

SRI RAMAKRISHNA THE PRACTICAL MYSTIC

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The nineteenth century was a period full of upheavals all over the world. It was so in Europe, in which the Industrial Revolution set things apace and changed man's mode of living as well as ways of thinking. It was in the last century again that Charles Darwin by his theory of biological evolution threw a challenge to religion. It was also in the nineteenth century that there was a civil war in the new continent, that of America, that made the United States a fact of history. It was during that period again that a scramble for overseas empires began and India came to be more and more dominated by the British. The British, however, not confining themselves to political domination ventured to penetrate into the cultural field of Indian life, with their very subtle methods. The British posed as benefactors of the Indian people and wanted to civilize a backward race—as they presented the Indian people to the world. Indians were told, that their religion was crude, that their scriptures were mere superstitions and that deliverance lay in giving them up and following Western modes of thought and life.

But yet another upheaval more powerful, more lasting, greater in extension and richer in content, in answer to many of these little tumults, also came about in the last century, viz. the spiritual upheaval. It was ushered in by Sri Ramakrishna, born in a village, acting as a temple priest at Dakshineswar, not far from Calcutta, with very little of the so-called education but deeply rooted in the culture of the soul. His life was a fitting reply, a challenge to the clamours of the iconoclasts, to the agnostic and the atheist, to the doubter of the efficacy of Hindu religion to stand its ground against other religions and last but not least to the onslaught of the then scientific man on religion itself. Forces of religion were rallied round, as it were, to encounter the rising tide of agnosticism in the person of Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna's was a wonderful life. He began with a simple faith in God that was nurtured in the innocence of a village life, guarded in a home of pious parents, and enthralled in the legacy native to his being. As he pursued his spiritual practices he no doubt passed through dismal nights of doubt, but only to be firmly and indissolubly bound to the Divine Mother, by the blessing of Her vision—an experience that made him cling to Her, like a child to its mother, all his life. Her first vision brought on him a raging fever, as it were, to have her complete and uninterrupted

presence. He pined and writhed in pain at separation from Her. In his anguish he rubbed his face on the rugged ground till it bled; so acute was his sorrow, so intense was his despair. He strained every nerve for that and completely gave his mind to Her. In this respect Sri Ramakrishna may be called a spiritual scientist. He, like the Rishis of old, was never content with theories but wanted to test them in the laboratory of practice and would not rest until he had gained his end. When he began the worship of the Divine Mother in the temple of Dakshineswar, he asked himself this question: 'Is the Divine Mother only a stone image?' He thought he must verify it. He held a piece of cotton to the nostrils of the Image and strange to say he felt the breath of the Mother on it. He felt it more tangibly than he felt his own breath. That was the method of his experimentation. If the Divine Mother was a conscious entity She should be seen, should be realized—that was his firm determination. This determination was backed by a strong renunciation and a penetrative discrimination.

Even as a boy he had discovered by observation the futility of mere book-learning—a learning which could be only a means of earning livelihood and of no further use. It did not solve the problem of life, did not unfold its meaning. On the other hand his first mystic experience at the age of seven, at Kamarpukur, at the sight of white cranes flying across sombre clouds had bathed his soul in great bliss. Compared with it, he found all other joy only a semblance of it. His father's devotion to God, rich with dreams and visions, had helped the boy to concentrate his mind on Him. And his father's death, early though it was in his life to leave its full impress, still had left some void in the boy's heart. That the boy felt his mother's sorrow and ceased to tease her with his importunities after the death of his father gives evidence of this. His association with the wandering monks who visited the village of Kamarpukur kindled the fire of renunciation. Lastly, the religious performances of the wandering minstrels lit up his love of God. His power of concentration, specially on subjects connected with the God-head increased enormously, so much so that on occasions he was absorbed, completely oblivious of his surroundings, in the thoughts of the particular Deities, which the circumstances would arouse. His second ecstasy occurred on the way to the Temple of Visalakshi, the Divine Mother, of Anur, and his absorption in the thought of Siva on the Sivaratri, when he was called upon to act the part of Siva in the village drama, was his third mystic experience that lasted for a long time. Thus grounded in discrimination and renunciation and mind given to God, Sri Ramakrishna entered the state of adolescence well-equipped to start on his journey of mystical pursuit.

