

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND GOD-CONSCIOUSNESS

By Swami Paratparananda

* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – February 1963; Vol. 49; page 403

This is an age of science when people doubt the very veracity of the existence of God. Though advanced scientists are not so dogmatic in their views now, most people think that matter is quite sufficient for the existence of the universe. Science provides them with their requirements of trade, transport, luxury and other things. By researches in the hygienic field science has been able to extend the lease of man's life. A long and happy life is what most people desire, and for that they have the science and its methods. Where then is there the necessity for a God, whom none can see even by travelling in the space capsules? He is not visible to our eyes, nor perceived by our senses; how then can a sense-bound man believe in Him? So he denies Him outright.

Some others do not go so far, they think, 'Let Him be if He exists; He can neither do good nor evil to us, so we have no necessity of Him. We need not bother about Him.' Still others oscillate between belief and unbelief. They sometimes are very hopeful and certain that He is; and that is when everything goes on in their favour, to their liking, but at other times when they are thwarted in their desires, their belief snaps like a worn out string. Most of the believers are of this latter type. It is not bad either. For, it is better than rank materialism. But one should not stop with this belief. Religion should not end in mere lip service, rituals, or seeking utility. Swami Vivekananda used to say, 'It is good to be born in a church but not to die in it'. Man is not man unless he evolves into spiritual manhood. Others are mere babies who are satisfied with the tinsels of this world. They are happy with these 'red toys'. Unless they are tired of these little plays they will not listen. In the language of Sri Ramakrishna they have scored three, four or five points and are still in the game. In short the ordinary run of men, even if they be scholars, are only matter-conscious.

Very rare are the souls who desire to be God-conscious; who hunger for God. Sri Krishna voices the same opinion in the Gita, 'One among thousands tries for perfection and some one among those who try, know Me truly, in the proper perspective.'¹ Sri Ramakrishna used to remark often with great pathos, 'Who wants God? People shed jugful of tears for wife, children, property and wealth; but who weeps for God?'

Nature in the physical world has a way of adjusting itself. A depression at a certain place in the atmosphere, due to extreme heat, immediately sets in a gale, a storm. It is the nature's way of infilling the want. A similar phenomenon we notice in the life of man. He is terribly afraid of the upset of balance of power, and struggles hard to maintain it; for upon it depends his physical existence. All the conflicts that we see in

the world today are due to this fear of upset of balance. Now what happens in the physical world, may also be attributed to be repeating in the spiritual world. So when agnosticism reached its peak, hit the ceiling, as it were, and the balance was disturbed in the spiritual atmosphere, some one was necessary who could restore the balance; who could demonstrate that matter alone without the spirit behind it, was powerless like the body without life; who could show that God was the essential unit of all existence, that God was a verifiable truth and not the mere fancy of fevered brains.

Sri Ramakrishna came to us to point out that. He was the embodiment of God-consciousness. When we review the events of his life we find that one thread of Super-Consciousness running all through them without a break. His birth itself seems to indicate this characteristic in him. Let us recall the event. The baby was born. The woman attending on the mother after sometime turned round to look for the baby. But it was not where she left it. It had slid into the hollow fire-place nearby and was seen besmeared with ashes. Yet it uttered no cry. Was it a prelude to the child's future life of silent but intense renunciation? Observing the later events one is compelled to surmise that it is so. How does it indicate renunciation? The ashes for the Hindu have a two-fold significance. They are sacred to him as they are Lord Shiva's ornament. Adorned with it He is visualized as sitting absorbed in meditation on the Mount Kailas. Secondly it points to the ultimate end of man. What is left of man when he dies and is cremated, but a handful of ashes? All his ambitions, huge aspirations, ever recurring desires —none of these can hold him back from the mouth of death, nay they thrust him again and again into its mouth. That is what the Upanisad says, 'The other world (the Highest) does not shine for the child-minds (the indiscriminating), who are engrossed in worldly attachments, and are deluded by wealth; who deny the existence of a higher world, and believe that this is all that exists. Such people come under My (Death's) sway again and again.'² So one is asked to make an oblation of one's desires by lighting the fire of knowledge to be free from death, which means to be free from birth also. 'As a blazing fire reduces to ashes all wood that is put into it, the fire of knowledge burns away all activities,'³ says the Gita. Here the child (Sri Ramakrishna) is, as if, immersed in his own Self unaware of the surroundings, displaying his unattachment to things worldly and his perfection from very birth.

