Nikhilananda, *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), ix.
3. Three main interfaith attitudes are recognized: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism holds that 'my religion alone is true, all other religions are false'. Inclusivism maintains that 'my religion alone is true no doubt, but other religions are not false because they are included in my religion'. Pluralism believes that all world religions are true since they are different views of, or paths to, the ultimate. To this list Swami Vivekananda added a fourth interfaith attitude known as 'universalism'.— For a detailed discussion on this subject see Swami Bhajanananda, *Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2008).

The reader will find mentioned in this work [*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*] many visions and experiences that fall outside the ken of physical science and even psychology. With the development of modern knowledge the border line between the natural and the supernatural is ever shifting its position. Genuine mystical experiences are not as suspect now as they were half a century ago. The words of Sri Ramakrishna have already exerted a tremendous influence in the land of his birth. Savants of Europe have found in his words the ring of universal truth.

But these words were not the product of intellectual cogitation; they were rooted in direct experience.

Hence, to students of religion, psychology, and physical science, these experiences of the Master are of immense value for the understanding of religious phenomena in general. No doubt Sri Ramakrishna was a Hindu of the Hindus; yet his experiences transcended the limits of the dogmas and creeds of Hinduism.

Mystics of religions other than Hinduism will find in Sri Ramakrishna's experiences a corroboration of the experiences of their own prophets and seers.

And this is very important today for the resuscitation of religious values. The sceptical reader may pass by the supernatural experiences; he will yet find in the book enough material to provoke his serious thought and solve many of his spiritual problems. —Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, vii-viii



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6. Setting in Motion a New Spiritual Movement

The work of an avatara is not for a few years but for centuries or even millennia. He ensures the continuance of the new spiritual tradition for such a long period. In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, the perpetuation of his mission on earth has been ensured in several ways: through a new monastic order that he founded, through a community of lay devotees, and through various other institutions.

(i) The New Monastic Order

Only an order of monks can dedicate themselves fully and selflessly to the task of propagating an avatara's message and sustaining his mission for the welfare of humanity

for centuries. This was the reason why Sri Ramakrishna was eager to bring into existence a new monastic order during the closing months of his physical life on earth.

He is the real founder of the Ramakrishna Order.

Although mainly Swami Vivekananda was instrumental in the formation of this new monastic order, he played his part in accordance with the instructions received from Sri Ramakrishna. Like the message of Sri Ramakrishna, the new monastic order too came as the culmination of three to four thousand years of Indian culture.

Monasticism probably originated in India. The Rig Veda, which is the oldest living scripture in the world and is dated between 2000 and 1500 bce, mentions *muni* and *yati* in several places. These words refer to homeless ascetics or monks who led a wandering life.

Quite different from these wanderers were the spiritual teachers known as rishis or seers. The rishis we come across in the Rig Veda were composers of hymns and songs, whereas the rishis we meet in the Upanishads were illumined teachers who discovered transcendental truths about the ultimate Reality. Most of these rishis were married people who nevertheless led disciplined and austere lives in hermitages known as ashramas. Spiritual seekers flocked to these ashramas and lived with them as their disciples.

Monasticism became a well-defined and disciplined way of life with Buddha in the sixth century bce. Some of the major contributions made by Buddha to the development of the monastic ideal are as follows: (a) he started a large-scale induction of people, without the distinctions of caste or class, into monastic life; (b) he organized monks into a distinct order known as Sangha; (c) the lives of monks came to be regulated by strict moral rules and codes of conduct; (d) he sent monks to different places as missionaries to preach Buddhist Dharma—two thousand five hundred years later all these features were revived and incorporated into Ramakrishna monasticism by Swami Vivekananda.

Buddhist monasticism exerted influence on Hinduism, but regarding the extent of this influence there is no unanimity of opinion. One visible sign of this influence was the gradual replacement of the rishi ideal by the sannyasin ideal. According to some scholars, the adoption of sannyasa as the 'fourth stage', *caturtha-āśrama*, of life in Hindu social structure took place after Buddha. Under Buddhist influence a negative attitude towards life began to pervade Indian life and thought.

With Acharya Shankara in the eighth century ce Hindu monasticism acquired an independent status, a distinct identity, and great prestige.

Shankara's life-work had a threefold aim: (a) to establish Advaita as the highest Truth and ultimate goal of life; (b) to bring out the true spiritual import of Vedantic scriptures and establish their supremacy by interpreting them in a logical, consistent way, within the philosophical framework of Advaita; and (c) to establish a new type of monastic life, known as Math, in four parts of India, to serve as centres for the cultivation, preservation, and propagation of Vedantic knowledge. A Math is a monastic institution with a single sannyasin whose functions are similar to those of a bishop.

There is a permanent arrangement for worship in a Math, which thus serves as a

centre for the harmony of jñāna and bhakti. Shankara introduced the scholarly tradition into monastic life and made sannyasins learned spiritual teachers.

The next stage in the development of Hindu monasticism was inaugurated by the great scholar-monk Madhusudana Sarasvati. He opened the doors of sannyasa to people belonging to all castes and started a new way of monastic life known as Akhada. Originally conceived as a militant order—like the Hospitallars and Templars of Medieval Europe—an Akhada is a huge monastic institution in which a large number of monks live in a loosely-knit collective life under a powerful abbot-like monk called Mahant.

Islamic mystics known as Sufis are generally married people and therefore, strictly speaking, cannot be regarded as monks. From the twelfth century onwards several Sufi orders, such as Qadiriyyah and Naqshbandiyya, were introduced into India from the Middle East, while a few others, such as the Chistiyya and Suhrawardiyya, developed indigenously. Christian monasticism of the Eastern tradition existed in the southern part of India, now known as Kerala, from the sixth century. With the coming of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, several Roman Catholic monastic orders—such as the Carmelites, Jesuits, Benedictines, and others—were introduced into India.

It is against this vast and complex background of so many different monastic traditions, all of which are thriving but each with a particular vision, that we have to understand the significance of the establishment of a unique monastic order known as the Ramakrishna Order—Ramakrishna Math in Indian languages—by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

The historical significance of the event lies in the fact that the rise of the new monastic order took place at a most critical period in the history of Indian culture. In the second half of the nineteenth century many spiritual, religious, social, cultural, and even political forces were pulling society in different directions. There was a great need for a new spiritual centre to gather up the scattered spiritual forces of the nation, to unify the different strands of Indian culture, a centre to bring about inter-religious and intra-religious harmony, a centre to act as a link between the ancient and the modern and as a bridge between the East and the West, a centre to initiate and sustain a spiritual resurgence and social awakening, a centre to propagate among humanity the new avatara's message of faith, purity, strength, love, and service. From a historical standpoint it may be seen that the establishment of the Ramakrishna Order or Math came as the fulfilment of the need for such a living spiritual centre.

Recent observations have shown that monasticism as a whole is now on the decline all over the world, especially in the West. As a part of the spiritual renaissance associated with Sri Ramakrishna, the rise of the Ramakrishna Order may in future prove to be a historical process of rejuvenation of monasticism in the whole world. For the millennia-old monastic tradition of India the Ramakrishna Order signifies not only a process of self-renewal but the beginning of a new era.

Ramakrishna monasticism is in several respects a new concept of the monastic ideal. Some of the notable features of this new way of monastic life are briefly stated below.

(a) Universal Outlook

We have seen that Hindu monasticism has three main patterns: the ashrama, a more or less temporary abode for a guru and his disciples, the Math, a permanent establishment with a single monk and having regular arrangements for worship, and the Akhada, a very large loosely knit monastic community. The Ramakrishna Order does not conform to any of these patterns, though it includes some of the good aspects of all of them. It also includes some of the good aspects of Buddhist and Christian forms of monasticism.

This does not, however, mean that the Ramakrishna Order follows a syncretic monastic ideal. It follows an independent ideal that comes nearest to a universal monastic ideal. This universalism is not an outer show of liberalism or a means of obtaining the support of people. The universalism of the Ramakrishna Order is based on the Vedantic principle of unity in diversity realized by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as a fundamental fact of life and existence.

(b) Modernity

Monks of the Ramakrishna Order are engaged in different kinds of social services. This calls for social mobility and interaction with the society at different levels. To facilitate these matters the monks follow a modern way of life such as the use of tailored clothes, of modern amenities and modes of travel, and so forth.

This modernization of the lifestyle has been done without compromising the basic ideals and values of monastic life. The two basic principles of sannyasa are renunciation and looking upon oneself as the Atman.

As regards the first principle, renunciation, traditional Hindu monasticism gives much importance to its external signs. Sri Ramakrishna regarded external signs of renunciation unimportant.

He considered renunciation of lust and wealth to be true renunciation. He used to say: 'There is no harm in chewing betel-leaf, eating fish, smoking, or rubbing the body with oil. What will one achieve by renouncing only these things? The one thing needful is the renunciation of "woman and gold". That renunciation is the real and supreme renunciation.'⁴ This teaching of Sri Ramakrishna is strictly followed in the Ramakrishna Order. In fact, chastity and non-possession of wealth are two of the several vows the monks take, even during their novitiate, and they keep these two vows unbroken all through their lives.

The very basis of a sannyasin's renunciation is the Vedantic principle that the human's true Self is neither the body nor the mind but the Atman, which is inseparable from the supreme Self known as Brahman or Paramatman. Sannyasa does not mean only renunciation of external objects but also renunciation of identification with one's body, *dehātma-buddhi*. This false identification is the root of all forms of attachment, hatred, fear, egoism, and the like. A true sannyasin gives up this and identifies himself with his true Self or Atman, which is ever-pure, ever-free, ever-blissful, eternal, and infinite. True Self-knowledge protects the sannyasin from the false appearances, attractions, illusions, and pitfalls of worldly life.

The two principles of renunciation and Self-knowledge enable the monks of the Ramakrishna Order to adapt themselves to the conditions, needs, and demands of the modern world as well as to lead an absolutely pure and holy life wholly devoted to God, even while discharging the duties of monastic life and engaging themselves in various kinds of service activities for the welfare of others all through their lives.

(c) Discipline and Freedom

The Ramakrishna Order has been established by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda not only for a few years; with its foundations deep in the spiritual traditions of India, it is built to last centuries. A monastic organization can last for centuries only if it is governed by strict discipline and integrity and is sustained by perennial spiritual logistics. The disciplined life that the monks lead is based on definite rules and regulations originally formulated by Swami Vivekananda himself. It is the first, and perhaps the only, monastic order within the Hindu tradition that is governed by a written rule and not merely by traditions and conventions.

Swami Vivekananda has said: 'Liberty is the first condition of growth.' What is the scope for freedom in monastic life if it is governed by strict rules? Now, freedom is of two kinds: external and internal. External freedom is freedom to move about as one pleases and do whatever one likes. It is over this freedom that many of the conflicts and quarrels take place in the family, in the workplace, in society, in political circles.

Internal freedom refers to three kinds of inner freedom. The first one is freedom from slavery to desires, to impulses, to instinctual drives. The second one is 'free will'—as St Augustine has stated, by 'free will' is meant a will that is so completely free from bad thoughts that it can think only good thoughts and can turn freely towards God. The third type of inner freedom is freedom from dogmatism and prejudice, freedom to know the thoughts of great people, to study different systems of philosophy and different religions, freedom to pursue one's own spiritual path.

The rules and regulations of the Ramakrishna Order impose restrictions on external freedom but not on inner freedom. Monastic life helps the monks of the Order to develop their inherent potentialities and higher creativity by exercising their inner freedom.

(d) Synthesis of Yogas

It is to facilitate the development of inner potentialities that Swami Vivekananda introduced a synthesis of yogas into monastic life.

Sannyasins of *dashanami* orders generally follow Vedanta as a philosophy and way of life and adopt *jñāna-mārga* as the means of mukti. Vaishnava sadhus follow the path of bhakti, and those among them who study scriptures do so in order to strengthen their devotion.

