

**PHILOSOPHY  
OF  
SRI RAMAKRISHNA**

**SWAMI HARSHANANDA**



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SRI RAMAKRISHNA**

**Swami Harshananda**



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## PREFACE

Sri Ramakrishna was not a philosopher, in the conventional sense of the term. And yet, who can deny that the highest spiritual truths he taught, out of the fulness of his profound mystical experiences, constitute a philosophy eminently suited to the present age? A humble attempt has been made in the first essay to piece together his teachings under classified headings and formulate a philosophy in consonance with the ideas and ideals for which he stood. Since his teachings fall within the general framework of Vedānta, of which Śrī Śaṅkara is a great exponent, a comparative study between the two has also been tried.

The Upaniṣads are the primary sources for Vedānta. Hence, cannot the Vedānta of Sri Ramakrishna be presented in the form of an Upaniṣad? This is the spirit that prompted the composition of the second essay, originally in Sanskrit, now offered with English rendering and comments.

Both these had appeared as articles in the *Vedānta Kesari* (Annual Number 1985; March 1987) a monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order.

If the students of Ramakrishna literature are motivated to do further research in this field, we will feel rewarded.

S. H.

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# Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna

## Introduction

Man is often described as a rational animal. Once the animal in him is reasonably satisfied by the provision of basic biological and some psychological needs, the rational part gets an opportunity to evolve to higher levels. Philosophy, including metaphysics, is one of the highest aspects of this evolution.

The Indian philosophical systems have developed not only as a result of intellectual speculations but also of mystical intuition. Hence the name 'Darśana' (lit., 'seeing'), usually applied to them. The topics most commonly discussed by these Darśanas are generally four: the world and its creation or evolution; the existence, nature and attributes of the Absolute or God; the nature of man; and the goal of human life.

Different standpoints and differing views on these topics of discussion have naturally led to a variety of schools. These schools are broadly divided into two classes: the āstika and the nāstika. The former accept the authority of the Vedas whereas the latter do not. The Vedānta Darśana belongs to the former class and has gained a pre-eminent place in it due to its judicious combination of reasoning

and acceptance of the authority of the Vedas as also due to its long, unbroken tradition.

The word 'Vedānta' means the 'end or essence of the Vedas.' The Upaniṣads, the *Brahma Sūtras* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* (collectively known as the *Prasthāna-traya*), as also all other allied literature based on them, form the sources of Vedānta. Differing interpretations of the *Prasthāna-traya*, especially of the *Brahma Sūtras*, have given rise to different schools of Vedānta, of which Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita are well-known.

### **Advaita of Śaṅkara**

Among these three schools, again it is the Advaita which has gained greater currency and is more widely known.

According to Śaṅkara, the chief expounder of this school, the ultimate Truth is one and one only, and it is Brahman. This Brahman is Sat-Cit-Ānanda ('Existence-Knowledge-Bliss-Absolute') and is without form (*nirākāra*) and without attributes (*nirguṇa*). The world in which we live, move and have our being, is unreal since it is only an appearance in Brahman, like that of a snake in a rope, due to ignorance or illusion. However, as long as this ignorance or illusion is not transcended and Brahman is not realized as It is, this world of appearance, which is the ground of our experience, is given a tentative and empirical reality. When this empirical reality is admitted for

the world, its creation or evolution, its sustenance, and its destruction or involution, have also to be admitted. Looked at from this angle and conceding Brahman as the ground of evolution and involution of the world, It becomes Īśvara or God, the supreme Ruler of creation. This Īśvara creates, sustains and destroys the world out of His power of māyā.

As regard the individual souls, Śaṅkara posits that they are really identical with Brahman, their separate identity and bondage in the world being due to the ignorance (avidyā) of their real nature. This ignorance is beginningless (anādi) but can be ended through knowledge (jñāna) of their real nature as Ātman or Self identical with Brahman or Absolute. Since it is ignorance (avidyā or ajñāna) that has caused bondage for the individual soul, Śaṅkara maintains that knowledge (vidyā or jñāna) alone can give liberation, though he admits that selfless action (niṣkāma karma) and devotion to God (bhakti) can be useful preliminary disciplines. In the state of liberation, the individual Self merges in Brahman, completely losing its identity.