Before we proceed with our subject let us state what we understand by mystic experience in this context. It is not something that is mysterious or unravellable. It is not a thing of the past. It does not exhaust the human being. It is an experience of the supernatural. It is living beyond the senses. It can be experienced even now by those who

live a pure and unsullied life and pursue the path of spirituality. It is the going to the source of all bliss. It is seeing God; being touched by Him. It is bliss of God or Atman bathing the soul. It is a state where all senses are left behind. Even speech cannot reach it. That is why it is not possible to describe it through the vehicle of language. Language is but a poor porter there. It is left far outside. It has no access to those chambers. This is what Sri Ramakrishna told his disciples. This is what we can see, if we care to, in his life. This is also what the Upanisads declare: 'From whence speech unable to penetrate returns with the mind, reaching that bliss of Brahman a seer never fears anything.' Reaching it man goes beyond all fear. He finds nothing else but himself or his God present everywhere. Normally, man in this world is afraid of several things and the worst fear of all is the fear of death—and these fears continue as long as he sees a second being other than himself. Even death of the physical body holds no fear to a person who has realized that he is deathless. Is this then not a significant benefit? Is it not a covetable experience? Mystic experience in brief, is something that can be felt by a human being, if there be the requisite qualities of purity and other disciplines to his credit. Sri Ramakrishna experienced this mystic touch even in his first ecstasy in Kamarpukur. When all the household was perturbed at the sudden event and were trying to find remedy for the malady, the boy, Gadadhar, for so was Sri Ramakrishna named in his younger days, assured his parents that he did not feel anything bad, that, rather he felt a flow of bliss during the period of his unconsciousness. This was subsequently corroborated when nothing untoward happened to the boy.

Sri Ramakrishna's mystic experiences are innumerable to be enumerated here. But as far as is necessary to our subject we shall refer to some of them now and then. A spiritual person in India if anything is intensely practical, if not he is nothing. Speaking about practicality Swamiji once said to an audience in the West: 'Just as your people are practical in many things, so it seems our people are practical in this line (spirituality). Five persons in this country (America) will join their heads together and say, "We will have a joint stock company," and in five hours it is done; in India they could not do it in fifty years; they are so unpractical in matters like this. But, mark you, if a man starts a system of philosophy however wild its theory may be, it will have followers. For instance, a sect is started to teach that if a man stands on one leg for twelve years, day and night, he will get salvation—there will be hundreds ready to stand on one leg. All the suffering will be quietly borne. . . So you see the word practical is also relative.' So spirituality, religion and philosophy have a practical basis in India. And practice alone can bring one to fulfilment of one's ideal. This was obviously known to Sri Ramakrishna. So he plunged headlong into spiritual practices. Night and day he was absorbed in the thought of the Mother, at Dakshineswar. His only idea was to know and see Her. In the beginning he had none to guide him. But his own intense yearning brought on Her vision. He had

heard that God never came to a person who was conscious of his ego, who looked upon himself as a man of noble birth, as a person of wealth and so on. Therefore, at dead of night, after every one had retired to bed, he would steal into the nearby Panchavati and casting off the sacred thread, the symbol of Brahmanhood, and even the wearing cloth, sit for meditation, deeply absorbed in the thought of God. His nephew and attendant Hriday noticed his absence from his room for several days.