The Ramakrishna Order follows a twofold synthesis: synthesis of Vedanta and yoga, and synthesis of four yogas. Each yoga is based on the development of a particular faculty. Synthesis of yoga aims at the development of all the faculties.

Swami Vivekananda saw in Sri Ramakrishna the perfection of all the yogas and considered Sri Ramakrishna to be the ideal of human development.

Swamiji wanted the monks of the Ramakrishna Order to attain an integral development of all the faculties through the practice of a synthesis of yogas and become fully functioning individuals.

(e) Service as a Way of Life

In the Ramakrishna Order service is not a matter of mere duty or obligation but a way of life, a natural way of living in the world. This acceptance of service is based on certain philosophical principles. To understand these principles it is necessary to first understand the traditional view of work prevalent among conservative sannyasins.

Since work involves a threefold division in consciousness, namely, the knower, knowledge, and the object to be known—*jñātā, jñāna, jpeya*—Advaitins regard work as a product of *ajñāna*, primordial ignorance. Moreover, by virtue of their renunciation of the world, conservative sannyasins regard themselves as above the compulsions of work and social obligations.

Swami Vivekananda opened a new approach to work that supersedes the above view. In the first place Swamiji showed that karma need not be a product of ignorance. Karma or karma yoga can be done as an expression of the knowledge of our true nature as the Atman, which is inseparable from Brahman. He described this process as the 'manifestation of the potential divinity of the soul'. Every kind of work can be done with this knowledge. Work done with the knowledge of the Atman does not cause bondage.

The second point is that everywhere in the Upanishads Brahman is spoken of as immanent in all beings. But traditional Advaitins ignored this fact and gave all importance to the transcendent aspect of Brahman. As a result the illusoriness of the world came to be emphasized. It was Sri Ramakrishna who restored the original Upanishadic idea of the immanence of Brahman in creation, and he added that although Brahman as God dwells in all beings His greatest manifestation is in the human being. Therefore, the best way to worship God is to worship Him in the human being. Sri Ramakrishna asked: 'If God can be worshipped through an image, why shouldn't it be possible to worship Him through a living person?' (687). This means service to the human being is to be regarded as service to God: *Śiva-jñāne jīva sevā*, as he put it.

Swamiji applied this doctrine on a large scale in the social field. All the service activities of the Ramakrishna Order are done in the spirit of worship to the living God. The monks of the Order do different types of service in society not out of a sense of duty or obligation or compassion, but as an expression of their selfless love for God in people. For them all work is spiritual discipline, a natural way of leading the spiritual life.

Doing work as worship is not a new idea. It was first taught by Sri Krishna in the Gita. For instance: '*Svakarmaṇā tam-abhyarcya siddhiṁ vindati mānavaḥ*; by worshipping (the all-pervading) God with one's own work, human beings attain the ultimate goal of life.'⁵ What Sri Ramakrishna added was to worship God in the living person, to serve the living person as God, to regard service to the living person as service to God.

Swamiji's special contribution was to make the poor, the downtrodden masses, and the sick and suffering people the focus of service activities.

He was the first religious leader in modern India to speak for the neglected masses. Even now service to the poor is given priority in the service programmes of the Ramakrishna Order.

(f) Brotherly Love

As was pointed out earlier love, *prīti*, is considered to be a cause of attachment and bondage in Buddhism and Hinduism. Hence, in Buddhist and traditional Hindu monasteries the relationship among monks is of the nature of fellowship, friendliness—*maitri*—mutual help and support, and devotion to a common guru or ideal.⁶ In such a situation love is reserved for God alone. But as we know from the Upanishads it is only the lower type of love, based on the unity of *prāṇa*, that causes bondage. There is a higher type of love based on the unity of the supreme Self in all beings. This divine love liberates a person from lower desires and selfishness and also develops into universal love for all and *parā-bhakti* for God.

Sri Ramakrishna, who recovered the Vedic ideal, radiated this pure divine love and transmitted it to his disciples. That stream of pure spiritual love is the primary force unifying all the members of the Ramakrishna Order, who have different temperaments and diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The role of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi in the development, integrity, power, and continuity of the Order is so important that it needs to be treated separately.

Here we only mention that the boundless love of her all-inclusive, all-forbearing, all-forgiving, great mother heart is also a major force holding together the ever-expanding monastic Order.

The universal love of Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, and the direct disciples of the Master is a living and enlivening tradition in the Ramakrishna Order, which has no parallel in the modern world. Relationship among the monks of the Order is based on this divine love.

(g) Centred around Sri Ramakrishna

The whole Ramakrishna Order is centred around Sri Ramakrishna. He is the be-all and end-all of the members of the Order. Their individual and collective lives are oriented to him as their end and means. Swami Vivekananda has described the Ramakrishna Order as the 'mystical body of Sri Ramakrishna'. The Order serves as the main channel for the flow of Sri Ramakrishna's grace and power in the world for the welfare of all people. On the occasion of consecrating the newly acquired grounds of Belur Math, in December 1898, Swami Vivekananda said: 'The spiritual force emanating from here will permeate the whole world, turning the current of men's activities and aspirations into new channels. From here will be disseminated ideals harmonizing *jñāna*, *Bhakti*, *Yoga* and *Karma*.'⁷ This Ramakrishna-centredness does not contradict or limit the universal outlook of the Order. The reason for this is that Sri Ramakrishna represents the universal prototype of

divinity on earth, and he can be identified with the impersonal, *nirguṇa*, aspect or with any of the different personal, *saguṇa*, aspects of the ultimate Reality. That is to say, he can be worshipped in any form as the 'God of all'.

Notes and References

4. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 291.
5. Bhagavadgita, 18.46.
6. It may be pointed out here that the basis of Christian monasticism is love, but it is based on different principles.
7. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 2.400-1.

He [Sri Ramakrishna] appeared to be an ordinary person, but his facial smile was unique. I have never seen the like of it. When he smiled or laughed, it appeared as if the wave of *ānanda* was flowing through his eyes, face and even the entire body. And that divine blissful smile removed from one's heart all the miseries for ever. His voice was sweet, so sweet that one desired to just keep sitting and listen to his voice only, a voice which 'poured nectar on the ears'. His eyes were bright, his look very sharp and affectionate. When he looked at others, it appeared as if he could see the inside (mental makeup) of them. At least I used to feel that way.

I felt that there existed deep and tangible tranquillity in his room. All those present seemed to be enchanted with bliss while listening to the words which poured from the Master's lips. I distinctly recall that picture of tranquillity in his room although I do not remember what conversations took place that afternoon.

I was sitting in a corner, looking, listening and experiencing an indescribable bliss. I did not pay heed to the conversations. I was only looking at him with rapt attention. He did not say anything to me, nor did I ask him anything.

—Swami Vijñānānanda and his *Paramahansa-carita*, 22



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(ii) Community of Lay Devotees

Apart from the young unmarried disciples who later became monks, Sri Ramakrishna had a large number of householder disciples who were also spiritual seekers. After the passing of the Master some of these householders lived without any contact with the monks. But the others rallied around the fledgling monastic Order and supported it as much as it was possible for them.⁸ When the monastic Order became fully established, with a new lineage of gurus, more and more people came to be closely associated with the Order. In this way a community of lay devotees gradually took shape. It now consists of lakhs of devotees held together by their love for, and the love of, Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, and Swamiji.

Although this community is not well organized like the monastic Order and its boundaries are not quite distinct, what we have written about the Order applies, to a lesser degree, to the lay community as well. Like the monks, the lay devotees also are sincere spiritual seekers and many of them practise spiritual disciplines under the guidance of a monastic guru.

Sri Ramakrishna placed the ideal of God realization before both monks and householders. In the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* he repeatedly gives the assurance that it is also possible for householders to realize God. In fact, he seems to have held the view of lib-

eration of all, *sarva-mukti*. He states: 'All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, some in the evening; but none will go without food. All, without any exception, will certainly know their real Self.' 9

Sri Ramakrishna is the supreme ideal for monks as well as householders. He did not encourage any of his householder disciples to become sannyasins. He did not regard the householder's life as a preparation for sannyasa; rather, he regarded it as an independent path, as the ancient Vedic sages did. The sages we meet in the Upanishads, known as rishis, were mostly married people; nevertheless, they lived a life of self-control and attained spiritual illumination. Sri Ramakrishna has recovered the rishi ideal for modern people. He taught that householders should practise self-control, discrimination, prayer, and discharge the duties of life depending fully on God.

The lay devotees of Sri Ramakrishna form a unique community. They belong to all castes, religions, races, and nationalities. They provide the main support to the monastic Order, cooperate with the monks in different ways, and many of them render voluntary service at the centres of the Order. Through them too the message of Sri Ramakrishna is spreading in different parts of India and the world.

(iii) Other Streams of the Ramakrishna Movement

Apart from the Ramakrishna Order, the parallel women's Order—which runs on similar lines—and the community of lay devotees attached to both, there are various other independent institutions founded in the name of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, or Swami Vivekananda that follow their message in various ways. There are also hundreds of people who are inspired by the lives and teachings of the Holy Trio but do not associate themselves with any institution.

All these institutions and people mentioned above together constitute the Ramakrishna Movement. This movement is gradually spreading, without much propaganda, in different parts of India and the world. The Ramakrishna Movement is the most visible and permanent product of the spiritual renaissance associated with the name of Sri Ramakrishna. It is the main channel by which Sri Ramakrishna's message is spreading and is the chief means of sustaining it. Apart from this, there are several factors that give the Ramakrishna Movement an important place in the annals of recent history.

In the first place, it has prepared the ground for the continuity of Indian spirituality into the unknown future centuries. Secondly, it has made available the highest spiritual truths in a simple form to the common people. Thirdly, the Ramakrishna Movement serves as a permanent, universal base for bringing about harmony of religions, harmony of religion and science, and harmony of cultures.

7. Strengthening the Moral Foundations of Culture and Spirituality

Yet another noteworthy feature of the spiritual renaissance associated with the name of Sri Ramakrishna is that it has boosted the moral convictions of the Indian people, strengthened the moral foundations of Indian culture, brought about a thorough purific-

ation of spiritual practices, and established the spiritual ideal on the twin foundations of purity and selflessness.

Swami Vivekananda has stated that Buddha's great contribution to Indian culture was to give it a strong moral foundation. Before Buddha, Vedic culture was dominated by the spiritual ideal. Spirituality then was so strong that morality was followed as a matter of course. In Indian culture morality was originally a by-product of spirituality. When Vedic culture declined Buddhism provided the moral foundation for Indian culture. The subsequent decline of Buddhism, repeated invasions, and endless internal wars disrupted the whole social fabric and weakened the morale and collective will of the nation.

After a long time Sri Ramakrishna came and gave a moral orientation to Indian culture and strengthened the moral foundations of spirituality through his life and teachings. It may not be an exaggeration to say that after Buddha no other great spiritual teacher or prophet in India gave so much importance to morality as Sri Ramakrishna did—fifty years after Sri Ramakrishna's passing Mahatma Gandhi came and boosted the moral fibre of the nation still further.

Sri Ramakrishna stressed three primary virtues: renunciation of lust, *kāma* or *kāmini*, renunciation of filthy lucre, *kāñcan* or gold, and observance of truthfulness. His teachings on morality are to be understood in the right perspective. In the first place, his advice to renounce *kāmini-kāñcan* was meant for sincere spiritual seekers who were eager to realize God. He did not give this advice to wealthy people like Mathur Babu. He was not against marriage or acquisition of wealth. He never advised or allowed householders to renounce family and wealth. He once told two doctors:

But renunciation of 'woman and gold' is not for you. You may renounce them mentally. That is why I said to the goswamis: 'Why do you speak of renunciation? That will not do for you. You have to attend the daily worship of Shyamasundar.' Total renunciation is for sannyasis. ... You should not renounce woman completely. It is not harmful for a householder to live with his wife. But after the birth of one or two children, husband and wife should live as brother and sister' (874).