## **Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna**

### **BRAHMAN**

Now let us see how the philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna compares with that of Śrī Śaṅkara. At the very outset, it has to be made clear that Sri

Ramakrishna never propagated a system of philosophy of his own. He experienced the Truth directly and then spoke out of the fullness of that experience. Hence, we have to piece together his teachings on these aspects of philosophy given at random in his conversations.

Like Śaṅkara, Sri Ramakrishna also accepts Brahman as the highest and the only reality. He also accepts It as nirguṇa and nirākāra in Its aspect as the Absolute. But, unlike Śaṅkara, he does not accept God (Īśvara); the aspect of Brahman with form (sākāra) and with attributes (saguṇa), as either illusory or as a reality of a lower order. To him, God is both formless and possessed of form. Not only that, He is beyond both these too! Says he: 'God is formless, and God is possessed of form too. And He is also that which transcends both form and formlessness. He alone knows what all He is.' (*Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, 871).

He calls the Absolute as Brahman, in Its eternal (nitya) aspect, when It is at rest and inactive. The same in Its sportive (līlā) aspect when involved in the process of creation, preservation and destruction, he calls Śakti or Kālī, the same as Īśvara or God. So, according to him, Brahman and Śakti are one and inseparable. 'The distinction between Brahman and Śakti is really a distinction without a difference. Brahman and Śakti are one (abheda), just as fire and its burning power are one. Brahman and Śakti

are one, just as milk and the whiteness of milk are one. Brahman and Śakti are one, just as a gem and its brightness are one. You cannot conceive of the one without the other, or make a difference between them.' (*Sayings*, 857) 'God the Absolute and God the Personal are one and the same. Belief in the one implies belief in the other. Fire cannot be thought of apart from its burning power, nor can its burning power be thought of apart from it. Again, the sun's rays cannot be thought of apart from the sun, nor the sun, apart from its rays. You cannot think of the whiteness of milk apart from its milky whiteness. Thus the Absolute cannot be thought of apart from the idea of God with attributes, i. e., Personal God and *vice versa*.' (*Sayings*, 856) 'The Primordial Power and Supreme Brahman are identical—It is like the snake and its wriggling motion.' (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 1947 edn., p. 263)

## MĀYĀ

Sri Ramakrishna accepts māyā as the veil that keeps God hidden from our sight. He compares it to a small patch of cloud that can hide the big sun from our view, or like the weeds that cover placid water. He also holds, like the Sāṅkhyas, that as soon as māyā is discovered, it disappears. But he is a little more considerate towards this māyā than the Advaitins, because he accepts that it has two aspects, the vidyāmāyā and the avidyā-māyā. The former

helps a bound soul to get liberation by giving him discrimination and non-attachment. It is the latter, manifested as lust, lucre and egoism, that really binds him.

Again, this explanation which leads to the corollary that a spiritual aspirant should take recourse to vidyā-māyā to nullify the effects of avidyā-māyā, even as one thorn (needle) is used to remove another thorn and then both are thrown away, adds a new dimension to the philosophy of spiritual practice (sādhanā). By ingeniously avoiding the need to propitiate a Personal God to remove this māyā, the purely Advaitic standpoint is maintained.

As regards the locus of māyā, there is no unanimity among the traditional Advaitic schools. But Sri Ramakrishna solves the problem convincingly by saying that it is located in Brahman, but acts on the individual souls (jīvas), like the poison of a snake which is contained in its mouth and yet does not affect it in any way, but acts on those bitten by it. He thus absolves Brahman of any imperfection or limitation due to māyā.

## CREATION

Coming to creation, Sri Ramakrishna gives it a much greater degree of reality than Śaṅkara. He calls it a līlā aspect of Brahman and hence real, though not eternal. It is like ice crystals appearing

on water and again dissolving back in water. The ice crystals are as real as water—but do not endure permanently.

A person ascending the staircase to reach the roof of a building denies at first any 'roofness' to the stairs. But he discovers after reaching the roof that the stairs are also made of the same material as the roof. In the same way, though a man of wisdom (jñānī) may deny the world as not Brahman, when he becomes a man of 'supreme wisdom' (vijñānī), through more complete realization, he accepts that the world is also Brahman since nothing exists apart from Brahman. This theory gives us a greater insight with the help of which we can understand better, the activities of a jīvanmukta, one who is liberated even while living.

