

WHY WE FAIL TO RECOGNIZE SPIRITUAL PERSONALITIES

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It is our great misfortune that we are unable to recognize spiritual personalities when they are still in the mortal frame and utilize their presence amidst us for our onward progress in the path. Why is it so? What prevents or veils our vision to perceive the divine? First of all, there are no outward indications by which we could know the highly evolved souls; to borrow a phrase from the Holy Mother 'they do not grow horns' by which they could be recognized. Secondly, they do not go about broadcasting their spiritual stature; they behave as though they are the lowest amongst the lowly. Thirdly, they live and move with us as if they are ordinary human beings suffering bodily ailments as any others, and sorrowing for the death of the near ones or worried over the illness of others. Thus veiled they escape attention of the common run of men. These divine personalities can be recognized only by a few advanced souls to whom they reveal their true being.

Now the question will be: Do these advanced souls require any help? They could have somehow reached the goal. A healthy man does not need tending. It is the ailing alone that needs the physician. Why then do not the Incarnations announce their arrival and minister to the vast multitudes which grovel in darkness? For many reasons they abstain from doing so. First of all, having taken a human form, they have to respect its limitations. Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother to send him Her pure-souled devotees, when he found that those who came to him were steeped in worldliness. He said to the Divine Mother, "Why dost Thou bring such worthless wayward people here? I cannot do so much. Let there be at most one-fourth or so of a measure of water to one measure of milk; but now it is not so; there are five measures water to one measure of milk; my eyes are burning with smoke as I continue pushing the fuel into the fire. If thou likest, go and give personally; I cannot do so much feeding of the fuel into the fire; don't bring such people any more".¹

The question is why did he pray so? Though he had come for the rejuvenation of mankind in the religious path, their redemption, it was

¹ Sri Ramakrishna, The Great Master, Pub: Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras-4. P.605, III Edition, 1963.

physically impossible for one human frame to meet the needs of all and sundry. For that purpose he had to train up persons who would do it for him. If he wasted his time which was ebbing away from his life-span how could he accomplish his task? That was why he prayed and even fought with the Divine Mother to send him Her pure-souled devotees so that he could train them and work through them.

Further, human estimation of spirituality is warped by desires and hankerings. Men judge spirituality by the grandeur, splendour and occult powers a person possesses. But what does this all lead to but wealth, honour, fame and creature comforts? People will flock to such persons for getting cured of their maladies, obtaining wealth, progeny and the like. What do we find in the life of Sri Ramakrishna? Quite the opposite. Let us quote his own words. "When I first had my exalted state of mind, my body would radiate light. My chest was always flushed. Then I said to the Divine Mother: 'Mother do not reveal Thyself outwardly. Please go inside'. That is why my complexion is so dull now. If my body were still luminous, people would have tormented me; a crowd would always have thronged here. Now there is no outer manifestation. That keeps weeds away. Only genuine devotees will remain with me now."²

People do not always want to know God or realize Him, but to use Him. What can I get out of Him? That is the attitude of most people. With this same end in view people approach spiritual persons also; their motive is selfish and not enlightenment.

It may now be objected that the original question still remains unanswered; that this is only a by-passing of the issue, an evasion of the problem. To this we reply: There is no need to side-track the issue. The answer is there in the question itself. Does the patient want to be cured? That is the point. If so the physician is always ready; at least in the religious path it has been so, and therefore there is no room to doubt that it will not be so in the future. Take for instance the life of any great saviour and you will find that wherever anyone repented of his deeds and wanted to be reformed there succour was not denied, nay it went seeking the fallen. In the life of Jesus we have the example of the woman who was taken in adultery. She was not merely saved from physical torture but better still was retrieved from her misguided life.

What was Girish Chandra Ghosh when he came to Sri Ramakrishna? Did he not in one of his drunken states abuse the Master in the vilest language? Yet, was he not saved, was he not reformed? The chief thing is the desire to become better. If that is lacking no amount of force would reform anyone. Swami Vivekananda told a story about a person who was

² Sri Ramakrishna, The Great Master, Pub: Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras-4. P.816, III Edition, 1957.

confined to a dark dungeon for years. When he was at last released and was brought into the world of free air and light he felt the light too much for his unaccustomed eyes. His prayer for mercy was that he be confined to the dungeon again. Such is the pathetic condition of most of the people. They do not want to see light but prefer to live in the dark. Will such people understand even if the Incarnation announces himself as the son of God or Man and stands before them? They will not. Sri Krishna says in the Gita, "Fools despise Me who have taken a human form without knowing My divine nature, as the great Lord of all creatures. Such persons are befooled into vain hopes, into devotion to vain deeds and fruitless knowledge and thus are deluded to take recourse to demoniacal and cruel natures".³ Should Godmen then "cast pearls before swine", and allow them to "trample them under their feet and turn again and rend them"?

