



Spiritual Masters: Sri Ramakrishna
M. Sivaramkrishna

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About the book:

Sri Ramakrishna is one of the greatest spiritual masters to have lived on this earth. The God-man of nineteenth-century India did not found any cult, nor did he show a new path to salvation. His message was his God-consciousness. A truly divine, God-realised soul, Sri Ramakrishna's life demonstrated the meaning of spirituality and the harmony of all religions.

In this delightfully evocative book, the author brings out the endearing simplicity and catholicity of Sri Ramakrishna. The Master is not one of those serious, formidable figures of dry religiosity. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna's life is a mart of joy and dipped in irresistible humour. Sri Ramakrishna illustrates the exquisite art of living; a radiant love without limit suffuses his being. This book provides fresh insights into the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and is a valuable addition to the existing literature on the Great Master.

About the Author

Prof. M. Sivaramkrishna is former Chair, Dept of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad, and has a doctorate from Osmania University in American Literature. His involvement with the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition finds expression in numerous books: Ramakrishna: The Unique Phenomenon, Art of Sadhana in the Stories of Ramakrishna, Poet Saints of India, Pathways to Paramahansa Ramakrishna and Re-Visioning Ramakrishna. He writes regularly for journals such as Prabuddha Bharata (Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata), Vedanta Kesari (Ramakrishna Math, Chennai), and Nectar of Non-Dual Truth (Portland, Oregon, USA) among others. His diverse interests include literature, philosophy, psychology and spirituality.

PROLOGUE

There is a story in one of the Upanishads: a small fish was kept in a bowl. In a few days it grew big enough to be in the bowl. It was taken out and kept in a bigger vessel. But even that it outgrew—so much that it needed, they felt, a pond. It went on growing immeasurably until nothing else but an ocean could hold it!

This is, of course, a symbolic story. But it reflects the incredible phenomenon which we know as Sri Ramakrishna. Born in a remote village near Calcutta, his stature now is global. His life is as fascinating as the life-skills that flow from it. From Kamarpukur (his village), he has teleologically travelled all over the globe. His biographies are no longer confined to his mother tongue Bengali or even English. Most European languages—within a short interval after his demise—have translations of his teachings. From 1907 to date, he appears in so many forms: as a figure which enormously interests psychologists, sociologists, mythologists, linguists, narrators of various hues, harmonisers of religious paths, and even filmmakers. In essence, he has touched and transformed our perceptions not of spirituality alone but the various aspects of life in which it is situated. And, recently, feminist or gender studies, too, find him fascinating.

Chapter 23

SADHANA

We now enter the most awesome as also the most fascinating phase of Sri Ramakrishna's life. It was his *sadhana* phase. In recorded history, there is little comparable to its variety and depth. Unprecedented in its intensity and range, Sri Ramakrishna's *sadhana* is, in every sense of the word, phenomenal. It spread over twelve long years and sapped his entire energy—mind and body—in such a way that often people called him “pagal Ramakrishna” or the “pagal pujari”, the mad priest.

Saradananda gives a remarkable account of this *sadhana*. In the beginning, let us hear what the Great Master himself told his admirers and devotees in his own words. Only on this authentic base can we have a true idea of what it meant. On the incredible frequency of ecstatic experiences, he said, “Oh, what a state, God kept me in, at that time! One experience would hardly be over before another overcame me. It was like the movement of the husking machine: no sooner is the one end down, than the other goes up.” And, pointing out the various modes of *darshan* of God, he observed: “I would see God in meditation, in the state of Samadhi, and I would see the same God when my mind came back to the outer world. When looking at the side of the mirror, I would see him alone and when looking on the reverse side, I saw the same God.”

(*The Gospel*, Pp. 544 – 45)

There is artless simplicity and transparency in Sri Ramakrishna's narration. Seeing God everywhere and everything in God is his unique perception. The result is the integral linkage between the outer and inner, between our secular experiences and the interior ones. The time and the timeless—what the Great Master called the *Nitya* and the *Leela*—fuse, as obverse and reverse of the same coin. This is evident in the remarkable image he uses to evoke the perennial nature of his experiences: the husking machine. One end is down, alongside the other going up. This is not just an analogy but a process of sacralising everything and every activity as divine. No question of fragmenting.

It is also a kind of persistence not only of images but also of the religious traditions. For instance, the Bhakti movement is distinguished by this pervasive phenomenon of rural / pastoral life-contexts being seen as coexistent with the presence of the God. In fact, in their remarkable study of the Maharashtrian women's participation in the Bhakti tradition, Guy Poitevin and Hema Rairkar uncover this aspect. Stonemill and grinding are interlinked to singing songs of devotion and often the songs deconstruct the so-called hegemony of the male. For instance, Jana Bai asserts:

Never get discouraged for being born as a woman

The saints have worked wonders for me.