One night wanting to know where Sri Ramakrishna went and what he did, Hriday followed him. But he felt scandalized when Sri Ramakrishna put off the sacred thread and the wearing cloth as well, as he sat in the woods for meditating. Hriday took him to task for his sacrilegious act. For a Brahmin to cast off the sacred thread! He could not think of it. But Sri Ramakrishna was unperturbed. He calmly replied, 'If a person wants to approach God, he should cast aside his sense of aristocracy of birth, wealth and the like and humble himself before God. For what are they before the omnipotent and omniscient Being? So I am trying to do that.' Another time Hriday tried to frighten his uncle out of the wood by throwing sand in the direction where he sat. But Sri Ramakrishna was lost to the outside world the moment he had entered the woods. So deep was his concentration. The fury of his hunger for God increased as days went by. He rolled on the ground calling, 'Mother,' 'Mother'. People around thought of him in various ways. Some thought him mad. Some others thought that he was crying out of colic pain. But to him, as he himself expressed later on to his disciples, the persons around were like pictures painted on a wall or at best were mere shadows.

Again, Sri Ramakrishna was not satisfied with a chance acquaintance with the Divine Mother. Perhaps, in spite of the bliss that he felt on his first vision, he had questioned himself, as Narendranath did later, whether it was not some fancy of his mind that made him think that he had a vision of the Mother. Actually, however, the bliss itself had made him mad, as it were, for Her perpetual presence, as a lover longs for the presence of the beloved, as a child longs for the mother, and as a man of the world yearns for more and more wealth. And till he obtained the continuous vision of the Divine Mother and forced it, as it were, from Her, he was not contented. That was why he used to say: 'Who is my Mother! Is She a step-mother, no, She is my own Mother.' Yet other times he advised: 'Force your demand on God; claim your birthright as a son claims his patrimony.' To him God-vision is the birthright of every human being. We are the children of the Divine Mother. Why should She then withhold Her vision from us? We have every right to claim it. That was his firm conviction. Nay, it is his assurance to us from his life's own experience.

To him came the teachers of different faiths when he had known the Divine Mother, when he had conclusively established the relation of a child with Her; when he could see Her, and talk to Her whenever he desired to do so. In his case, to quote his own simile, the fruit came first

and then the flower. His later sādhanas were for the verification of what he had already known by his earnest faith and boundless yearning. His earlier realizations were corroborated when he followed the path laid down in the scriptures. After his first realization he came in contact with the God-head following other paths in a very short time. It did not take him more than three days to arrive at the culmination of any one path. Here also he was most practical. He put his whole mind, body and soul into it. For instance, when he was undergoing the disciplines of Islamic faith, he abstained from visiting the temples, everything about the Divine Mother was forgotten. In habits as well as costumes he followed the Mohammedans in every detail. And that is why he could arrive at the result in so short a time.

In the case of Advaitic sādhana he had a little difficulty. While trying to concentrate his mind on the formless Brahman, the benign form of Divine Mother appeared before him everytime. He expressed his difficulty to Sri Totapuri, his teacher in the Advaitic sādhana. The latter was not to be put away. He pressed a piece of broken glass between his eyebrows and asked him to concentrate his mind on that spot. No sooner did Sri Ramakrishna direct his mind towards his eye-brows than the Mother's form appeared before his mind's eye but this time he cleaved it, as it were, by the sword of knowledge. The thin veil that separated him from Brahman fell and he passed into the realm of the Unknowable. It was now the turn of Totapuri, who had taken forty years to reach the state of Nirvikalpa Samadhi, to be surprised at the ease and rapidity with which Sri Ramakrishna had scaled the pinnacle of spiritual realization. For three days, Totapuri kept watch over Sri Ramakrishna. On the fourth day Totapuri, assured that the latter had been established in the discipline, brought him to normal consciousness.

It will be an incomplete survey of the practicality of Sri Ramakrishna as a mystic if we do not mention here how he expanded the vision of those who came in contact with him, even those who came to teach. For, as Swamiji said, Sri Ramakrishna's life itself was a Parliament of Religions. It was therefore natural that those who came to him should have their views extended. We shall cite only the example of Totapuri again. Totapuri, who never stayed for more than three days at any place, charmed with the surroundings of Dakshineswar and enthralled by Sri Ramakrishna spent there nearly eleven months. But he could not understand Sri Ramakrishna's worship of the Divine Mother even after attaining the *Nirvikalpa samadhi*. To him all these forms were only illusions. Sri Ramakrishna, however, chided him for his disparaging remarks about the worship and prayer to God with form. But deeply imbued with the idea of Advaita Vedanta as he was, Totapuri could not easily give in. Strange, however, are the ways of God. Though he tried to take leave of Sri Ramakrishna several times, something held him back from broaching the subject. At last he fell a victim to dysentery. Gripping pain laid him down. He could not sit for meditation. One day in utter