### ĪŚVARA OR GOD

In Śaṅkara's Advaita, Brahman the Absolute is not very responsive to human emotions or prayers. The Īśvara we bank on is either unreal or has a precarious existence. But according to Sri Rama-krishna, Īśvara who is Brahman in Its līlā-aspect, is real and responsive, and hence the entire gamut of devotional practices (bhakti-sādhanā) acquires validity and leads to fulfilment. Instead of being a secondary sādhanā, as in traditional Advaita, bhakti is a primary sādhanā placed on an equal footing with jñāna; and this is achieved within the broad framework of Advaita which both accept as the final truth.

Closely connected with this topic is the concept of the Avatāra or incarnation of God. Śaṅkara, constrained by the extreme stance of Advaita which he is obliged to adopt, is very apologetic about the whole doctrine (vide his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā* 4. 6-9). Sri Ramakrishna however has no such constraints since he accepts both the nitya and the līlā aspects of Brahman as equally real and valid. Once the līlā-aspect is accepted as real, there should be no difficulty at all in according reality to the Avatāra of God also. God being omniscient and omnipotent, can do anything He likes. None can put any limitation on His power. If it is His will He can be born as a human being and sport through it. In fact, He does sport through the human body to bring enlightenment to the bound souls, out of His infinite compassion for them. And again, since the incarnation is God Himself, seeing Him is equivalent to seeing God. To touch the river Gaṅgā, it is not necessary to touch the entire stretch of water from the Gomukh (the birth-place of the river) to the Gaṅgāsāgar (the place where the river joins the sea). It is enough if it is touched at Dakshineswar!

#### IMMANENCE OF GOD

For Śaṅkara the world is only an illusory appearance in Brahman, like silver in nacre. Brahman thus being the substratum of the world, appearance cannot be, strictly speaking, immanent in it. Im-

manence implies a much greater degree of reality for the substance in which immanence of the other is recognized. The Upaniṣads clearly speak of divine immanence in the world and the living beings (vide *Taittiriya Up.* 2. 6; *Aitareya Up.* 1. 3. 12; *Chândogya Up.* 6. 3. 2). Sri Ramakrishna teaches not only of divine immanence in all beings and things but also of its manifestation in different degrees. Says he: 'Every object is Nārāyaṇa (i. e., God). Man is Nārāyaṇa, the animal is Nārāyaṇa, the sage is Nārāyaṇa, the knave also is Nārāyaṇa. All that exists is Nārāyaṇa. The Deity (Nārāyaṇa) sports in various aspects. All things are His diverse forms and the manifestations of His glory.' (*Sayings*, 890) 'God is in all men, but all men are not in God; that is why they suffer.' (*Sayings*, 889) 'The manifestation of Śakti (the Divine Power) varies in varying centres of activity; for variety is the law, not sameness. God is immanent in all creatures; He is even in the ant. The difference is in manifestation only.' (*Sayings*, 892)

#### JĪVA OR INDIVIDUAL SOUL

Coming to the nature of the jīva or man, Sri Ramakrishna admits that in his essential nature he is God Himself: 'The soul enchained is man, but when free from the chain (māyā), it is the Lord.' (*Sayings*, 20) 'What is the relation between the jīvātman and the Paramātman? As a current of water seems to be divided into two when a plank

of wood is placed against it edgewise, so the Indivisible appears divided into two, the *jīvātman* and the *Paramātman*, due to the limitation of *māyā*.' (*Sayings*, 21) 'Water and a bubble on it are one and the same. The bubble has its birth in the water, floats on it, and is ultimately resolved into it. So also the *jīvātman* and the *Paramātman* are one and the same, the difference between them being only one of degree. For, one is finite and limited while the other is infinite; one is dependent while the other is independent.' (*Sayings*, 22)

#### CAUSE OF HIS BONDAGE

What then is that causes his bondage? Sri Ramakrishna attributes it to egoism, brought about by the *avidyā-māyā*. On a deeper analysis of this 'I,' it will be found to be non-existent even as nothing is left over when we go on peeling an onion. And yet, it can create no end of troubles. Not only that, it is extremely difficult to get rid of it! How then can we get rid of it? Classifying the ego into two groups, the ripe-ego and the unripe-ego, Sri Ramakrishna advises us to cultivate the ripe-ego to counter the unripe one: 'If you find that you cannot drive off this feeling of "I," then let it remain as the "servant I." There is not much to fear from the ego which is centred in the thought, "I am the servant of God, I am His devotee." Sweets cause dyspepsia, but not sugar-candy which is an exception. The