Later, as a boy, his sport and pastime were in enacting the life incidents of Sri Krishna. The solitary mango grove of Manick Raja was the venue of these sports; with a few friends of his own age he retired to this place and re-enacted what he heard from the wandering minstrels and saw at the dramatic performances about these godly lives. Moulding the images of Gods and Goddesses and playing at their worship was his another play.

Another thing, which was conducive to his nature, was doing odd

jobs for the wandering monks, who stayed at the village rest-house and listening to their talks on God. As days passed he took to wandering alone in the village cremation grounds and was seen to spend hours in solitude. This latter trait developed in him by degrees after his father's passing away. What visions he had and what revelations came to him none can say. His mind must have been in deep communion with nature and its Creator. For, he is seen after this to emerge with definite convictions regarding the way he would conduct himself in the world. One is reminded of the Upanisadic story of Satyakama Jabala, who lived in rapport with nature for several years and at the end of the period came to have the Highest knowledge, being taught by a bull, the fire, and the two birds. Sri Ramakrishna's exhortation even to his lay-disciples to go into solitude, at least occasionally, is of particular significance. He lived for years and years such a life and knew the value of it.

As early as the age of seven he had his soul's first flight into the Unknown. And how was it occasioned? One day when he was out in the fields with a handful of puffed rice, in a basket, his eyes fell on a flight of snow-white cranes across some sombre clouds; the contrast and picturesqueness of it so enveloped the boy that he lost all outward consciousness. He was carried in that condition to the house. Though the parents became anxious it was observed that the ecstasy had no adverse effect on the boy. The boy himself related later to his friends and parents, that he enjoyed a unique bliss within him at that time. Perhaps, for his pure mind, the beauty of the scene gave an inkling into the realms of the Beautiful; lifted the veil from the face of the Reality, the Lord, who is described in the scriptures as Truth, Auspiciousness and Beauty. Even at this age his absorption in the contemplation of the Divine appears to be so complete that a little impetus would send him into deep ecstasy. Once the boy, Gadadhar (Sri Ramakrishna's early name), was accompanying some ladies of the village to Visalakshi temple at Anur, a village two miles to the north of Kamarpukur, singing the glories of the Goddess, when he suddenly became still. Tears began to flow from his eyes and all efforts of the ladies to bring him back to the normal state were of no avail, until at last a pious lady in the group suggested that they take the name of the Goddess. This had the desired effect. Another time it was when he played the part of Siva, in a dramatic performance on a Sivaratri night in his village, that he merged in the identity of Siva. With the matted-locks, the tiger skin, and the trident he looked so charming that the assemblage cheered him. But he was rapt up in the thought of God. Who would hear and who would act? He did not regain the normal state again that night, in spite of their best efforts.

The storm of God-consciousness that had seized Sri Ramakrishna and was blowing unabated in his boyhood increased in its strength and became a tornado when he entered the Kali Temple at Dakshineswar as Her priest. There She, the Divine Mother, was and he Her child was out to verify the truth of Her existence. He prayed to Her, entreated Her, wept,

fasted and passed nights in calling upon Her to show Herself to him. What agony, what anguish he passed through we can never know. A little glimpse of it we can obtain from the description that he himself gave. He said, 'I felt as if someone was wringing my heart and mind, just as they do to squeeze out water from a wet towel.' Unable, at last, to bear the agony he wished to end his life. It was then that the Divine Mother gave him the first vision. What a vision it was! He felt as if he was being enveloped in the surging waves of an ocean of infinite light, and fell down unconscious.

