

SRI RAMAKRISHNA THE TYAGI *

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*(Sri Ramakrishna was never tired of repeating that the essence of spiritual discipline is the renunciation of Kama-kanchana, lust and lucre. Swami Paratparananda, Head of Ramakrishna Ashrama **, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and a former Editor of the Vedanta Kesari explains how freedom from carnal desires and avarice helps in God-realization and how Sri Ramakrishna the scientist demonstrated by his own life that this can be achieved.)*

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Example is better than precept, goes an old adage. It is applicable in a sense more forcefully to spiritual life. Every religion has its scriptures and lofty are their teachings, but the generality of mankind cannot construe them properly if it does not see before it persons in whom such principles are embodied in actions. The Upanishads, which form the latter part of the Vedas, the supreme authority among the Hindu scriptures, says: "Neither by work, nor by progeny, nor by wealth, but by *Tyaga* (renunciation) alone did they attain immortality."¹ The purpose of all religions is to teach and equip man to attain immortality, freedom from all types of bondage, bondage created by attachment to worldly things, to persons, to one's body etc. As the above passage clearly states, immortality is not possible without *tyāga*, renunciation. The above is not a solitary instance. In the Brihadarnyaka Upanishad it is clearly pointed out that immortality cannot be attained by wealth ². In the Kathopanishad Yama offers Nachiketa celestial damsels, chariot, unlimited wealth, long life and so on in place of the Knowledge about the life after death. Nachiketa rejects them all as transitory and evanescent and insists on being taught that Knowledge, acquiring which one becomes immortal.³ The scriptures have classified the desires which impede man from realizing God, into desire for progeny, for wealth, and desire to enjoy in

¹ *Kaivalya Up.* 2; also *Mahanarayana Up.* 12-14.

² *Brihadarnyaka Up.* 2.4.2

³ I. 25-26

the heavens or the other worlds.⁴ Giving up of these desires is renunciation. All these teachings of the scriptures would have had no meaning unless there were persons who practised them and attained that blissful state that is promised. This want was supplied by the life of Sri Ramakrishna.

The advent of Sri Ramakrishna occurred at a time when bhoga, enjoyment coupled with materialism, was reigning, when religion was considered the opium of the poor, and Hinduism a mass of superstitions. Although there came into being some organisations, such as the Brahmo Samaj, to revive the religious life of India, they concerned themselves rather with social reforms, which touched only the fringe and not the core of the problem. They were only trying to adapt religion to the existing atmosphere. The central theme of religion, tyāga, renunciation, was as far away from their view as from that of the materialist. And though India did not lack renouncers, Sannyasins, they mostly lived in the Himalayan regions, far away from the generality of mankind, unbeknown to it. Now, it was the life in the cities which was setting the standard, and here under the influence of western thought people, especially the young, were beginning to doubt the veracity of the teachings of the Hindu scriptures. Therefore, it cannot be gainsaid that the advent of Sri Ramakrishna at this juncture was an effective and solid remedy to the ills that were plaguing the society. This will be amply verified if we glance through some of the major events of his life.

One of the practices essential to lead a life of the spirit is discrimination between the real and the transitory. From his very boyhood Gadadhar, as Sri Ramakrishna was then called, possessed this virtue in a great degree. He was also a keen observer. His father's piety, dedication to and dependence on God left no doubt in the mind of the boy as to the real purpose of human life. The minstrels who used to go through the villages reciting mythological stories from the epics and Puranas used to inspire the villagers to enact them. Gadadhar never missed nay of these performances and being possessed of a wonderful memory repeated such dramas before his friends. Thus "he directed all his energies to the study of the lives and characters of spiritual heroes."⁵ The death of his father when the boy was only seven years of age made him seek solitude and pass long hours absorbed in thought. Moreover the company of the wandering monks who would spend a few days in the village rest-house on their way to the sacred city of Puri, strengthened in him the feeling of transitoriness of this world, which was beginning to manifest in him. The constant association with these monks, listening to their discussions on and readings from the scriptures gave the boy an incentive to meditation. The investiture with the sacred thread which gave him the opportunity to

⁴ *Brihadaranyaka Up.* 3.5.1

⁵ *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, (Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta. 1977) p. 13 (hereafter 'Life')

worship the family deity Raghuvir filled him with great joy and lifted his mind to a lofty level, in which he had extraordinary visions.