“servant I,” the “I” of a devotee, the “I” of a child—each of these is like a line drawn with a stick on the surface of water; this “I” does not last long.’  
(*Sayings*, 121)

In this connection he gives a unique example as to how the liberated souls continue to live in this world and teach others even after their egoism has been wiped out: ‘As a piece of rope, when burnt, retains its form, but cannot serve to bind, so is the ego which is burnt by the fire of supreme knowledge.’  
(*Sayings*, 132)

#### FOUR TYPES OF JĪVAS

Sri Ramakrishna, though conceding that all the jīvas, in the ultimate analysis, are equal, yet classifies them into four groups: The baddha (bound), the mumukṣu (struggling for liberation), the mukta (emancipated) and the nityasiddha (ever-free).

Those of the last group are born to teach mankind. The first group is so deeply engrossed in the world of senses that it is least interested in the life of the spirit. The last two groups have already reached the goal of their lives. Hence it is the second group that needs special attention.

#### THE GOAL OF LIFE

Sri Ramakrishna says that the goal of life is God-realization. All our miseries will end, all our problems will be solved once for all, by realizing

God. Following the ancient tradition, he advises the aspirants to seek a competent spiritual teacher (guru) first and then practise disciplines according to his directions. Sri Ramakrishna's teachings contain a veritable mine of information and instructions on practical spiritual life. Unlike the traditional philosophies or religions he is not at all dogmatic about the path leading to the goal. Just as the Kalighat temple can be reached through several roads of Calcutta, God also can be realized through several spiritual paths and disciplines. In his philosophy of sādhanā, jñāna, bhakti, yoga and karma—all have a place. One can practise them either singly or in combination. What is needed is vyākulatā, great earnestness. In fact, this approach of his can accommodate in its fold not only all the spiritual disciplines of Hinduism, but also those of other religions. He goes to the extent of according a place even to the abominable practices of some Tāntrik Schools, calling them as 'backdoors,' though he does not advocate or recommend them.

### JÑĀNA OR BHAKTI?

As regards the controversy among the various schools about jñāna or bhakti being the direct path to liberation, Sri Ramakrishna advocates devotion tempered by knowledge (jñāna-miśrita-bhakti) as most suitable for this age. This standpoint avoids the extremes and prevents the aspirant from becom-

ing dry or sentimental, the dangers to which he is generally exposed if he follows only one of them to the exclusion of the other.

What happens to a person when he realizes God? Here, Sri Ramakrishna follows the traditional description given in the scriptures. The man of realization experiences unalloyed bliss within and sees the Divine everywhere. Outwardly he may not exhibit any signs of his inner joy and may even behave like an abnormal person. But one thing is certain: He remains unaffected by the vicissitudes of life which affect others intensely. He lives in God and works for the good of others, seeing God in them.

#### CONTINUANCE OF BODY AFTER REALIZATION

Sri Ramakrishna says that normally a person who goes into nirvikalpa samādhi (the highest state of superconsciousness) remains in that state for twenty-one days and then passes away. However, a few who are destined to teach mankind return to the ordinary plane of consciousness by keeping a trace of egoism without which corporeal existence is impossible.

About prārabdha-karma (the result of past deeds, that have borne fruit in this life) Sri Ramakrishna accepts it as inevitable but assures us that a greater part of its effects can be offset by the power of God's name (vide *Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna*, 913)

## PROBLEM OF GOOD AND EVIL

Concerning the problem of good and evil which has been debated much in philosophy, Sri Ramakrishna says that the very act of creation presupposes imperfection. Just as pure gold cannot be made into ornaments unless it is mixed with traces of baser metals, the world cannot come into existence without *māyā*. The simultaneous existence of good and evil is to be counteracted through good as far as possible. But the ultimate solution is to transcend both good and evil by rising to supreme spiritual heights where everything is levelled in God. Then neither good nor evil is recognized, just as it is impossible to notice the difference in the heights of tall trees or clusters of grass when one is flying high in the sky.