Even after this vision Sri Ramakrishna's desire to be in Her immediate presence did not subside, rather it only increased. Like a child he wailed, calling upon the Divine Mother to bestow on him the boon of Her constant vision. He writhed and rolled on the ground in pain at being separated from Her. Hearing his wailing people would gather round him. But to him they were no more real than shadows or were at the most mere pictures drawn on canvas. In his extreme agony he would lose his external consciousness and in that state would be more than compensated by the blissful presence of the Divine Mother in his inner Self. At that time She consoled him and taught him in endless ways.

At one time, for six years at a stretch, he had no sleep. He could not wink his eyes. They had lost the power to do so, because of his extraordinary longing for the unbroken vision of the Divine Mother. Sri Ramakrishna himself was petrified at this phenomenon. To quote his own words: 'I could not close the eyes in spite of my efforts. I had no idea of the passage of time and was not at all conscious of the body. When the eyes turned from Mother to the body, even a little, I felt apprehensive, I asked myself, "Am I not on the verge of insanity?" I stood before the mirror and put my finger into my eyes to see whether the eyelids closed. I found they were incapable of winking even then; I became alarmed and wept and said to the Mother, "Mother, is this the result of calling on Thee? Is this the result of my absolute reliance on Thee that Thou hast given this terrible disease to this body". And the next moment I said, "Let anything happen to this. Let the body go if it is to do so; but see, Mother, You don't forsake me. Do reveal Thyself to me and bestow Thy grace on me."'

Perhaps the only near parallel to this kind of love for God we may find in the love of Gopis of Vrindavan for Sri Krishna. The Bhagavata says about them: 'Their hearts given to Him, they talked of Him alone; they imitated His sportful activities; they identified themselves with Him; they sang of His excellent attributes; they did not think of their homes.'⁴ Sri Krishna says of them to Uddhava: 'Through deep longing for Me the thoughts of the Gopis were firmly fixed on Me and hence they were not conscious of their body, or what was far or near, just as sages absorbed in contemplation, or like the rivers that have entered the sea losing their distinguishing name and form.'⁵

We can learn a little more of Sri Ramakrishna's inordinate love for

God if we take one or two more incidents in his life. Once Sri Ramakrishna had been to Banaras, the holy city of the Hindus, with Mathur Babu, proprietor of the Kali Temple and a son-in-law of Rani Rasmani. Mathur was a man of the world and many types of people came to him and there would be talks on all sorts of subjects. To Sri Ramakrishna the atmosphere of the house became unbearable. He said to the Divine Mother in a complaining tone, 'Mother, where have You brought me? I was much better off at Dakshineswar. Here I am in a place where I must hear about "woman and gold". But at Dakshineswar I could avoid it.'

Again when devotees began to come to him in large numbers, he noticed that most of them were like one measure of milk mixed with three or four measures of water, so dilute, so luke-warm in their love towards God. He cried out in despair, 'Mother, bring some pure-souled devotees. I shall die of the company of worldly people.' Such was his condition. Even a little talk of anything else than God would pain him deeply. Narada in his Bhakti Sutras speaks of this attitude as ananyata or unification with God, which comes from the abandonment of all other support.⁶ He speaks of such Bhakti as, 'the consecration of all activities, by complete surrender to Him and extreme anguish if He were forgotten'⁷ The Upanisads too speak in a similar strain. The Mundaka Upanisad says: 'Know That one alone, the Atman; give up all other talk. This is the bridge to Immortality.'⁸ What can we understand about all this? Try even for a single day to practise this injunction of the Upanisad and you will find how difficult it is; it appears almost impossible. But in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's life, which stands as the unrefuted proof of the Upanisadic teachings, all these truths of the scriptures acquire a new meaning; they get a new lease of life as it were. That is why Swami Vivekananda said, 'The life of Sri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. He was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Sastras. He showed by his life what the Rishis and Avatars really wanted to teach . . . Without studying Sri Ramakrishna first, one can never understand the real import of the Vedas, the Vedanta, of the Bhagavata and other Puranas.'