On another occasion he said to householders: 'Again I say, why should you give up the world? You will find it more convenient at home. You won't have to worry about food. You may even live with your wife. It isn't harmful. You will have near at hand all that the body needs at different times. When you are ill, you will have someone near you to nurse you' (627).

Sri Ramakrishna only wanted that the animal instincts and drives lodged in the depths of the mind should be kept under control. Giving free licence to animal instincts harms not only the individual but the whole society. The enormous increase in the incidence of crime, violence, immorality, alcoholism, drug abuse, break-up of family life, and so forth in the modern world is the social consequence of unbridled pursuit of lust and lucre.

Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on *kāmini*, which is usually and rather inappropriately translated as 'woman', has caused much misunderstanding. The word literally means 'object of desire'. When understood in the light of his own life and the lives of the Holy Mother and Swamiji, what the teaching seems to imply is as follows: Every woman

should be looked upon not as a *kāmini* but as the embodiment of divine motherhood and should be treated with respect. Indeed, if every man could see the divine light and not the skin and flesh in every woman, it would sanctify human relationships, ennoble human life, and elevate human society.

Regarding wealth, what Sri Ramakrishna condemned was inordinate greed and attachment to wealth, as well as making the acquisition of wealth the sole aim of life. He was also against the misuse of money for luxuries and for pomp and show. He wanted that money should be properly used for the maintenance of one's family and for serving holy men and poor people. Some of his statements on this subject deserve special attention. 'Money enables a man to get food and drink, build a house, worship the Deity, serve devotees and holy men, and help the poor when he happens to meet them. These are the good uses of money. Money is not meant for luxuries or creature comforts or for buying a position in society' (285). 'Then mustn't one perform acts of compassion, such as charity to the poor? I do not forbid it. If a man has money, he should give it to remove the sorrows and sufferings that come to his notice. In such an event the wise man says, "Give the poor something." But inwardly he feels: "What can I do? God alone is the doer. I am nothing"' (379). 'You see, he alone is a true man who has made money his servant. But those who do not know the use of money are not men even though they have human forms' (637).

Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on truthfulness is a self-evident truth in itself and needs no elaboration. All the laws of the universe and the laws of life are only manifestations of the one great universal law of Truth. All the success we attain in life is the result of the success of some truth or other, and all our failures in life are the result of our failure to follow the law of truth pertaining to the particular field. This is true of individual life as well as collective life. '*Satyameva jayate*; Truth alone triumphs' is India's national motto. Most of the failures of India in different fields are caused by its failure to fulfil the stringent conditions of the motto.

We have discussed at length the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna on morality for two reasons. One reason is to show the moral significance of Sri Ramakrishna's avatar-hood for the whole Indian nation. The spiritual renaissance that originated in the middle of the nineteenth century was followed by a political resurgence led by a galaxy of great political leaders, with Gandhiji at their centre. After independence came an agricultural revolution and social transformation, which is still going on. In the last decade of the twentieth century began the electronic revolution, which has enabled India to emerge from the backwoods of poverty and catch up with advanced countries. We are now in the thick of the 'knowledge revolution'. All that we need now is a 'moral revolution'. Here it may not be an overstatement to say that Sri Ramakrishna has sown the seeds of such a moral revolution. Owing to the social and political turmoil going on in India, this fact has not received much attention. As the Russian born Harvard sociologist Pitrim Sorokin has shown, the whole human society can be reconstructed on the basis of the spiritual and moral ideas. Swami Vivekananda has also said: '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.'¹⁰

The second reason for discussing Sri Ramakrishna's moral teachings is their importance in providing a strong moral foundation to spiritual life. Although his moral teachings can be applied to the social and cultural fields, their main application is in the spiritual field. Sri Ramakrishna's primary interest was in spiritual life, and his teachings on renunciation of lust and lucre and on observance of truthfulness are primarily meant to help spiritual aspirants build their spiritual life on a firm moral foundation. In spiritual life mere morality is not enough. It serves only as the first step. Spiritual life becomes fruitful only if the mind is thoroughly purified. This is what Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples taught, and it is the main guiding principle for spiritual life in the Ramakrishna Movement. All the saints, sages, and mystics of the world religions concur with this principle. But in modern times there is a growing tendency to follow spiritual practices, or claim to have spiritual experiences, without making any attempt to purify the mind or even to lead a moral life. Sometimes morally aberrant practices are followed in the name of spiritual life. In this world of shadows the blazing purity of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swamiji shines as a great light guiding genuine seekers along the right path.

8. Manifestation of Divine Glory in the Human Being

One of the fundamental tenets of Vedanta is that the ultimate Reality, known as Brahman, is both immanent and transcendent—*antarbahisca*, inside and outside—and that a person's true Self, the Atman, is an inseparable part or reflection of the immanent Brahman. This means every human being has within him or her a centre of divine power, and the glory of Brahman or God is manifesting itself through that centre. Although all Vedantic scriptures like the Upanishads and the Gita proclaim this enlightening idea, its practical application in the life of the common people in the modern world was left to Sri Ramakrishna to teach.

The Upanishads give almost equal importance to both the aspects of Brahman. But the traditional Advaitins gave greater importance to the transcendent aspect; and instead of stressing the immanent aspect of Brahman, they stressed the illusoriness of the world. Sri Ramakrishna stressed the immanent aspect of Brahman and thus restored the balanced vision of the Vedic seers.

In this context a question arises: Why was the immanent aspect of Brahman not stressed in traditional Advaita? The goal of traditional Advaita is *mukti*, and this is attained by the realization of the oneness of the *jivātman* and Brahman by the complete destruction of causal ignorance, *kāraṇa ajñāna*. The experience of Advaita, or non-dualism, is the highest point of spiritual experience; there cannot be any *higher* experience than Advaita. According to Shankara, with the non-dual experience of Brahman *mukti* takes place instantaneously: there is no time-gap between the two. Since *mukti* is the ultimate goal of life, and Advaitic knowledge is the highest experience, there is nothing more to attain in life once they are attained. This is the view of traditional Advaitins.

Sri Ramakrishna accepts Advaita as the *highest* form of realization. But according to him, attaining *mukti*, which means one's own personal salvation or liberation, need not

necessarily be the ultimate goal of life for all people. Some souls, after having the highest realization of the non-dual transcendent Brahman—which Sri Ramakrishna calls *jñāna*—return to the earthly plane, by the will of God, out of compassion for suffering humanity. They realize that the transcendent Brahman is also immanent in creation and that all objects in the universe are nothing but different manifestations of Brahman. This integral realization of Brahman was called *vijñāna* by Sri Ramakrishna. The realization of the transcendent Brahman, *jñāna*, is attained by the process of negation ‘*neti, neti*’, whereas the realization of the immanent Brahman, *vijñāna*, is attained by the process of affirmation ‘*iti, iti*’.¹¹

Sri Ramakrishna explains the above view as follows.

The *jñani* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, ‘Not this, not this’. Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijñāni*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized intuitively as Brahman, through the eliminating process of ‘Not this, not this’, is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *vijñani* sees that the Reality which is *nirguna*, without attributes, is also *saguna*, with attributes.¹²

It was from his experience of *vijñāna* that Sri Ramakrishna developed his concept of the inherent divinity of the human being. He saw that although Brahman is immanent in the whole creation, He manifests himself in different ways and degrees in different beings. Brahman’s highest manifestation is in the human being, who alone has the inherent capacity to realize his or her true nature as Atman/Brahman. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna used to say: ‘If you seek God, then seek Him in man; He manifests Himself more in man than in any other thing’ (726). Sri Ramakrishna looked upon his disciples and all others as manifestations of God. He also held that all the achievements of human beings are the manifestations of God’s glory.

However, he also held that although God is present in all human beings, the degree of manifestation is not the same in all people. In saints and holy people there is greater manifestation of God, and hence they should be shown greater respect. In wicked and immoral people God’s manifestation is of a lesser degree and therefore one has to be careful in dealing with them. As Sri Ramakrishna put it: ‘God is even in the tiger; but you cannot embrace the tiger on that account’ (84). Furthermore, Sri Ramakrishna also taught that since the human being is the highest manifestation of God, service to people is to be considered service to God himself. This is his famous doctrine of *Śiva-jñāne jīva sevā*.

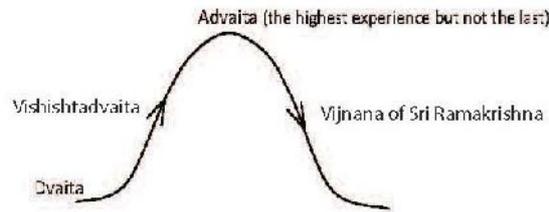
Sri Ramakrishna’s doctrine that the highest manifestation of God’s glories takes place through the human soul, and that service to the human being is real worship of God, forms the culminating point of the spiritual renaissance associated with Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Vivekananda made these two concepts the cornerstone of his philosophy of Practical Vedanta, the guiding principle for all his programmes to uplift the poor masses of India and the basis of all the service activities of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Notes and References

8. At that crucial juncture the Holy Mother Sarada Devi provided great support to the young monks. Her association with the monastic Order and her role as the 'Mother of all' helped much to establish a strong rapport between the monks and lay devotees.
9. *Gospel*, 818.
10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 7.412.
11. Sri Ramakrishna's concept of *vijñāna* is sometimes confused with Ramanuja's qualified monism, Vishishtadvaita, but the two are quite different. Ramanuja does not accept the *nirguṇa* aspect of Brahman, nor does he regard the Advaitic experience as the highest. Sri Ramakrishna accepts both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*, and both Vishishtadvaita and Advaita. The experience of *vijñāna* is something that comes *after* the Advaitic experience. It is a more integral and advanced experience than the Advaitic.

Swami Vivekananda regarded Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Advaita as three stages in the realization of Brahman. *Vijñāna* is not a return to the Vishishtadvaita or Dvaita stage; it is a new, more advanced stage. Advaita is the *highest*, but not the *last* stage; *vijñāna* lies beyond it.

The whole range of Vedantic experiences may be represented in the form of a bell-shaped diagram shown below.



12. *Gospel*, 103-4.

Sri Ramakrishna differed radically from the conventionally pious religious men of all nations, who look only to the external 'sins' of others and not to their inward states of openness to reform. What they fail to realize is that the 'sinner' may be closer to redemption than many a solid citizen who, while he may have avoided committing public offense, yet lives perversely cut off from the wellsprings of joy, love, and truth within himself. It is for this reason that the great sages have always looked more to the motivations of their fellow men than to their outward actions. Far be it from a Christ of the whores and publicans and a Ramakrishna to hold themselves aloof from the foibles of flesh and blood.

But if these holy men mixed with sinners, scrubbed the wounds of lepers, and mopped the mud huts of untouchables with their long matted hair, they did these things not to uplift or to purify or to set a good example for others. They did it because they felt every festering uncleanness of the body or spirit of every man, woman, and child to be their own. They bore the sins of the world in their own being—and not just metaphorically, not in some magical or supernatural sense, not in a single transcendental moment of sacrifice nailed to the bloody lumber of cruelty and ignorance, but every moment, in the living awareness of their unity with humankind. They bore our sins not in their dying, but in every moment of their living among us, in every tender moment of reaching out to suffering humanity. And because they understood us perfectly, because they felt every wrong turn of our body, mind, and spirit viscerally in their own being, they did not condemn—they were far too practical for that. They alleviated.

—Richard Schiffman— Sri Ramakrishna: A Prophet for the New Age, 122-3



SECTION V

PB February 2012

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AS THE SPIRITUAL IDEAL OF THE MODERN AGE

Meaning of 'Ideal'

At the outset we may note that a human ideal can be of two categories: subjective and objective. A subjective ideal is a person whom we want to emulate, a person who serves as a role model; he is the prototype, the mould in which we want to cast our lives. The objective ideal is a person who is the object of our love and adoration; we do not want to emulate him, for we know he is far superior to us. At the spiritual plane the objective ideal is known as one's *iṣṭa* or *iṣṭa-devata*, such as Shiva, Krishna, or Devi. When Swami Vivekananda spoke of Sri Ramakrishna as the ideal, he obviously meant both the subjective and objective ideals. There is not much difficulty in accepting Sri Ramakrishna as the objective ideal, as millions of people adore him as their *iṣṭa-devata*.