Not only do these Godmen not cast away the pearls but treasure them into caskets which will be able to hold them and be of much value to humanity. Many people came to Sri Ramakrishna but few stuck to him till the last; they were the chosen few, reminding us of Christ's famous saying, 'Many are called but few are chosen'.

Why does this happen? Because, of those who swell the crowd many come out of curiosity, many more out of greed and selfish motives and they are sifted when the real test is applied. Sri Ramakrishna tells those who were near him in his last illness: "Do you know why I have this illness? It has the same significance. Those whose devotion to me has a selfish motive behind it will run away at the sight of my illness".⁴ That is what people ask: "If you are a holy man why should you suffer from bodily ailments?" One who cannot cure his own ills how will he help others — that is the idea of people who approach with selfish motives.

But we have to know that outward grandeur is an impediment and a danger even for a highly evolved person. Only those who have gone beyond praise and blame, who have conquered lust, greed, and anger and who have a message to deliver can be safe even with splendour. For they are in the keeping of God. He does not allow them to stumble. The greatest of praise is to them like filth and worldly attractions are disdainful like the ashes of the cremation ground. Let us remember here what we have already seen in the case of Sri Ramakrishna, that the Incarnations want to remain as unknown as possible, lest people of low minds pester them for the fulfilment of their desires.

All this lead us to the inevitable conclusion that with a mind full of desires we cannot know a divine personality even if we live with him for

³ Gita, IX. 11 & 12.

⁴ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 816. op. cit.

years. That was what happened to Hridayaram, the nephew and a long time devout attendant of Sri Ramakrishna. How unstintedly did he not serve the Master? But could he understand him? If he had, would he have teased and tortured him towards the end? That is the enigma, that is the paradox of life. This shows that not only service, but the attitude and motive with which we serve is also important. On the one hand is Hridayaram's example, on the other is Lātu Maharaj's. What a vast difference? How poles apart? One wanted to utilize Sri Ramakrishna for his selfish ends and the other knew nothing, wanted nothing except service to him. But how can the poor human being who is accustomed to the glamour of the world know the soothing sweetness of coming in contact with divine personalities, unless they themselves reveal it through their grace?

Sri Ramakrishna points out: 'How many did know Sri Rama as an Incarnation? Only a handful of Rishis. Others knew him only as the son of Daśaratha'. How many knew Sri Ramakrishna himself as an Incarnation? Very few indeed. Many thought of him as a great *sādhaka*, a great *sādhū* and so on. How much less possibility was there of knowing the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi, the consort of Sri Ramakrishna as the Divine Mother? In the case of the Master at least there was the phenomenon of his ecstasies and *samādhi*, which everyone could witness. But in the instance of the Holy Mother that too was a hidden chapter. None, except, one or two of her women devotees knew about the exalted states into which she entered and re-entered time and again. Perhaps they too must have been allowed the privilege of being a witness to these, her states, not more than once or twice during their long association with her. For others to know her truly was therefore an impossibility.

Hers was outwardly an uneventful life. There were no spectacular happenings to attract attention of the worldly — no miracles, no pomp, no manifestation of occult powers. A few incidents of her life will make this clear, and explain why we fail to find out spiritually exalted beings. Only those who can read in between the lines of their life histories, will find much material to mould their own lives and make them blessed.

Sri Sarada Devi was born in an obscure village, of unsophisticated but pious parents and brought up in the confines of the village home. She was married at the age of five to Sri Ramakrishna, a person who had completely forgotten the world and given his mind to God. After marriage he seems to have entirely forgotten her — except for a brief period of a few months when on a visit to his native village, during which period he had taken ample care to teach her every art of housekeeping — until she went to Dakshineswar, thirteen years after their marriage. There she served Sri Ramakrishna, as is expected of a Hindu woman, with devotion. Nothing, at first sight, in her life appears extraordinary. Birth, bringing up and marriage all were of the ordinary kind. Of course, we are not alluding

here to the visions of her parents before her birth as they are not outward manifestations. We are also not recounting the experience of the Holy Mother herself on different occasions, as these also are subjective. These are matters that do not appeal to the modern mind until they themselves get a taste for the spiritual life. But we shall find enough and more material in her life by way of concrete help she has rendered in the uplift of many a soul.