Though the women accept the male God / saint, they assert their identity unabashedly. They assert by punctuating their domestic activities with songs of adoration for God. (See *Stonemill and Bhakti: From the Devotion of Peasant Women to the Philosopher of the Swamis*; New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1996; p. 81)

Notice the invasion by the Sacred of the women's world in a poem like this:

One night, God hastened to Jani's house
He stretched himself on a bed of happiness
Sleep overtook him while still continuing the intimate conversation.
"Get up, O God, get up! Its morning," says Jani. (*Ibid*, p. 80)

Sri Ramakrishna's advent meant not just women devotees adoring a male God but this "Man-God" (as Romain Rolland calls him) dedicating his life to the realisation of the Divine Feminine as a more pervasive spiritual principle. (In English, interestingly, the word "woman" contains man, "Madam" contains Adam, and "She" contains He!) This is the link not just to the continuing vitality of the Bhakti tradition but also a gender reversal!

To resume: Ramakrishna gave again his experience of other paths: "God made me pass through the discipline of various paths, first according to Puranas, then according to the Tantra. I also followed the discipline of the Vedas. At first, I practised sadhana in the Panchavati. I made a grove of tulsi-plants and used to sit inside it and meditate. Sometimes I cried with a longing heart, 'Mother, Mother!' or again 'Rama, Rama!'"

See the plurality of paths cited by the Master as his practising grounds, affirming the hidden unity of all! When, later, admirers like Keshab Chandra Sen, the celebrated Brahmo leader, hailed him as a prophet of harmony of religions, the roots are there in the Master's experiential dimension of the harmony. He was not pontificating; he felt the pulse of several religions on his very being. When he declared, "as many faiths, so many paths", it was not a cerebral statement mediated by a scholarly intellect! It came from the Source.

But even perception of this as viable and indeed imperative is seen as central to many Western scholars. They do not allow appreciation of Ramakrishna to supplant their own path. It is this openness which Ramakrishna exemplified and which attracted scholars of various disciplines to this message. This is the essence of the Power and Man. (To add here, see *Great Thinkers on Ramakrishna*)

If scientists are open, they find a new dimension to their conceptions of experiment and experience—in Sri Ramakrishna's *sadhana*. If Divine Mother is alive, he must *see* her. No question of relying on hearsay. If sugar is sweet, no question of a descriptive account of what sweetness is. Taste it, relish it. For another

instance, let us observe his adoration of Rama: “While repeating the name of Rama, I sometimes assumed the attitude of Hanuman and fixed a tail to the lower end of my backbone. I was in a God-intoxicated state. At that time, I used to put on a silk robe and worship the deity. *What joy, I experienced in that worship!*”
(*The Gospel*; Pp. 543 – 44)

Joy is the perceptible emotion which defines not only Ramakrishna’s *sadhana* but the very texture, the very warp and woof of his being. Unlike most religious people, he did not find the world a vale of tears but it is what he called “*majer kuti*”, “a mansion, a mart of joy”, which includes, one can playfully say, the walmart stores, too. In ecstatic moods he used to sing:

Behold the waves of [God’s] ecstatic love:
under them all the universe lies submerged!
And, in his love I, too, long to be drowned.

And

Dive deep in the Ocean of God’s Beauty;
If you descend to the innermost depths
There you will find the gem of Love
(*The Gospel*; p. 501)

In fact, Ramakrishna’s uniqueness lies in freeing religion from the notion of pursuit which shuns the world as sorrowful, and in affirming religion as one of love, vibrant, varied, love! Nothing else defines his religion more than seeing him as a prophet and practitioner of Love as the benchmark of religion.

Chapter 31

AWAKENING OF KUNDALINI

Once, a singer sang in the presence of Sri Ramakrishna about the awakening of Kundalini:

Awake, Mother! How long has Thou been asleep
In the lotus of the Muladhara!
Fulfil Thy secret function, Mother!
Rise to the thousand-petalled lotus within the head,
Where mighty Shiva has his dwelling;
Subtly pierce the six lotuses
And take away my grief, O Essence of Consciousness!
(*The gospel*, p. 242)

Following the singing of this song, the Great Master of Tantra laid bare transparently and effectively what the awakening of Mother's energy means. He said:

The song speaks of the Kundalini's passing through the six centres. God is both within and without. From within, he creates the various states of mind. After passing through the six centers, the jiva goes beyond realm of maya and becomes united with the Supreme Soul. This is the vision of God. (*Ibid*; p. 243)

The biological term of God can be translated into the energy of Kundalini as it manifests itself in the body. Thus, what is within acts upon what is without, so that the inner and the outer interact. Even the six centres of consciousness and energy are manifest through both the mental and physical dimensions. Ramakrishna gave examples to illustrate how this energy moves in the body. Since the experience cannot be put into words, he expressed it through significant examples:

Look that which rises to the brain with a tingling sensation does not always move in the same way. The scriptures speak of its five kinds of motion. First, it moves like an ant: one feels a slow creeping sensation from the feet upwards, like a row of ants crawling along with food in their mouths. When it reaches the brain, the aspirant merges into samadhi. Second, it moves like a frog. Just as a frog makes two or three short jumps in quick succession, stops for a while, then proceeds again in the same way, so something is felt advancing from the feet to the brain. When it reaches the brain, the aspirant goes into samadhi. Third, it moves like a serpent. As a snake lies quietly, straight or coiled up, but moves in a jig-jag motion when it seeks a prey or is frightened, so does it move upward to the head, when it reaches the brain, the aspirant goes into samadhi. Fourthly, it moves like a bird. Birds in their flight from one place to another, sometimes fly a little high and sometimes low, but never stop till they reach their destination. Likewise,

something is felt moving towards the head, when it reaches the brain, samadhi ensues. Fifth, like a monkey, it moves from one tree to another, leaping from branch to branch and clearing the distance in two or three bounds, so the Yogi feels the kundalini power go to the brain and samadhi follows. (*Divine Play*, Pp. 424-25)

This is so vivid a description of the “serpent power”, that one is amazed at the clarity and authority with which everything is evoked. And the movements of ant, frog, bird, monkey and serpent make the evocation graphic! Perhaps, aspirants and their innate aspirations determine the kind of movement that the power takes. From the kind of classification of movements—ant-like creeping, the jumps of a frog, the zigzag motion of a serpent, the low or high flights of a bird, the leaping of a monkey—we can infer the kind of intensity behind the aspirant.

Obviously, Ramakrishna traversed the entire field of consciousness, to know how the movements accelerate or are blocked totally. In other words, to go back to the root of aspiration, it is the desire which determines the intensity. But the goals of fulfilment which colour the desire are extremely risky in the case of Tantra. For the sake of simplicity, one can collapse them into power and enjoyment. Both are possible through *siddhis*, or occult powers. In *Vamachara*, the left hand path, based on the same impeccable rituals but which lead one astray into the pit. When enjoyment takes over, the light of enlightenment is eclipsed. Ramakrishna himself draws attention to this: he narrates, with his characteristic simplicity and subdued suggestive way, an incident: (*God Talked to Me*, p. 830 & 47-48)

There is one sect that prescribes spiritual discipline in company with women. I was once taken to the women belonging to the Kartabhaja sect. They all sat around me. I addressed them as ‘mother’. At that, they whispered among themselves: ‘He is still a pravartuka. He doesn’t know the way.’ (*Gospel*, p. 337)

Clinching the significance of this incident, Ramakrishna says that the sect has almost predictable potential for a fall with so much freedom between men and women—in the context of tantric practices.

Yet, it is to be noted, that Ramakrishna also declared that “Tantra is the most suitable path for the Kali Age”. This is certainly puzzling. But there is, in such an observation, extraordinary insight into the ethos of our contemporary life. This becomes clear from Ramakrishna’s own assertion: “Follow your own intuition. I hope there is no more doubt in your mind. The path of the Vedas is not meant for Kaliyuga. The path of tantra is efficacious.” (*The Gospel*, p. 311)

You mean to say that one cannot follow the path of Tantra? That, which is Brahman, is also Sakti, Kali.” (*Ibid*)

This is an unequivocal affirmation. But there is a rider: Ramakrishna stipulates a condition that the pure mind alone is capable of making Tantra an effective path, and also a path which expedites the process of realisation. For the simple reason that the contemporary sensate culture, is a great stimulant of the *energies* behind desire—for enjoyment and possession: woman as an object of desire has peaked in the media. The corresponding intensity of longing is unimaginable!

Then isn't it a dire need that the energies if not eradicated at least be given a different direction? Though there is implicit risk, the gain is undeniably great. It is this acceleration of desire for enjoyment which contains the seeds energising it towards enlightenment. Ramakrishna's unique example is Girish Chandra Ghosh. He was the icon of all that is unethical in contemporary society. He had enjoyed what the *Vamachara* stipulates as the *Pachamakaras*, chief of which are womanising and drinking, when the ritualistic commandment for control is thrown to the winds. Perhaps, in Ramakrishna's divine performative text—his divine play—Girish is an example of how the most “degraded” can still nourish the inherent seeds of redemption.

Can Tantric practices have a better redemptive example than Girish and a more compassionate Master than Ramakrishna? In effect, Tantra (an amalgam of the intense emotion of Bhakti and an equally intense personal equation of intimate love) seems what Ramakrishna declared it to be: “the most efficacious” path, but with the most explosive results when out of control. In short, it is like any other path: snakes are ladders, ladders are snakes.