Swami Vivekananda believed that Sri Ramakrishna could or should also serve as the subjective ideal for the modern man, particularly in India. In the course of a conversation Swamiji said: 'But take it from me, never did come to this earth such an all-perfect man as Sri 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!'¹ In another context Swamiji said: 'Such a unique personality, such a synthesis of the utmost of *jñāna*, Yoga, Bhakti and Karma, has never before appeared among mankind. ... He is the true disciple and follower of Sri Ramakrishna, whose character is perfect and all-sided like his. The formation of such a perfect character is the ideal of this age, and everyone should strive for that alone' (7.412).

Swamiji regarded Sri Ramakrishna as the ideal for Indians and also for the whole world. How can a person who had only the rudiments of education, who did not know anything about science or technology, and lived like a monk in a God-intoxicated condition in the precincts of a temple be regarded as an ideal for the modern people who idolize film stars, cricket players, politicians, populist leaders, and business magnates?

Before answering this question we have to understand what the term 'ideal' really means. An ideal is a symbol of perfection. Through the ideal we gain access to perfection. This means that none of the imperfect individuals of the world can be an ideal for humanity. Perfection cannot be found in the external world, which is ever-changing, full of imperfections, limitations, contradictions, and sufferings. Freedom from bondage to the world and attainment of absolute fearlessness, supreme knowledge, and everlasting joy and peace is what is meant by 'perfection'— *pūrṇata* in Vedānta. There is only one thing that fulfils all the above attributes of perfection, and that is the human's true Self, Atman-Brahman, which is of the nature of pure Consciousness.

When a person realizes this ultimate Reality and becomes one with it, '*Brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati*; a knower of Brahman becomes Brahman itself.'² He then becomes a

symbol or personification of Brahman. The *Mundaka Upanishad* further states: 'When a person realizes that the whole life (*prāṇa*) is pervaded by the supreme Self, he enjoys the bliss of Atman even while engaged in outer activities. Such a person is the greatest among the knowers of Brahman (*brahmadevāṃ variṣṭhaḥ*)' (3.1.4). This description perfectly fits Sri Ramakrishna. Such a person alone can be considered to be the ideal of humanity. That is why Swami Vivekananda spoke of Sri Ramakrishna as the ideal for the modern world.

In the Shankarite Advaita tradition the ideal of a knower of Brahman is the *jīvanmukta*, the liberated-in-life. The description of a *jīvanmukta* given in Advaitic treatises indicates a person who regards the world as illusory and who moves about unaffected by and unconcerned about the world, somehow exhausting his *prārabdha* karma. Obviously, such a person is not suitable as an ideal for the modern world.

Sri Ramakrishna has given a new ideal of a knower of Brahman: the *vijñāni*. As already mentioned, a *vijñāni* is a person who, after the realization of the non-dual Brahman in *nirvikalpa* samadhi, comes back to the world and, seeing the immanent Brahman in all, serves all people looking upon them as God himself. The *vijñāni* does not reject the world as illusory, but lives in the world as a channel for the free flow of God's grace and serves suffering humanity seeing God in everybody.

Sri Ramakrishna himself has made clear the distinction between the *jīvanmukta* and the *vijñāni* in several contexts. On one occasion he said:

There are two classes of paramahamsas, one affirming the formless Reality and the other affirming God with form. Trailanga Swami believed in the formless Reality. Paramahamsas like him care for their own good alone; they feel satisfied if they themselves attain the goal.

But those paramahamsas who believe in God with form keep the love of God even after attaining the Knowledge of Brahman, so that they may teach spiritual truth to others.

...Some eat mangoes secretly and remove all trace of them by wiping their mouths with a towel. But some share the fruit with others.

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.³

The second type of paramahamsa is the *vijñāni*. It is the *vijñāni* ideal represented by Sri Ramakrishna that Swami Vivekananda regarded as the ideal of the modern age.⁴ Here the word 'ideal' means 'prototype' or 'model'. This brings back the question we raised earlier: How can the *vijñāni* ideal embodied by Sri Ramakrishna be regarded as the ideal for the modern age, which is dominated by materialism, consumerism, competition, pursuit of sense pleasure, and various contradictions and conflicts? But Swamiji was a seer and he looked far into the future, beyond the turmoil of present society.

Four Global Trends

If we look at the present global human situation through newspaper headlines, what we get is a sombre picture of a world darkened by crime, violence, immorality, attack on women and children, corruption in high places, religious fundamentalism, terrorism, nuclear threat, and so on. These dark forces, however, are incapable of obstructing the

progress of humanity. Humanity has moved from agricultural society through industrial society to knowledge society, and is now poised to take an 'existential leap' to spiritual society. Among the several thought currents animating the collective mind of humanity four deserve special mention here: dominance of science and technology, globalization of economy, neo-humanism, and upsurge of interest in spirituality.

Science is now no longer looked upon as the domain of specialists but is being accepted as the correct and normal way of knowing and doing things. Science is only another name for the universal law of Truth. All economic activities, especially macroeconomic planning, business enterprises, and accounting are now based on scientific principles. With the rapid advancements of electronics, information technology, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and other fields technology has now come to play an important role in the day-to-day lives of even common people.

Globalization of economy is breaking down the barriers separating people, nations, and races and is making them more and more interdependent. One distinctive feature of the new global economy is that it is knowledge-driven and is leveraged by human capital. Human resources have now become more important than financial or other material resources.

The third trend in world thought is a new type of humanism. Till recently humanism was motivated by compassion and sense of duty towards one's fellow beings. The new humanism is based on the recognition of the rights of people, especially marginalized people and disabled people, for livelihood, equality, and justice.

The fourth development in collective human awareness is an upsurge of interest in spirituality. Since spirituality forms an essential aspect of Hindu religion and tradition, the new widespread interest in spirituality is taken as a natural phenomenon in India. But in other parts of the world, where religions have emphasized faith and allegiance to religious institutions, the rise of interest in spirituality has been hailed as a 'spiritual revolution'.⁵ A recent poll conducted by *Newsweek* in the US has shown that 36 per cent of the Americans regard themselves as spiritual rather than religious. Millions of people have taken to the practice of meditation, yoga, Zen, Vipassana, and other spiritual disciplines. In fact, this fourth global trend has assumed the nature of a worldwide spiritual movement.

Meaning of Spirituality and Spiritual Life

Until fifty years ago spirituality had been considered an essential aspect of religion, and hence there was no need to define spirituality separately. But during the last three or four decades it has become customary to treat religion and spirituality as two different or distinct phenomena. The use of the term 'religion' is nowadays confined to a system of belief and conduct consisting of:

- (i) faith in a personal God, in a founder-prophet, and in a sacred scripture;
- (ii) acceptance of certain dogmatic assertions to be true, even if they are found to be not in accord with the truths discovered by science; and
- (iii) observance of certain rituals, customs, and so forth as well as identification with

a religious institution and community.

What then is spirituality? Spirituality is now not only followed by millions of people but is also a major subject of discussion and study for psychologists, sociologists, neuroscientists, business executives, therapists, counsellors, and others. With such diversity of interest in spirituality it is only natural that different conceptions of spirituality exist. By now more than thirty definitions have been formulated. As a sample we give here a definition that originally appeared in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*: 'Spirituality, which comes from the Latin root *spiritus*, meaning "breath of life", is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate.'⁶ A simpler definition would be: spirituality is a view of reality and a way of life centred on the Spirit.

This raises a basic question: What is meant by 'spirit'? The meaning of the term 'spirit' depends upon our understanding of the nature of human personality. There are two main conceptions of human personality. In most of the systems of philosophy and religious traditions other than Hinduism, the human personality is regarded as dichotomous, that is, as consisting of only the body and the mind. The mind itself—or a higher dimension of it—is known as the 'soul' and 'spirit'. In this sense spiritual life is only a higher form of mental life.⁷ In India the ancient sages of the Upanishads discovered that the human personality has a trichotomous structure, that is, it consists of the body, the mind, and the Atman. The Atman is the true Self of the human being; it is of the nature of pure consciousness—*cit* or *caitanya*—which is the source of all the knowledge and happiness that a person experiences. Since the Atman is independent of the mind, it is ever pure, untouched by impurities and suffering, which belong to the mind. In this view the word 'spirit' should refer only to the Atman, which is the true Self of the human being. Therefore, according to this view, spiritual life is a way of life based on the awareness of one's own true nature as the Atman. The concept of the Atman is based on the most indubitable fact of one's own existence. As Acharya Shankara has pointed out, one may doubt anything else, but not one's own existence. It is on this most existential truth that spiritual life is based in the Hindu tradition.

The doctrine of the Atman is the one common thread uniting all the sects and philosophical schools in the Hindu tradition. The doctrine of God is only an extension of the doctrine of the Atman. In fact, this is the central principle in the ancient Upanishads and in the system of philosophy known as Vedanta. Investigation into the nature of the individual Atman led the Upanishadic sages to the discovery that the individual Atman or Self is an inseparable part or aspect of the supreme Self—Paramatman or Brahman—which is the ultimate Reality behind the universe. As the ultimate cause of the universe, Brahman is also known as Ishvara, which may roughly, though not accurately, be translated as 'God'. Therefore, according to Vedanta, which is the sole living philosophy of Hindu religion, spiritual life may also be regarded as a way of life centred on the supreme Self. In other words, spiritual life is God-centred life, the word 'God' being understood either as the impersonal Absolute or the personal Ishvara.

Here one may point out an anomaly: our true nature may be Atman-Brahman, but in

ordinary life we do not perceive this truth; we rather identify ourselves with the body and the mind, which we take to be our real nature. It was to explain this anomaly that later Vedantins introduced a third category: ignorance, known as *maya*, *ajñāna*, or *avidyā*. It is described as an inexplicable, mysterious power inherent in creation. Thus, although our true nature is Atman- Brahman, owing to ignorance this knowledge remains in a dormant or potential form. Spiritual life is an effort to remove this ignorance and realize one's true divine nature. As Swami Vivekananda has put it: spiritual life is the manifestation of one's potential divinity. This view is in accord with Sri Ramakrishna's view that, although God is present in all beings, in some people He manifests more and in some less. In simpler terms we may define spiritual life in the following way: whereas ordinary life is a struggle to transform animal consciousness into human consciousness, spiritual life is a struggle to transform human consciousness into divine consciousness.

Awareness of oneself as the Spirit and Self-empowerment, seeing God in all and maintaining an attitude of love and service towards all, and acceptance of life as governed by cosmic forces—these are the three basic ingredients of spirituality or spiritual life.

Notes and References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 6.480.
2. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.2.9.
3. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 500-1.
4. For a detailed discussion on the *vijñāni* ideal see Swami Bhajanananda, 'Three Aspects of the Ramakrishna Ideal', *Prabuddha Bharata*, 87/3 (March 1982), 83-91.
5. Cf. Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, Benjamin Seel, *The Spiritual Revolution* (London: Wiley- Blackwell, 2005). Also, David N Elkins, *Spiritual Revolution: A Way Out* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2010).
6. D N Elkins, L J Hedstrom, L L Hughes, J A Leaf, and C Saunders, 'Toward a Humanistic- Phenomenological Spirituality: Definition, Description, and Measurement', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 28/4 (Fall 1988), 10.
7. It may be mentioned here that the concept of a tripartite division of human personality prevailed among the early Christians up to the third century. St Paul, in his 'Epistles', distinguishes between psyche (mind) and pneuma (spirit). This doctrine was declared a heresy in one of the ecumenical councils in the fourth century.

Sri Ramakrishna holds the hope of salvation for everybody. For him there is not such thing as eternal damnation, because God resides in every being.