Thus was the great renouncer preparing for the final act, so much so by the time he was seventeen, his decision to shun the education which would provide him only with material prosperity was already made. Therefore, when his brother Ramkumar admonished him for neglecting his education, prompt came his reply: "Brother, what shall I do with a mere bread-winning education? I would rather acquire that wisdom which will illumine my heart and getting which one is satisfied for ever."⁶

The same spirit of independence and desire for freedom made him evade all overtures of an employment in the Kali temple though he lived there with his brother Ramkumar. Behind this attitude there was also the intense conviction that the prime objective of life was to attain God consciousness by the conquest of the flesh and renunciation of wealth. The death of Ramkumar on whom he had poured all his filial affection after the passing away of his father was a tremendous shock to him, for it happened when his mind was searching for something that was real and imperishable in this transitory world. He was convinced that man could go beyond all misery and attain immortality only by realizing God, the fountain of eternal bliss. His appointment as the priest of the Kali temple helped him to direct all the energy to have Her vision and pour his devotion on the ever affectionate Mother. This one-pointed devotion and anxiety to feel the presence of the Divine Mother, devoured, as it were, all thought about bodily comforts, nay even about its bare necessities. Thus the difficult struggle to conquer the flesh was made easy and there was no room left in his mind for thoughts about wealth. And once he had the vision of the Divine Mother his mind never turned towards the objects of the senses, rather his eagerness to feel the perpetual presence of the Mother increased a hundredfold.

However, he was not saved from undergoing some ordeals. The God-intoxicated state through which Sri Ramakrishna passed, caused him to act sometimes apparently in a strange manner. Rani Rasmani and Mathur suspecting this to be some nervous trouble first arranged for his treatment by an expert physician, but as it brought no relief, they thought a little deviation from the rigid observance of continence would do him good. "Accordingly they hired two women of ill fame to enter the room at Dakshineswar and tempt this child of the Divine Mother."⁷ At their very sight Sri Ramakrishna took refuge at the feet of the Mother, loudly uttering Her name. It is said that on another occasion Mathur took Sri Ramakrishna to Calcutta and stopped at a house where there were many beautiful girls waiting and retired, leaving him alone amidst them.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68

Immediately Sri Ramakrishna lost all outward consciousness repeating the name of the Mother. Finding him in that state the girls became apprehensive of the consequences of tempting a saint and began to implore his forgiveness. Mathur hearing the noise entered the room and was amazed at this marvellous proof of Sri Ramakrishna's total command over his passions.

This was again demonstrated when he underwent the *Tantrik* practices under the guidance of the Bhairavi Brahmani. Many of these practices were indeed fiery ordeals but he passed through them all remaining unscathed. He could see the Mother of the Universe manifest in all women, even in the street-girl. So his renunciation of lust, *tyāga*, was totally perfect.

The culmination of these tests came from Sri Ramakrishna himself. When the Holy Mother came for the first time to Dakshineswar, he allowed her to share his bed, and "one day, finding his wife asleep by his side, Sri Ramakrishna said to himself: 'Here is a woman's body which the world holds so dear. But he who takes pleasure in it is confined to the body and cannot realize God. Tell me frankly whether you want this or God. If the former, then here it is.'"⁸ His pure mind replied to this intimate question by entering into a Samadhi so deep that it lasted the whole night. Even the next day it was with great difficulty that he was brought back to the consciousness of the world by the repetition of the Lord's name in his ear. Nor was it a solitary day's instance. Months passed in this way, and yet never even for a moment did their mind descend to the sense plane.

Now we shall turn to the second obstacle in the spiritual path, viz. wealth, and see how he met this impediment. We have already pointed out how categorically he refused to acquire what he termed a 'bread-winning education', that is to say, an education that will give wealth, name and fame. He never gave a thought to these things. Not only that, when wealth was offered to him, he would feel extremely uncomfortable; for he had banished from his mind all thought about wealth, discarding it as of no more value than a clod of earth: "By reasoning he came to the sure conclusion, that a person who had made the realization of Brahman the only goal of his life could not derive any help whatsoever from gold any more than from a lump of earth. Therefore, repeating again and again, 'Rupee is earth and earth is rupee' he threw them both into the Ganges."⁹ By following this discipline this idea was so firmly engraved in his mind that any suggestion of possession would raise, as it were, a storm in his mind.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192

⁹ *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master*, (Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 1963) pp. 166-167.