Now, her devotion to the Master was not an ordinary one. It was not due to the earthly relationship between them. It was based on a higher consciousness. The Holy Mother seems to have been conscious of the purport for which Sri Ramakrishna had incarnated. This is evident from the dialogue which took place between them on her very first visit to Dakshineswar. Let us recall it here. Once Sri Ramakrishna asked the Holy Mother: 'Do you want to drag me down into Maya?' Prompt came the reply from her, 'Why should I do that? I have come only to help you in the path of religious life'. Here we should remember that the Holy Mother was then in the prime of her youth and if she was not aware of the purpose of Sri Ramakrishna's advent as well as of her own, if she was an ordinary woman, it would have been impossible for her even to understand what the Master was talking about. Think, for instance, how many of her age at the present time can understand this question set by the Master? Few indeed. And even among those who can understand how many can boldly say what she said? We are sure there will not be one. By this we do not mean that there are no renouncers at present but theirs is the path while the Holy Mother had reached the goal, from whose empyrean heights she had spoken those words. Her life after this is a demonstration of this statement of hers.

Consider also how Sri Ramakrishna was looked upon at that time. Most of the people knew him as the mad brahmin of Dakshineswar. The Holy Mother too had heard these strong and persistent rumours and had therefore personally come to Dakshineswar to verify it for herself, and be of service to him in any capacity. But, when more than half the world who had come in touch with him or heard of him, so to say, had considered him mad, she *knew* it from her personal experience to be otherwise. Note the word 'knew' here, it was not a fond hope or mere belief of hers, but personal knowledge. How could she know it if she were not herself a divine being? These things do not have any importance for a superficial observer, clouded as his intellect is with passions, prejudices, pre-conceived notions and the like. Spirituality cannot be judged from outward appearances. It is a matter of inner transmutation and, as Sri Ramakrishna said, only a jeweller can appraise a diamond. Unless we progress ourselves in the spiritual path how can we know about the state reached by others? And it is also true that the same persons whom we at the outset consider as mere aspirants, receive higher and higher estimation and reverence from us, as we proceed in the religious path. When even after much effort we cannot gauge the depth of their being we

are simply wonderstruck at their eminence. That is what took place in the case of the Holy Mother also. Even some of the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, at the beginning, could not understand her spiritual greatness. What then to speak of ordinary mortals! They only saw her engaged in household chores, serving devotees, looking after the household as any other woman. They did not have the penetrative acumen to see through these veils. And all through her life, the Holy Mother lived in this way; unknowable to many and unknown to many more even amongst those who came in contact with her.

We can only have a glimpse of her greatness by the respect and reverence the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna paid to her; by the way in which she guided the Ramakrishna Order unobtrusively and silently. The greatest problems of the organization were placed before her for advice and her opinion was accepted as the supreme judgment, as the correct interpretation of the message of Sri Ramakrishna. We shall cite here an instance: When some one raised a doubt regarding the programme of work chalked out by Swami Vivekananda for the monastic Order, the Holy Mother put this doubt to rest by this reply: 'How many are there who can meditate and practise Japa all the time? At first they earnestly practise these disciplines, but their brains become heated in the long run by sitting constantly on their prayer rugs. They become very vain. They also suffer from mental worries by reflecting on different things. It is much better to work than to allow the mind to roam at large. For when the mind gets a free scope to wander, it creates much confusion. My Naren (Swami Vivekananda) thought of these things and wisely founded institutions where people would do disinterested work'.⁵

On another occasion when a disciple was passing through a difficult time in his spiritual endeavour and was finding it impossible to continue his meditation, it was she who prescribed the right remedy and cured him of the tension he was experiencing. Instances can be multiplied to show how simple and effective were her ways of dealing with spiritual problems. Could one who is not oneself a knower of God direct another correctly to his goal? It is an impossibility. Even in the mundane world one cannot teach a subject of which he has himself no knowledge. What then to speak of the knowledge of the inner life!

Thus we see that we fail to recognize, an incarnation, a divine being, due to a want in our own perspectives. We have a tendency to overlook whatever is easily accessible. And this has arisen from the fact that we look for gorgeous and glorious things that are perceived by our senses. In other words we are bound by our senses and inhibitions. But spirituality is what transcends the senses; how then is it possible for man to know it through them? Then what is the way? The way is to go beyond the senses i.e., to acquire purity of mind, to empty the mind of all desires and passions. How can it be done? To say it briefly, it can be done only

⁵ Sri Sarada Devi, The Holy Mother. Pub. Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras-4. p.526. Third Edition, 1958.

through filling the mind with God, by the thought of God, His contemplation. The more we fill our mind with God the more empty it becomes of the other impressions, and the more we are able to do this the better will we be able to contact the divine beings, even though they may not be present in the physical frame.