There cannot be a being in whom God is not, in whom Divinity is not hiding itself, as it were, and waiting for its expression. Sri Ramakrishna asked people never to think of their sins but to think of the glories of God and of the way they might realize Him, and to have abiding faith in the ultimate victory of spiritual struggle. There is not a single soul for whom there is no ray of hope, for whom there is no prospect of God realization. This boundless faith in man is a most striking feature of Sri Ramakrishna's message. — Swami Gambhirananda, in *A Bridge to Eternity*, 140



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Traditional Spirituality

Spirituality is not anything newly introduced into the world either in the East or in the

West. It has been with humanity from time immemorial. But the prevalence of interest in spirituality has been marked by periods of upsurge followed by periods of decline.

In India the first efflorescence of spirituality took place during the period of the Upanishads, which, according to Western scholars, was from 1,000 to 300 bce. This was followed by the rise of Buddhism. After a long period of repeated invasions from the north and political instability a new wave of spirituality was raised by Acharya Shankara in the eighth century ce. A third wave of spirituality was generated by the medieval saints Ramananda, Nanak, Kabir, jñānadev, and many others. With the spiritual renaissance associated with Sri Ramakrishna, which began in the middle of the nineteenth century, we are now in the midst of a new spiritual wave.

Christianity began as a lay spiritual movement. It became a great cultural and political force in what is today Europe and part of the Middle East and it was made the official religion in the fourth century ce. With the rise of monasticism in the third century, spirituality came to be associated with monastic life—as had happened in the case of Buddhism much earlier. The early centuries produced independent mystics like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Basil, Evagrius, and others. After several centuries of political wars and instability came the second wave of spirituality in the sixth century, which was sustained by Benedictine monks. Francis of Assisi started the third wave in the thirteenth century. This was followed by a lay spiritual movement known as *devotio moderna*, 'modern devotion', which produced the famous book the *Imitation of Christ*. The setback caused by the Protestant Reformation was soon overcome by the Catholic spiritual revival in the sixteenth century, some of the key figures of which were Ignatius Loyola, St Teresa of Avila, and St John of the Cross—all Spanish saints. In the seventeenth century the centre of Catholic spirituality shifted to France, which produced several mystics and spiritual guides who, except Brother Lawrence, are not so well known. That, however, proved to be the last flicker of spiritual light in Europe, for a series of historical events such as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, the influence of science and new socio-political theories as well as the world wars brought about the secularization of the West and a considerable decline in spirituality.

Modern Spiritual Movement

By 'modern spiritual movement' is meant the new spiritual trend that originated in the United States in the 1960s. It has been gaining momentum during the last fifty years and has been exerting its influence in many countries, including India and Japan. Before attempting to understand the real nature and scope of this new movement, it is necessary to note the following points.

In the first place it should be noted that this new movement is not a continuation of the two millennia- old Christian spiritual tradition discussed above.⁸ It is a new spiritual phenomenon that has no precedent.

Secondly, the new movement represents the shifting of the centre of spirituality from the Old World to the New World. In spite of all the violence and immorality reported in the newspapers, the United States is emerging as the most spiritually awakened nation

in the West. There are enough reasons to believe that India and America would be the two leading nations in the realm of spirituality in the future decades and centuries.

Another point to be noted about this new movement is that it is for the most part a lay movement completely unorganized, diffuse, and diverse. It now consists of so many diverse and disparate elements that it is more correct to regard it as a new sociocultural phenomenon than as a movement. The only thing that gives this phenomenon a sense of commonness, a semblance of unity, and a strong foundation is spirituality per se. The modern spiritual movement represents the struggle of a people to indigenize an alien view of reality and life that has not been thrust upon them through missionary strategies, but is something they have willingly accepted as it meets their needs and aspirations.

The First Phase

That view of reality and life derived from India's ancient scriptures, the Upanishads and the Gita, and the ancient system of philosophy known as Vedanta, first reached the shores of the US in the early decades of the nineteenth century and influenced some of the greatest people the country ever produced—Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. The inspiring writings of these creative geniuses influenced thousands of people, as they still do, and prepared the ground for a vast new movement. It was in that fertile ground that Swami Vivekananda sowed the live seeds of the universal message of his master Sri Ramakrishna and imparted an awakening impulse to the dormant spiritual consciousness of Americans. That primary spiritual awakening still provides the inner dynamic of the modern spiritual movement, though it is not always recognized as such.

Thus, the beginnings of the new movement were spiritual and Vedantic. During the two world wars, which devastated Europe, the US remained isolated. During that period some young monks of high intellectual and spiritual calibre were sent by the Ramakrishna Order to the US. They started several centres and established the Vedanta movement on a firm foundation.⁹ What we have discussed so far constitutes the first phase of the modern spiritual movement in the West.

The Second Phase

If the first phase was a pleasant daydream, what followed as the second phase was a nightmare. The second phase was a social revolution that swept through the US from 1965, the like of which had never happened before in the West. A variety of factors such as the collective sense of glut resulting from the enormous increase in affluence, disillusionment with the promises of science and technology, loss of trust in traditional religions and faith in God, Freudian psychology—which tended to destroy family relationships—the existentialist 'quest for meaning', the post-modernist iconoclasm and anti-intellectual movements in academic circles, the women's liberation movement, the futile Vietnam War, and lastly the relaxation of immigration laws by President Lyndon Johnson, which resulted in the flooding of the US society by a sudden influx of oriental ideas and hordes of gurus, yogis, rishis, lamas, Sufis, and other kinds of spiritual guides—all these factors contributed to the starting of the social revolution. This new phe-

nomenon was a mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous. The sublime part was the removal of racial segregation and social barriers; the ridiculous part was the rapidly spreading evil of drug abuse and the rise of the bizarre hippie movement, which tarnished the reputation of Western culture in oriental countries.¹⁰

This second phase is also known as the New Age and the age of Counter Culture.¹¹ What began as pure spirituality became clouded with a host of incongruous elements such as astrology, Ayurveda, pranic healing, reiki, crystal gazing, pyramid, rebirth, regression therapy, Gaia hypothesis, black mass, kundalini, psychedelia, and a host of other practices and cults.

What is most tragic about the whole bizarre phenomenon is the enormous waste of physical, psychic, and spiritual energies that it involved. It was as if hundreds of thousands of apparently rational people had come under a strange, extended hypnotic spell, the maya of the Divine Mother. Fortunately, the second phase exhausted itself to a great extent by the 1990s, thereby ending a bizarre chapter in the recent history of human culture.

The Third Phase

The beginning of the third phase is marked by the emergence of spirituality as a clear fountain out of the debris of superstitions, misconceptions, distortions of facts, and perversions of human instincts. During the second phase the followers of spirituality formed only a small section of society, which consisted of mostly misguided or eccentric individuals, including college drop-outs and hippies. Spirituality was considered to be outside the purview of science, although a few eminent scientists had spoken of the need to have a spiritual perspective on life.

By contrast, the present-day spiritual movement belongs to the mainstream of world thought and social life. Its followers are normal successful individuals holding responsible jobs and include business executives, lawyers, salespersons, therapists, housewives, and others belonging to all walks of life. Not only that, spirituality is now considered to be an essential aspect of a healthy and sane life. Its most important characteristic is that it is supported by science and technology.

Change in Attitude towards Spirituality

All over the free world there has come a radical change in the attitude towards spirituality. Regarded till recently as mysticism meant only for recluses, spirituality has suddenly become an important subject of discussion and research in universities and of practical application in day-to-day life. There are several reasons for this change that also indicate the general temper of the present age. Some of the causes are mentioned below.

(i) Quest for the Ultimate

From time immemorial the human soul has been seeking to attain immortality, supreme knowledge, supreme happiness, and everlasting peace. This aspiration had remained long suppressed owing to prevalence of materialism and preoccupation with the struggle for existence. With the recent changes in social conditions, the eternal quest is asserting itself once again in the souls of people.

(ii) Existential Problems

Human problems are of four kinds: economic, social, psychological, and existential. In developed countries economic and social problems are to a great extent solved or are being dealt with. Psychological and existential problems have greatly increased in recent years. The difference between the two is that psychological problems have a specific known or knowable cause such as traumatic experiences in childhood or in later life, unfavourable family circumstances, repression of instinctual desires, and so forth. These can be effectively dealt with by clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, mental hospitals, and others. By contrast, existential problems have no specific external cause. They arise from the very nature of human existence, from the alienation of the human soul from its divine substratum. Some of the common existential problems are: loneliness, meaninglessness of life, angst—a persistent feeling of insecurity or anxiety without any specific cause—unfulfilment, and so forth. These existential problems have no other solution than spirituality or spiritual life. In fact, it is the existential crises in one's life that provide the major motivation to turn to spiritual life.

(iii) Overcoming Stress in Life

Industrialization, unfavourable living conditions, the breakdown of family life, cut-throat competition, demanding jobs, hectic work schedules, financial uncertainties, and several other factors have made the lives of modern people very stressful. However, as Dr Hans Selye, who did pioneering work in understanding the physiological and biochemical reactions in the body to stress, has said, stress is unavoidable in life. Without facing stress nothing worthwhile in life can be achieved. But if stress goes beyond a person's stress-bearing capacity, it can cause serious mental disturbances or psychosomatic diseases. Therefore, what anybody who wants to attain success in life should do is not to avoid stressful jobs, but to learn to overcome stress or stress-induced reactions in the mind and the body. Studies conducted with the help of biofeedback and other scientific techniques have shown that spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer, self-enquiry, and the like are effective means of overcoming stress and strain in life. As a result meditation and other spiritual techniques have now come to be employed in secular life as well. Therapists and management gurus nowadays advise people to practise these methods. Many companies are arranging talks and classes on spirituality by leading spiritual personalities for the benefit of their employees.

(iv) Shift in Management Philosophy

We have been discussing the reasons for the growing, widespread interest in spirituality in today's society. Another reason is the realization that spirituality is a great help in leading a successful individual life and also in the successful management of companies. A paradigm shift is now taking place in management philosophy in the West as well as in the East. After trying the British, American, and Japanese models of management one after the other, there now seems to be a move to try the Indian spiritual approach in management. Regarding this the following points may be noted.

A new line of thinking on management began after World War II with the rise of the United States to the status of the wealthiest nation in the world. Research into the factors behind this phenomenon led to the discovery of the importance of 'human cap-

ital' in business management.

The oil crisis of the 1970s led to the collapse of the automobile industry and several other industries in the US. The decline of social morality and the rise of the hippie movement showed the dangers of pursuing a materialistic, pleasure-seeking way of life.

In the meantime the Japanese mastered electronic technology and rose to the status of an economic superpower, second in rank only to the US. The Japanese created a new management philosophy that emphasized human values and familial loyalty to the company. But within thirty years the Japanese economy ran out of steam.

The onset of the knowledge revolution fuelled by advancements in information technology as well as the globalization of economy have led to radical changes in business administration, the creation of the software industry, and the rise of China and India as economic powers. Parallel to these developments great changes have been taking place in social life and in the thinking, outlook, and belief patterns of people all over the world.

It is now being increasingly realized in the corporate world that humans do not live by bread alone. Humans have a hierarchy of emotional, social, creative—self-actualizing—and spiritual needs. As Karl Marx pointed out long ago, the purpose of work is to be a means of fulfilling these needs and not merely to earn money. Therefore, unless business management is based on a work culture that ensures this kind of value-fulfilment, mere monetary incentives alone are not enough to induce employees, especially top executives, to be loyal to the company or to give their best to it.

Of all the values, the spiritual value is the most important. Executives endowed with a spiritual perspective tend to look upon their work as a spiritual discipline and are more likely to discharge their duties with great care and sincerity. They tend to be more calm and collected and are thus able to take correct decisions as well as face difficulties and failures with faith and courage. They are also seen to be more courteous and loving to their colleagues and more forbearing and sympathetic towards the employees under them. Executives endowed with a spiritual perspective are thus a great asset to any organization or institution. A company based on spiritual principles works smoothly and efficiently, like a well-designed and lubricated machine.