Once Mathur wanted to make some provision for the Master's maintenance. On making the proposal Sri Ramakrishna seems to have thundered: "Do you want to make me a worldly man?"¹⁰ "Among the many who came to visit Sri Ramakrishna there was a rich Marwari gentleman named Lakshmi Narayan, who held the Master in great esteem."¹¹ We shall narrate here the circumstances as we find in the biography: "One day Lakshmi Narayan noticed a soiled coverlet on the Master's bed and at once offered to deposit in the bank in his name a sum of ten thousand rupees, so that his needs might always be supplied. The proposal was so painful to Sri Ramakrishna that he besought him with folded hands never to mention the subject again. Finding all his importunities futile, the Marwari next approached Hriday and pressed him to accept the money in the name of the Holy Mother, who would thereby be enabled to look to the Master's comforts. When this was made known to the Master, he again objected, saying that even in that case the money would be practically his, and he could not bear the idea of having any possessions. The generous man still insisted. Finding argument of no avail Sri Ramakrishna cried out in anguish: 'O Mother, why dost Thou bring such people here, who want to estrange me from Thee?' At this pathetic appeal the gentleman desisted. Referring to this incident the Master afterwards remarked, 'At the offers of Mathur and Lakshmi Narayan I felt as if somebody was sawing through my skull!' "¹²

Sri Ramakrishna's renunciation was thorough as well as total. He could not entertain the idea of possession even of things trivial. His nervous system recoiled at the very idea of hoarding. We can understand this better if we give here an example. "The Master was fond of chewing certain spices now and then, especially after meals. One day after he had taken his meal at the room where Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother stayed in Dakshineswar, she gave him some spices in a packet of paper and asked him to take them to his room. The Master started for his room but felt confused. He walked straight to the embankment and was about to fall into the river. Sarada Devi did not know what to do. She was too bashful to go out in the public and restrain him. Suddenly she saw a priest of the temple and asked him to call Hriday, who saved the Master from the imminent catastrophe. Evidently, to Sri Ramakrishna, the carrying of a small packet of spices was an act of hoarding."¹³

The very touch of metal which symbolises money would cause excruciating pain to him. One day, after his last illness had begun, a great physician named Bhagavan Rudra was called in. The physician was told all

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 435

¹¹ 'Life', pp. 225-226

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother*, (Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 1962) p. 69 (hereafter 'Holy Mother')

about the Master's illness. Sri Ramakrishna then began to talk with the doctor. "Well, what do you think of this? When I touch a coin my hand gets twisted; my breathing stops. Further, if I tie a knot in the corner of my cloth, I cannot breathe. My breathing stops until the knot is untied," said the Master. "He asked a devotee to bring a rupee. When Sri Ramakrishna held it in his hand, the hand began to writhe with pain. The Master's breathing also stopped. After the coin had been taken away, he breathed deeply three times and his hands relaxed."¹⁴ Even an unconscious touch of money would produce the same result as we shall see in the following incident of his life. "One day when the Master was absent in Calcutta, Narendra came to Dakshineswar. Finding there was no one in his room, a desire arose in his mind to test the Master's renunciation of wealth. So he secretly placed a rupee under the bed and went to the Panchavati for meditation. After a time Sri Ramakrishna returned. No sooner had he touched the bed than he started back in great pain. Wondering, he was looking around, when Narendra came in and watched him silently. An attendant examined the bed, and the presence of the rupee was disclosed."¹⁵ Having thus observed the Master for many years how he practised renunciation, not only from the conscious plane but even in the unconscious, Swami Vivekananda in his Bengali hymn to the Master describes him as *Tyagīśvara*, supreme among the renouncers.

We shall conclude by what the Holy Mother said of the unique feature of Sri Ramakrishna's life. "One day a disciple asked her about the special message of Sri Ramakrishna. Was it not the harmony of religions that he experienced and taught? The Mother replied: 'My child, what you say about the harmony of religion is true. But it never occurred to me that he had practised the disciplines of different faiths with the definite idea of preaching this harmony. Day and night the Master remained overwhelmed with divine rapture. He enjoyed God's sport by following the paths of the Vaishnavas, Christians, Mussulmans, and the rest. But it seems to me, my child, that the chief characteristic of the Master's sādhanā was his renunciation. Has anyone ever seen such natural renunciation? Renunciation is his great ornament.'¹⁶



¹⁴ *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, (Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center, New York) p. 845

¹⁵ 'Life' p. 267

¹⁶ 'Holy Mother', p. 216