disgust he wanted to cast off the body by drowning himself in the Ganga. For what use was it if the mind could not be immersed in the Self. Resolved to do so, one might he walked into the Ganga but wonder of wonders was that though he waded through the river, the water never reached above his knees. In amazement he cried out, 'What strange *māyā* is this?' Turning back towards the temple of Bhavatarini he saw the benign form of the Divine Mother. He returned to the Panchavati and lay himself down, soothed in body being relieved of pain. Next day Sri Ramakrishna saw him cheerful. Totapuri narrated the incident to Sri Ramakrishna and having been thus enlightened he shed his dogmatic outlook and took leave of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna came to the world to teach mankind that every path was true. Would then the Mother allow his teacher to remain a fanatic? That was not to be. Sri Ramakrishna's contact thus corrected the views of even his teachers.

Another matter Sri Ramakrishna paid great attention to was the company his young disciples kept. In spite of the loving and compassionate heart that he possessed, he could not allow his disciples to mix with any and every sort of man who came even in the guise of a monk. Once a wandering minstrel, a haul came to Dakshineswar and wanted to sit for food along with Narendranath and others who were having a picnic in the Panchavati. The Master did not allow it. He said: 'What merit has he earned that he will sit with you? One should be very careful in associating with people during the early period of one's spiritual life. It harms one's spiritual growth if one indiscriminately mixes with people.'

It is said that religion and religious experiences are other-worldly. First thing here to remember is, that all religions can be followed here and now though we may reap the results of our actions in the other worlds also. Secondly religious experience has an effect on man in this world too. The natural and other forces leave no mark on him. Entering him they are lost like the rivers in the ocean. He alone becomes like a limpid pool, calm, serene and peaceful and not he who is running after the sense objects, says the Gita. Thirdly religion is the basis of morality. By religion no dogma or creed is meant. Religion, as Swamiji often stressed, is realization: realization of God; realization of the unity of all beings. When that realization comes then alone can man talk of universal brotherhood. Today humanity suffers from all types of handicaps, racial, so-called religious, social and others. In such a world the only way to come together is by spiritual realization. In this respect Sri Ramakrishna's contribution is invaluable, immeasurable, overwhelming. By his life he showed that dissensions due to these badges of religion are not necessary. They only bring unrest. Nay, they are harmful. But sad to say, humanity has yet to learn this lesson. Will it ever awake? It can do so if it studies Sri Ramakrishna.

Lastly we shall say a few words as to how practical Sri Ramakrishna was in his normal life. He trained the Holy Mother how to live in the

household. He taught her every detail of housekeeping, beginning from the way to trim the lamp upto dealing with persons whom she would have to contact. He chastised his disciples when they took anything for granted. One day he gave a young disciple (Swami Yogananda) some money to purchase a frying pan. The disciple believed the shopkeeper and brought the pan the trader gave without examining it. It was however found that the shopkeeper had deceived the boy and given him a broken pan. At this Sri Ramakrishna commented: 'That you have become a *sadhu* is no reason that you should be a fool as well. The trader is not there to earn merit but make money. So before you purchase anything examine it, enquire at other shops and in the case of purchases where an extra allowance is made collect that too.' Such was the advice on things secular by a person who could not take proper care of his wearing apparel! What then to speak of lesser beings! Sri Ramakrishna as we see him portrayed to us in his biographies and talks was intensely practical not only in spiritual but also in secular matters. That is why he has an appeal even to the most modern man. We are sure the erroneous impression that a mystic is a mysterious being will clear away if Sri Ramakrishna's life is properly and critically studied.