(v) Support of Science and Technology

We now come to the most important reason why interest in spirituality is growing rapidly among people belonging to all walks of life in the mainstream of society. Spirituality is now receiving the indirect support, and in some cases the direct support, of science. This support comes from the fact that the connecting link between science and spirituality has been found: it is *consciousness*. The discovery of consciousness as the common ground between science and spirituality is one of the most significant events in the recent history of human culture and is likely to have far-reaching influence on the future of humankind. Consciousness is now one of the most important subjects of study in different branches of science. It is at the cutting edge of interdisciplinary research. We mention here briefly four disciplines that are now studying consciousness from four different angles.

Western philosophy has taken up consciousness studies seriously. It now recognizes two types of consciousness: one is the empirical consciousness gained through senses and thinking, which can be expressed in words. The other type of consciousness is the ineffable, inexpressible types of awareness such as aesthetic experience and transcendental spiritual experience.

Western psychology has practically given up Freudian psychology as unscientific and has outgrown the limitations of behaviourism. Its main field now is cognitive psychology, which deals with all aspects of consciousness. It also has seriously taken up transpersonal psychology and transcendental spiritual experiences, which Abraham Maslow has termed 'peak experiences'. In neuroscience the main problem is to decide whether the mind is the same as the brain or different from it. Either way, attempts have been made, with the help of eeg, mri, and other equipment to show the effect of spiritual experience on the cerebral hemispheres.¹²

Modern physicists have also in recent years shown interest in consciousness. On the one hand, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Godel's Theorem, and others have shown the limitations of human knowledge as expressed through mathematics. On the other hand, it has been discovered that human consciousness has a direct role in determining the objective reality of subatomic phenomena. An electron may exist as a wave or as a particle, but what it actually is at a particular moment depends upon the observer.

These studies on consciousness and views of eminent scientists on the subject have helped to strengthen the faith of people in the authenticity of spiritual life, and have contributed much to the growing universal appeal of spirituality.

Notes and References

8. An attempt was made in the 1950s to intensify contemplative life in the Catholic tradition by Thomas Merton in the US and by Abhishiktananda and Bede Giffith in India. A similar attempt to revive contemplative life in the Greek Orthodox tradition was made at Mount Athos.
9. For a detailed, scholarly study of the Ramakrishna- Vedanta movement in the West see Karl T Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994).
10. For a comprehensive and balanced account of the first and second phases of the modern spiritual movement see Philip Goldberg, *American Veda* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010).
11. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).
12. One of the most well known of these studies is that conducted by Andrew Newberg, et al. See their book *Why God Won't Go Away* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002).



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Universal Spirituality: Its Salient Features

As mentioned earlier, spirituality had been regarded as a part of religion till modern times. It was Sri Ramakrishna who first brought about the separation of spirituality from religion.¹³ He taught that spirituality is the essence of every religion, and whoever follows it with purity and sincerity will be able to realize God whatever be the religion one belongs to. Swami Vivekananda gave the name 'Universal Religion' to this universal spirituality. Whatever might be its origin, the idea that spirituality can be practised without

affiliation to any religion gained ground from the 1970s and, with the coming of the World Wide Web, it became established as a distinct movement. The World Wide Web is making available the spiritual treasures of all religions to people all over the world. People are beginning to discover a common ground to all the spiritual traditions of the world, and they have the freedom to choose whatever good idea they find in different traditions. In this way spirituality assumes a universal dimension and an independent status. The new spiritual movement has been named 'Secular Spirituality', 'Global Spirituality', and 'Non-religious Spirituality'.

The separation of spirituality from religion has taken place mainly in Western countries. In India there is no need for this separation because the Hindu tradition is so broad based that even an atheist can remain a Hindu. Nevertheless, since India has a secular polity with a multi-religious population, the secular spiritual movement is a welcome development, as it can be introduced to youths and in educational institutions without being labelled as 'religious bias'. In fact, freed from the hold of prejudices and limitations of traditional religions and supported by science and technology, secular spirituality is becoming popular among the present generation of youths in the West as well as in the East. For millions of people it has become a new way of making life nobler, richer, meaningful, successful, and fulfilling. The new movement is quite similar to what Swami Vivekananda called 'Universal Religion', by which he really meant 'Universal Spirituality'.

Thus, at present two kinds of spirituality are in vogue: religious spirituality and non-religious spirituality, which is also known as Secular Spirituality, and named here as Universal Spirituality.

What are the salient features of the new Secular Spirituality? When we study these features, we can see how close some of them are to the well-known ideas of Swami Vivekananda.

(i) One noticeable feature is the shifting of the centre of spirituality from God to the human being. It is not theological questions about God that young people are now interested in but their own inner problems. They may or may not have faith in God, and their primary concern is not realization of God but to orientate themselves to a universal life and reality. Spiritual life for the modern youth is a personal quest for meaning, for security, for love, for peace.

(ii) The second notable feature is a change in the attitude of people towards themselves. The Vedantic concept of human personality as body-mind-spirit seems to be more acceptable to the followers of modern spirituality than the Judeo-Christian concept of body-mind. It may be noted here that the idea that the spirit, known as the Atman, is different from the mind was a key concept in the Vedanta philosophy propagated in the West by Swami Vivekananda.

(iii) Another general trend is to seek a source of power within oneself. Instead of blaming God for one's misfortunes or waiting for God to bail them out of difficulties, modern youths are willing to face the difficulties of life themselves.

One can see in this attitude the echo of Swami Vivekananda's exhortations, such as this: 'Therefore, stand up, be bold, be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your own

shoulders, and know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succour you want is within yourselves.' 14

(iv) A positive and holistic outlook on life characterizes the present generation. Young people do not look upon spirituality as a means to escape from life, but as a means to live a richer, fuller, nobler, and meaningful life. For them spiritual life is not other-worldly but this-worldly. Good health and success in life are also motivating factors. Success is nowadays defined not merely in terms of wealth but in terms of one's total life, which includes holistic health, stress reduction, happy family life, self-actualization, and spiritual fulfilment. Spirituality itself is now being regarded as a means of attaining success in life. In the old religious tradition renunciation of wealth was insisted upon as a primary condition for leading a spiritual life. A prominent idea in the modern secular spirituality is that wealth is not an obstacle to spirituality. One can be wealthy as well as spiritual.¹⁵

In the Hindu religious tradition there are two ways of leading a religious life known as *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*. The aim of *pravṛtti* is worldly prosperity, *abhyudaya*, whereas the aim of *nivṛtti* is mukti, liberation from bondage to the world, freedom from ignorance and suffering. It is clear that the modern spiritual movement, based on secular spirituality, belongs to the path of *pravṛtti*. There is nothing wrong in this, for spiritual life is meant not only for monks, nuns, and recluses but also for people who lead a family life, follow different professions, and undertake social responsibilities. Swami Vivekananda's practical Vedanta shows how basic Vedantic principles can be applied in *pravṛtti-marga* as well.

(v) Another important feature of the modern spiritual movement is its pluralistic approach to world religions, its openness to the spiritual paths of all religions. The spiritual truths of all religions are now available to all people through multimedia channels. People belonging to different religions can now see for themselves the similarities and the common ground among all spiritual paths and can adopt in their lives those ideas that suit their temperaments and aspirations. In this way Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine that religions are different pathways to the same ultimate goal has become an essential aspect of modern spirituality.

(vi) Youths of the present generation do not want their souls to be imprisoned by the walls of religious institutions. Religious life may need identification with a denomination or institution, but spiritual life is a personal quest in the depths of one's consciousness. It is, in the words of the famous mathematician and philosopher A N Whitehead, 'what an individual does with his solitude'. Every person has his own distinct way of thinking, feeling, and willing, his own temperament, his own drawbacks, all of which together constitute his inner nature, his own 'law of being'. His spiritual life will be meaningful and fruitful only if it is lived in accordance with his own inner 'law of being'. What this fact implies is, according to Swami Vivekananda, that each person has his own personal religion. Swamiji said: 'No one form of religion will do for all. ... No man is born into any religion; he has a religion in his own soul. Any system which seeks to destroy individuality is in the long run disastrous. Each life has a current running through it, and this current will eventually take it to God.'¹⁶ These are great ideas that perfectly express the needs and aspirations of the present and future generations of youths. But unfortunately these noble ideas are not known or appreciated widely.

(vii) Finally, we come to a basic idea animating the modern secular spiritual movement: spiritual-

ity is not only a personal quest but also a matter of direct experience. Modern people are not satisfied with mere faith in scriptures or religious dogmas. They want to enrich their lives with spiritual experiences. We may here say that it was Sri Ramakrishna who in the middle of the nineteenth century propounded the idea that the test and criterion of the validity of religion and spiritual truths is direct transcendental experience. Swami Vivekananda popularized this idea in the West. The experience aimed for by the followers of secular spirituality may not be the higher transcendental experience described by Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and the mystics of all religions. What the present generation seeks is a personal encounter with Reality in all its dimensions—from ordinary day-to-day life to the highest mystic experience. For the present-day spiritual seekers any experience that transforms one's life inwardly and gives a higher understanding of Reality is a spiritual experience. Says the noted New Age author Paul Heelas: 'An idea or practice is "spiritual" when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt relationship with the deepest meaning or powers governing life.' 17

(viii) Apart from the salient features discussed above, the modern secular spiritual movement also concerns itself with environmental protection, gender equality, cyber culture, and other matters.

Drawbacks of Modern Secular Spirituality

We have discussed above the positive points of the ongoing secular spiritual movement. It is, however, necessary to point out here that this spiritual movement has some drawbacks as well.

One obvious drawback is the absence of an overall, integral philosophy of life. The present secular spiritual movement depends upon many spiritual ideas, philosophical concepts, academic studies, research findings, and experiences claimed by its followers, all of which is so diverse that, without an all-inclusive, integrating philosophy of life the movement lacks correct direction and coherence and may be the cause of much confusion in the minds of people. Without an overarching correct view of life and reality individual life may also be easily misled by wrong ideas and false claims of spiritual experience.

Such an integral philosophy of life should be based on the spiritual experiences of ancient sages as well as the research findings of modern science, should include the ideals of the West and the East, should appeal to the temperaments of different types of people, and should be adaptable to changing circumstances. Universal spirituality needs a universal philosophy. We believe that the Vedanta philosophy, as lived by Sri Ramakrishna and interpreted by Swami Vivekananda, can to a great extent fulfil the need for such universal philosophy.

The second drawback is that the modern spiritual movement lacks a strong moral and ethical foundation. Without a strong moral foundation, individual spiritual life as well as social life degenerates. This does not, however, mean that one has to be a monk or nun to be spiritual. Spirituality is possible for all without any distinctions of caste, creed, or race, and for both monks and lay people. But it should be supported by moral values, both personal and social. Modern youths do not want a morality based on convention, compulsion, or fear—fear of God or authority. This calls for a new moral philosophy or

system of ethics based on inherent purity, goodness, and divinity of the soul. Swami Vivekananda has laid the foundation for such a universal moral philosophy.

Another drawback in the modern secular spiritual movement is that it does not help to raise women's dignity in society. A comprehensive philosophy for the spiritual movement must provide an ontological justification for giving a higher status to womanhood. The real glory of womanhood is motherhood. The fact that maternal love and care is not restricted to the human species alone but is shared by other higher species as well shows that motherhood is a universal, divine trait and function. Sri Ramakrishna's worship of God as the Divine Mother of the universe and his looking upon all women as manifestations of the Divine Mother raises the dignity of women and sublimates man's attitude towards them.

Yet another drawback of the present-day secular spiritual movement is a lack of clear understanding of genuine spiritual experience. For many people who regard themselves as spiritual any good feeling is a spiritual experience. Some people have a vivid imagination, which they mistake for spiritual experience. Truly speaking, only transcendental experiences, *atīndriya anubhūti*, are genuine spiritual experiences. But only very few people ever achieve these higher experiences.