Regarding surrender which, is spoken of in the Bhakti Sastras, Sri Ramakrishna had an over abundance of it. His visions, the treasures of his unstinted practices and unsullied life, were doubted by Swami Vivekananda at the beginning. Sri Ramakrishna like a child approached the Divine Mother and asked in a pathetic way, 'Mother, should you, finding me ignorant, befool me?' But when the Mother assured him that his visions were all true and that Narendra would soon accept them, he was delighted. When Hazra, a devotee who lived at Dakshineswar temple garden and was of a perverse disposition, admonished Sri Ramakrishna for his attachment to the youngsters, he was really perturbed. He prayed to the Divine Mother for guidance. Referring to this Sri Ramakrishna says: 'I said to the Divine Mother: "Mother, Hazra admonishes me for worrying

about Narendra and the other young boys. He asks me why I forget God and think about these youngsters." No sooner did this thought arise in my mind, than the Divine Mother revealed to me in a flash that it is She Herself who has become man. But She manifested Herself most clearly through a pure soul.'

Without a mention of the various ways in which he enjoyed the realization of the Most High, we will not be able to have an idea of his all-consuming love of God. He practised the Tantrik, the Vaishnava, and the Vedanta modes of approach to the Godhead. And when he had finished the whole gamut of the Hindu way of spiritual practices, and realized the goal of all these several paths, he wanted to know how the Mohammedans prayed to God. No sooner had this thought crossed his mind than a Muslim Fakir came to the temple garden, and Sri Ramakrishna learnt from him the Islamic way of approach to Reality and realized the Highest through that path as well. He then contemplated on Jesus and had His vision too. At last he came to the definite conclusion that the so many views were as many paths to the one Reality, upholding as it were the statement, of the most ancient Rishis of India, 'Truth is one, sages call It variously'.⁹ He used to say, 'Why should I be like a one-stringed instrument. I enjoy the presence of God through many ways. When I was initiated into the Vedantic disciplines I prayed to the Mother "Mother, do not make me a dry Vedantin".'

We have given some of the incidents in Sri Ramakrishna's life to show how all through he was conscious of the Highest. This would not, however, have helped the world, had he not practised spiritual disciplines himself and emphasized their necessity; if he had not showed how to attain God-consciousness. People talk lightly of the guru: that the system of guru and sisya is a relic of the past superstition; that spiritual life is possible without any outside aid. Sri Ramakrishna, on the other hand, took the aid of many teachers even after scaling the heights of spiritual peaks to affirm the importance of the guru. His directions regarding the necessity of a guru in spiritual life are unambiguous. Let us listen to what he says: 'One must get instruction from his guru. If a man is initiated by a human guru, he will not achieve anything if he regards his guru as a mere man. The guru should be regarded as the direct manifestation of God. Only then can the disciple have faith in the Mantra given by the guru.'

'A sadhaka has to sever the eightfold fetters that bind man down to this earth if he has to win the grace of the Mother,' said Sri Ramakrishna to his nephew and attendant, Hriday, in the early period of his sadhana at Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna was at that time spending his nights in the woods of the temple garden, meditating on the Divine. He used to put off his sacred thread, the symbol of Brahminism and sit for meditation. Hriday, who had followed him one night to see what he was doing there at dead of night, felt scandalized at this behaviour of his uncle. He went near Sri Ramakrishna and upbraided him for his sacrilegious act. It was

then that the Master had told him that shame in taking the name of God, pride of birth, contempt for others, fear and the like were the impediments in the way of approach to God. Here Sri Ramakrishna gives us a practical lesson on the way to God-consciousness. Like all great preceptors, Sri Ramakrishna too laid stress on keeping the company of the holy. In his sayings and talks even the smallest amongst us can find some practical hints for our spiritual uplift and that is the beauty of Sri Ramakrishna's utterances: the abstruse truths are brought home to us in the simplest language and the homeliest parables.

In a world full of the darkness of material-consciousness Sri Ramakrishna came with his select band of disciples to re-infuse the light of God-consciousness; to be as a beacon light and to reinvigorate humanity spiritually.

¹ Gita, 7.3.

² Katha U. 2.6.

³ Gita, 4.37.

⁴ Bhagavata, X.30.44.

⁵ Ibid., XI.12.12.

⁶ N.B.Sutras 10.

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Mundaka 2.2.5.

⁹ Rig Veda.