Human experiences are of two kinds: transcendental and empirical. Transcendental experiences begin with the awakening of the *pratyagatman*, individual self, and culminate in the realization of God as personal, *saguṇa*, or impersonal, *nirguṇa*. Empirical experiences are those gained through the five sense organs or through the mind. There are many spiritual samskaras lying buried in the unconscious depths of the mind. Through prayer, meditation, japa, and other spiritual disciplines some of these latent impressions become activated and give rise to a kind of spiritual experience. Such experiences are good and may be helpful, but they should be distinguished from genuine transcendental spiritual experiences, which are attained only through a long period of purification, inner struggle, and divine grace.

In the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples one can see the full glory of the spiritual life, and from their experiences and teachings we can understand what genuine spiritual experiences are.

Dawn of the Golden Age

Power of Religion and Spirituality

Why have we discussed in detail the modern spiritual movement in this series of articles on the avatarhood of Sri Ramakrishna? The reason is that spirituality—religious spirituality as well as secular spirituality—has already begun to play a significant role in the lives of millions of people all over the world. And there are evidences to indicate that in the future spirituality is going to play a dominant role, transforming human consciousness into divine consciousness and human life into divine life. About this future role of spirituality Swami Vivekananda said more than a hundred years ago:

It is sometimes said that religions are dying out, that spiritual ideas are dying out in

the world. To me it seems that they have just begun to grow. The power of religion, broadened and purified, is going to penetrate every part of human life. So long as religion was in the hands of a chosen few or of a body of priests, it was in temples, churches, books, dogmas, ceremonials, forms, and rituals. But when we come to the real, spiritual, universal concept, then, and then alone, will religion become real and living; it will come into our very nature, live in our every movement, penetrate every pore of our society, and be infinitely more a power for good than it has ever been before.¹⁸

Twenty five years later, almost echoing Swamiji, the famous British writer H G Wells wrote towards the end of his brilliant work *The Outline of History*:

But, out of the trouble and tragedy of these times and the confusion before us, there may emerge a moral and intellectual revival, a religious revival, of a simplicity and scope to draw together men of alien races and now discreet traditions into one common and sustained way of living for the world's service. ... Religious emotion—stripped of corruptions and freed from its last priestly entanglements—may presently blow through life again like a great wind, bursting the doors and flinging open the shutters of the individual life, and making many things possible and easy that in these present days of exhaustion seem almost too difficult to desire.¹⁹

Sri Ramakrishna and the Satya Yuga

In the introductory section of this series of articles it was mentioned that in ancient India and Greece the progression of history was believed to take place in cycles of four ages or yugas: Satya, Golden; Treta, Silver; Dvapara, Bronze; and Kali, Iron. According to Swami Vivekananda, one such cycle has just come to an end. And, with the advent of Sri Ramakrishna, a new Satya Yuga has begun. He mentioned this view in several of his letters to his monastic brothers: 'From the date the Ramakrishna Incarnation was born, has sprung the Satya-Yuga.'²⁰

Swamiji's concept of Satya Yuga is, however, different from the popular conception of it. We have seen that the so-called secular spirituality, which is coming up in many parts of the world, including India, has several drawbacks. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda have brought about a thorough purification of spirituality, although their work in this field is yet to become widely known in the other parts of the world. With the dawn of the Golden Age the spiritual stream will run clear. Swamiji conceived the Golden Age as the culmination of the spiritual evolution of the collective human mind. This leads to Swamiji's theory of evolution.

Spiritual Evolution

According to modern science, the human species, *Homo sapiens*, is the result of millions of years of evolution. This raises the question: what is the line for further evolution of human beings? Julian Huxley, the noted British biologist of the twentieth century, held the view that further evolution of human beings is psychosocial, and not merely physical as in the case of animals and plants.²¹ Long before Huxley, Swami Vivekananda had thought about psychosocial evolution; but according to him, it is something that has been going on for several thousand years. Now, however, humanity has reached the

threshold of a new stage of evolution, the collective emergence of the Spirit.

Psychosocial evolution is only a preparation for the spiritual evolution of humanity. And this leap into the highest stage of evolution is effected through yoga.

In his introduction to his work *Raja Yoga*, Swamiji speaks of human evolution as the ascent from the unconscious to the conscious and thence to the superconscious. At the unconscious level life manifests itself as *instincts*; at the conscious level life manifests itself as *reason*; and at the superconscious level life manifests itself as *superconscious awareness*. Furthermore, at the unconscious level there is no sense of egoism; it is at the conscious level that the ego manifests itself; but at the superconscious level again there is no sense of egoism.²² The point Swamiji makes here is that at the superconscious level the human being is liberated from the limitations of the ego; his individual consciousness becomes one with the infinite consciousness of Brahman or God, and he sees God in all people. This generates universal love for all, and the liberated individual serves all people as the Divine.

One more point is to be noted here about Swami Vivekananda's theory of the spiritual evolution of humankind. The term 'spiritual evolution' does not imply that the Spirit, known as Atman, undergoes any change or evolution. Atman is immutable, unchanging, beginningless, and endless. All transformations and changes take place in Prakriti and, in the case of the human being, in the mind. The mind is like a dark screen covering a source of light, which stands for the Atman. Through a small hole in the screen a little light comes out, and as the hole becomes larger, more and more light manifests itself. In the same way, as ignorance in the mind is progressively removed, the Atman manifests itself more and more as superconscious knowledge.²³

The twofold process of the removal of ignorance and the manifestation of the inherent divinity of the soul is what is meant by yoga, according to Swami Vivekananda. There are four yogas—jñāna, bhakti, dhyana, and karma— which are four ways of manifesting the inherent divinity. In other words, yoga is the process of transforming human consciousness into divine consciousness.

The key element in this inner transformation is intensity, which Sri Ramakrishna called *vyākulatā*, intense longing. Ordinary evolution is a very slow process; yoga is a process of speeding up, accelerating evolution. Yoga is spiritual revolution.²⁴

According to Swamiji, Darwin's idea of struggle for existence as the main driving force in evolution applies only to the level of animals. At the human level the only struggle is the inner struggle for consciousness. Struggle for existence, which means competition or even fighting with others, becomes an obstacle in the spiritual evolution of the human being. What helps in spiritual evolution is not competition but cooperation, love, compassion, knowledge, and other virtues.

What we have discussed above constitutes Swami Vivekananda's theory of the spiritual evolution of humanity. In support of Swamiji's theory we may cite the theories of evolution propounded by Sri Aurobindo, the great mystic and thinker, and Teilhard de Chadrin, the Jesuit thinker and palaeontologist.²⁵

Notes and References

13. This was pointed out many years ago by Arthur Osborne, the well-known biographer and follower of Sri Ramana Maharshi. See Arthur Osborne, *Be Still: It Is the Wind that Sings* (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanashramam, 2000), 37.
14. *Complete Works*, 2.225.
15. See Vikas Malkani, *The Yoga of Wealth* (Singapore: Times Edition, Marshall Cavendish, 2004).
16. *Complete Works*, 6.82.
17. Paul Heelas, *The New Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 60.
18. *Complete Works*, 2.68.
19. H G Wells, *The Outline of History* (London: Cassell, 1921), 602-3.
20. *Complete Works*, 6.327-8; see also 6.318, 335.
21. Cf. Julian Huxley, *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* (London: George Allen Unwin, 1945).
22. Cf. *Complete Works*, 1.180, 184.
23. See *Complete Works*, 1.420, 2.81, 3.239, 6.24.
24. See *Complete Works*, 1.157.
25. Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution, elaborated in his magnum opus *Life Divine*, holds that evolution is actually the unfolding of consciousness from its involvement in matter, then from its involvement in life, and then from its involvement in mind. Human evolution has passed through the stages of matter, life, and mind. The next stage is supra-mental, by which the limited individual consciousness is liberated and becomes one with supreme divine consciousness. This ascent and liberation are effected through yoga. Sri Aurobindo, however, differs from all others in holding that the supra-mental transformation also involves the 'descent' of the Super-mind into the body leading to the divinization of the body. According to Teilhard de Chardin, the universe consists of three layers: the lithosphere or matter, biosphere or life, and noosphere or mind. The human mind is a part of the noosphere. The noosphere, by a process of 'complexification', culminates in the Omega Point, which is the ultimate goal of humankind. For Teilhard evolution is a gradual progression from simpler to more and more complex organism. He conceived the Omega Point as the Cosmic Person, whom he identified with Christ. Human mind is now limited by the ego, but at the Omega Point all egos merge into the Cosmic Person—cf. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Collins, 1960). Thus, according to Swamiji, Sri Aurobindo, and Pierre Teilhard, at the ultimate point in human evolution human consciousness is freed from its limitations and becomes one with the supreme Spirit.



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Characteristics of the Golden Age

We have seen that, according to Swami Vivekananda, the spiritual evolution of humanity would culminate in a period of spiritual efflorescence known as Satya Yuga, the Golden Age. The first period of spiritual efflorescence that happened in India was the Vedic Age. A second period of spiritual efflorescence has been now inaugurated by Sri Ramakrishna. It is clear from Swamiji's speeches and letters that he had a vision about the new Golden Age. Some of the characteristic features of the Satya Yuga that Swamiji envisioned are mentioned below.

(i) Rishis and Prophets Would Be Numerous

According to Swami Vivekananda, the Golden Age will be an epoch of illumined souls. The main feature of the Vedic period was that the majority of the people who lived in that age were illumined souls known as rishis, seers. In later centuries the fully illumined person

was called a *jīvanmukta*. Sri Ramakrishna called that person a *vijñāni*. Swamiji wanted to recapture the ambience of the Vedic period, and so he reintroduced the term 'rishi' and its Western equivalent 'prophet'. Moreover, 'rishi' is a term with wider connotations. A rishi is one who has attained transcendental vision, *krānta-darsin*.

Swamiji explains the term as follows:

'He who realizes transcendental truth, he who realizes the Atman in his own nature, he who comes face to face with God, sees God alone in everything, has become a Rishi. And there is no religious life for you until you have become a Rishi. Then alone religion begins for you, now is only the preparation. Then religion dawns upon you, now you are only undergoing intellectual gymnastics and physical tortures.'²⁶

During the Vedic period the Indo-Gangetic plain was dotted with hundreds of hermitages, ashramas, in which lived illumined rishis. Seekers of wisdom flocked to these hermitages to sit at the feet of those illumined sages and in their turn themselves became illumined. Everywhere in the Upanishads we find fundamental questions about life and reality being raised by earnest seekers of truth. Swami Vivekananda visualized a similar situation taking place in the future. In an impassioned oration, remarkable for the startling foresights that it reveals, Swamiji stated:

There were times in olden days when prophets were many in every society. The time is to come *when prophets will walk through every street in every city in the world*. ... Schools and colleges should be training grounds for prophets. The whole universe must become prophets; and until a man becomes a prophet, religion is a mockery and a byword unto him. ... We have to work now so that every one will become a prophet. There is a great work before us. [Emphasis added.]

In old times, many did not understand what a prophet meant. They thought it was something by chance, that just by a fiat of will or some superior intelligence, a man gained superior knowledge. In modern times, we are prepared to demonstrate that this knowledge is the birth-right of every living being, whosoever and where-soever he be. ... is, the training of prophets, is the great work that lies before us' (6.10-11).

This is undoubtedly an astounding statement. Swamiji must have been seeing far into the future. It is not for ordinary mortals like us to question the truth of such prophetic statements or understand their real significance. We can, however, be sure of one thing: spirituality will be the zeitgeist, or a dominant trend, in human society in the future.

(ii) Unity of the East and the West

World culture consists of two major divisions: Eastern and Western. At present these two divisions have met and are interacting. Swami Vivekananda was one of the earliest thinkers to build bridges between them. In recent years the globalization of economy, education, spirituality, the Internet, and other factors are bringing the two cultures closer together. Swamiji believed that in the Golden Age the two cultures will unite giving rise to a homogeneous culture. Not only that, Swamiji also believed that out of the fusion of these two cultures there will arise a superior type of person. In a letter to the Diwan, minister, of a princely state in India Swamiji wrote: 'With proper care and attempt and struggle of all her [India's] disinterested sons, by combining some of the active and heroic elements of the West with calm virtues of the Hindus, there will come a type of men far superior to any that have ever been in this world' (.). Furthermore, Swamiji said: 'In the present age, it is to bring into coalition both these civilizations [Indian and Western] that Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna was born'

(.).

(iii) Equality and Love

It was Swami Vivekananda's belief that, under the influence of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings, a new society would come into existence in which all inequalities would be ironed out. Swamiji wrote in a letter:

From the very date that he was born, has sprung the Satya-Yuga (Golden Age). Henceforth there is an end to all sorts of distinctions, and everyone down to the Chandala will be a sharer in the Divine Love. The distinction between man and woman, between the rich and the poor, the literate and the illiterate, Brahmins and Chandalas— he lived to root out all. And he was the harbinger of Peace—the separation between Hindus and Mahomedans, between Hindus and Christians, all are now things of the past. ... In this Satya Yuga the tidal wave of Sri Ramakrishna's Love has united all (.).

The love that Sri Ramakrishna taught through his life was not the emotional, self-centred, impure, possessive, limited, impermanent love of ordinary people. His love is spiritual, divinized, boundless, universal, which is an expression of the spiritual unity of all selves in the supreme Self. In the Satya Yuga all human relationships will be based on this kind of pure, universal, spiritual love, which does not cause bondage.

This spiritual love finds expression in selfless service and all work as worship. Swamiji said: 'Let us try to make things simpler and bring about the golden days when every man will be a worshipper, and the Reality in every man will be the object of worship' (.).

(iv) The Courage to Be

In modern consumer society people are valued not for what they *are* but for what they *have*. As psychologist Eric Fromm has pointed out: 'Modern man *has* everything, a car, a house, a job, "kids", a marriage, problems, troubles, satisfactions—and if all this is not enough, he has his psychoanalyst. He *is* nothing.' Too much importance is given to the possession of objects because of the mistaken notion that happiness lies in external objects. According to Vedanta, happiness is an essential aspect of the Atman. The Atman is of the nature of *sat-cit-ananda*, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. *Ananda*, joy, is not something one has to acquire from outside; it is inseparable from one's true existence as the Atman. For an illumined person existence itself, life itself, is joy. That is why in India an illumined soul is described as *atmarama*, one who delights in one's own inner Self.

The realization that purity, goodness, love, and other virtues are inherent in the Atman and constitute our real nature will prevent us from harming or competing with others. Thus, morality for the illumined person is not the result of compulsion or fear but a natural state of being. It is the self-assertion of the intrinsic purity, goodness, and divinity of the soul under all circumstances in one's life. Virtue or morality is the 'courage to be'—one's own true nature, the Atman—even in the midst of evil.

The attitude of 'to be', instead of the attitude of 'to have', will be the dominant attitude of the future human being. It is clear from the fact that 'learning to be' is one of the recommendations made by the two recent Commissions on Education set up by .

(v) Unity of Spirituality and Science

The unity of science and spirituality will be one of the most notable and practicable features of the Golden Age visualized by Swami Vivekananda.

Religion is burdened with dogma, mythology, ritual, cult, and so forth, and hence it is difficult to reconcile religion with science. But spirituality is concerned primarily with direct experiences that can be verified. Moreover, the connecting link between spirituality and science has been found: it is consciousness. Now science has also started studying consciousness. As a result, spirituality is now emerging as the 'science of consciousness'. Swami Vivekananda had spoken of this more than a hundred years ago.

(vi) Utopia or Reality?

The ideal of a Golden Age had been propounded by several eminent thinkers in the past. Plato wrote about an ideal republic; St Augustine wrote about the 'City of God'; Sir Thomas Moore visualized a 'Utopia'; Karl Marx believed that a communistic society would be the inevitable result of the evolution of human society; Mahatma Gandhi dreamed of Rama Rajya as an ideal state. None of these prognostications proved to be true. This raises the question: Will Swami Vivekananda's vision of the Golden Age become a reality? There is every possibility that Swamiji's vision will become a reality on this good earth of ours in the future. The reason supporting this statement is the coming together and possible unification of four of the great civilizing forces of humanity: morality, spirituality, education, and science.

Morality had till recently been an appendage of religion, but now it has been freed from its limitations and has become secular and universal. Spirituality also, having been freed from religion, has become secular and universal. Education has also assumed universal dimensions. Science has always been universal. The combination of these four universal disciplines can exert such a tremendous force upon the course of human history that historical progression can be accelerated and can culminate in the Golden Age as foreseen by Swamiji.

Sri Ramakrishna as the Ideal of the Golden Age

Swamiji regarded Sri Ramakrishna as the prophet of the Golden Age. In a letter to Haridas Viharidas Desai, a distinguished statesman of those days, Swamiji wrote:

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 Godman 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. ... Now do you think 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 Godman to lead was born in India. He was the great Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and round him this band is slowly gathering (8.308-9).

Swami Vivekananda spoke of Sri Ramakrishna as the ideal of India and of the modern world, and by 'ideal' he meant both subjective and objective ideals. In the prevailing world situation, dominated by consumerism, commercialism, pleasure-seeking, as well as social, religious, and political conflicts and problems, the true significance of Swam-

iji's statement may not be apparent to all, except a small minority of enlightened people. However, from the discussion on the characteristics of the Golden Age given above we can see that Swamiji's statement is most likely to become a reality in the Golden Age.

In the light of the description of the Satya Yuga envisioned by Swamiji, we can see that Sri Ramakrishna's life is a prefiguration of the type of life that a large number of people are likely to lead in the Golden Age. Sri Ramakrishna would then be considered to be the role model or prototype for the people in this age.

Swamiji saw in Sri Ramakrishna the image of the perfect man. He once told a disciple of his: 'But take it from me, never did come to this earth such an all-perfect man as Sri Ramakrishna!' (6.480). Only a perfect man can serve as the ideal for the new age, not an ordinary person. One of the signs of perfection that Swamiji saw in Sri Ramakrishna was his absolute, immaculate purity. 'It is the purest of lives ever lived,' Swamiji remarked once.

Another sign was the all-round, total development of personality that Sri Ramakrishna had attained. About this point Swamiji said: 'Such a unique personality, such a synthesis of the utmost of jñāna, 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' (7.412).

However, the most remarkable aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's personality is the vast range of transcendental realizations he had. He was several prophets rolled into one; he embodied the spiritual consciousness of all the previous prophets of world religions. This trait alone is enough to make him the ideal for the Golden Age because, as we have seen, prophet-hood of the common man would be a characteristic feature of the Golden Age.

Every person has in him or her the potentiality to attain transcendental spiritual experience, to realize God, to become a rishi or prophet in his or her own right. In Mahayana Buddhism every person is regarded as a potential Buddha. Swami Vivekananda saw immense spiritual potential in every individual. Therefore, he declared: 'I should better like that each one of you become a Prophet of this real New Testament, which is made up of all the Old Testaments. Take all the old messages, supplement them with your own realizations, and become a Prophet unto others. ... This very moment let everyone of us make a staunch resolution: "I will become a Prophet, I will become a messenger of Light, I will become a child of God, nay, I will become a God!"' (4.134).

This great exhortation of Swamiji is seldom quoted, and is perhaps much less responded to. But it will continue to reverberate in the corridors of time, gaining in volume as more and more people respond to it, until it culminates in the spiritual symphony of the Golden Age.

Conclusion

In this series of articles, which have been appearing in *Prabuddha Bharata* from January 2011 as '*Sri Ramakrishna: The "New Man" of the Age*', we have made a modest attempt to make a fairly comprehensive study of the phenomenon of Sri Ramakrishna's avatarahood. The main features of Sri Ramakrishna's avatarahood we have covered are summed up below.

- (1) Sri Ramakrishna as the breaker of bonds.
- (2) Sri Ramakrishna as the door to the Infinite.
- (3) Sri Ramakrishna as the revelation of the ultimate Reality.
- (4) Sri Ramakrishna as the Ishta Devata.
- (5) Sri Ramakrishna's grace as the direct means.
- (6) Sri Ramakrishna the lover of humanity.
- (7) Sri Ramakrishna and divine motherhood.
- (8) Sri Ramakrishna's life of self-sacrifice for others.
- (9) Sri Ramakrishna's life as divine yoga, divine *tapas*, divine lila.
- (10) Sri Ramakrishna's life as the culmination of five thousand years of the spiritual life of Indian culture.
- (11) Sri Ramakrishna as world teacher.
- (12) Sri Ramakrishna and the spiritual renaissance.
- (13) Sri Ramakrishna as the spiritual ideal of the modern world.

This study of the avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna has been undertaken with the following purposes in mind.

- (a) To have a proper understanding of the true greatness of Sri Ramakrishna, who is now the object of love and adoration of millions of people. Even in worldly life, lack of proper understanding is one of the main causes of failure in love. To make our love for God authentic, unwavering, and eternal it is necessary to have a proper understanding of God's real greatness, *mahimā* or *māhātmya*.
- (b) To make known to the world the unique contributions of Sri Ramakrishna to Indian culture and to world culture.
- (c) To remove some of the misconceptions about Sri Ramakrishna's avatarahood.
- (d) To show the important historical role of Sri Ramakrishna in the ongoing spiritual transformation of human consciousness.
- (e) Lastly, this study is intended to serve as our humble homage to Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna on the occasion of the celebration of his 175th birth anniversary.

This study has covered only certain aspects of the avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna. It may take several centuries for the great possibilities and immense Shakti involved in the avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna to manifest themselves fully for the welfare of the world.

No one in the world ever understood, or can possibly understand, the true significance and implications of Sri Ramakrishna's avatarahood more than Swami Vivekananda.

Moreover, Swami Vivekananda was not only endowed with extraordinary intellectual and spiritual powers as well as a prophetic vision capable of seeing far into the future, but also he was a highly rational person who never allowed himself to be limited by narrow emotional or cultic considerations or made unauthenticated statements to mislead people. Hence, Swamiji's statements on Sri Ramakrishna have veracity and trustworthiness ingrained in them. The present discourse on the avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna can have no better conclusion than the following statement of Swamiji:

So at the very dawn of this momentous epoch, the reconciliation of all aspects and ideals of religious thought and worship is being proclaimed; this boundless, all-embracing idea had been lying inherent, but so long sealed, in the Religion Eternal and its scriptures, and now rediscovered, it is being declared to humanity in a trumpet voice.

This epochal new dispensation is the harbinger of great good to the whole world, specially to India, and the inspirer of this dispensation, Sri Bhagavan Ramakrishna, is the reformed and remodelled manifestation of all the past great epoch-makers in religion. O man, have faith in this, and lay it to heart.

The dead never return; the past night does not reappear; a spent-up tidal wave does not rise anew; neither does man inhabit the same body again. So from the worship of the dead past, O man, we invite you to the worship of the living present; from the regretful brooding over by-gones, we invite you to the activities of the present; from the waste of energy in retracing lost and demolished pathways, we call you back to the broad new-laid highways lying very near. He that is wise, let him understand (6.185-6).

In order to respond to this clarion call of Swamiji all that one has to do is to release one's faith. Everyone has in him or her inborn faith, but it usually remains imprisoned by the walls of ignorance and delusion. In the Pali scriptures of Buddhism there is the following anecdote.

After attaining Bodhi, full spiritual illumination, when Buddha decided to preach the new Dharma to the world, the gods rejoiced. They declared in one voice:

Apāvṛtaṁ teṣāṁ amṛtasya dvāram, He śrotṛvantaḥ pramupcantu śraddhām.

Opened is the door to immortality for you; he who has heard this [news] let him release his faith.²⁸

This declaration is true for the avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna as well.

Notes and References

26. *Complete Works*, 3.283-4.
27. Eric Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 87. See also Eric Fromm, *To Have or To Be* (New York: Continuum, 1977).
28. Mahavagga, 1.5; translation by the author.



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