## CAUSE OF DISAGREEMENT

Finally, a word about why there is so much disagreement and difference among the various philosophical systems and religions. Sri Ramakrishna tackles this question from two standpoints: the subjective and the objective. Through the well-known story of the blind men and the elephant, he tells us that when people get an incomplete or imperfect view of God and preach it as the whole truth, conflicts are bound to appear. This is from the subjective standpoint. From the objective standpoint, he says that God is so great that none can

comprehend Him fully. He alone knows what all He is. Brahman or God is the one thing that has not become 'ucchiṣṭa' (food tasted and left over) since none has till now fully described Him. Any attempt to size Him up with our limited intellect and describe Him through our limited speech will be as futile as the efforts of the salt-doll that wanted to gauge the depths of the sea! Hence, even when people who have had genuine and complete spiritual experience try to describe Him (who is really indescribable), their descriptions are bound to fall far short of the ideal and are also apt to be different from one another.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion we can safely assert that Sri Ramakrishna's experiences and utterances, though similar in many respects to the traditional Vedānta, have much more in them that can form the subject matter for a fascinating study, unravelling new vistas of Vedānta. After all, this is how our Sanātana Dharma has grown over the millennia!

# Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahamsopaniṣad

## Introduction

Upaniṣads are the basic scriptures of many of the Indian philosophical systems. Though there are a good number of Upaniṣads that go by different names and with different types of teachings, Hindu tradition has always considered them—from the doctrinal point of view at least—as one unit.

The word 'Upaniṣad' has been interpreted as the secret and sacred teaching that a disciple has received while sitting near (*upa* = near) his spiritual preceptor at his feet (*ni* = below), which teaching destroys his ignorance, loosens his bonds and leads him to the highest Truth (*sad* = to destroy, to loosen, to lead to).

Since our modern times are characterized by a craze for stylish abbreviations (e. g., UNO, NAM or DNA) a similar interpretation may be attempted here: Upaniṣad is that scripture which is like sweet drinking water (*U* = *Udaka* = water) for one who is awfully thirsty in this desert of a world; which helps one, like an axe (*PA* = *Paraśu* = axe), to cut down the tree of transmigration; which gives the shelter of a sweet home (*NI* = *Nilaya* = home) to the tired traveller of worldly life; and, ultimately destroys (*SAD* = to destroy) his primeval ignorance.

The teachings of Sri Ramakrishna fit in very well with all theses definitions or interpretations. Hence they have been designated as 'Upaniṣad' here and presented in a systematic manner.

### Peace Chant

ॐ सह नाववतु । सह नौ भुनक्तु । सह वीर्यं करवावहै ।  
तेजस्वि नावधीतमस्तु मा विद्विषावहै ॥  
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

*Om saha nāvavatu. saha nau bhunaktu.  
saha vīryam karavāvahai. tejasvi nāvadhītamastu,  
mā vidviṣāvahai. Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ.*

'May He protect us both (the teacher and the disciple) together (by revealing knowledge). May He nourish us both (by vouchsafing the results of knowledge). May we attain vigour together. Let what we study, be invigorating. May we not cavil at each other.'

Om! Peace! Peace! Peace!

### Special Feature

अथ श्रीरामकृष्णपरमहंसोपनिषदं व्याख्यास्यामः ।  
सैऽषाऽपरोक्षानुभवरूढा साधनप्रधाना च ॥ १ ॥

*atha śrīrāmakṛṣṇaparamahāṃsopaniṣadam  
vyākhyāsyāmah. saiṣā aparokṣānubhava-rūḍhā  
sādhanapradhānā ca.*

1. Now, we shall expound the *Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahamsopaniṣad*. This (Upaniṣad) is rooted in direct spiritual experience and is heavily oriented towards *sādhana* or spiritual practice.

## COMMENTS

This then is its special feature. Sri Ramakrishna taught out of the fulness of direct spiritual experience obtained mainly through *vyākulatā* or intense longing to see God. He did not undergo the orthodox or traditional modes of spiritual practices before his first vision of the Divine Mother. He practised them abundantly later, just to get confirmed, the highest mystic experience he had already got. Since his 'mouth speaketh out of the fulness of the heart' his teachings are refreshingly simple and immensely practicable.

## Twofold Brahman

निर्गुणं निराकारं च परं ब्रह्म । तदेव भक्तजनानां  
शीतलभक्तेः प्रभावात् सगुणाः साकारः  
परमेश्वरो भवति, हिममिव जलात् शैत्यात् । स  
एव परमेश्वरो निखिल-जगदन्तर्यामी च ॥ २ ॥

*nirguṇam nirākāram ca param brahma. tadeva  
bhaktajanānām śītalabhakteḥ prabhāvāt saguṇaḥ  
sākāraḥ paramēśvaro bhavati, himamiva jalāt śaityāt.  
sa eva paramēśvaro nikhilajagadantaryāmī ca.*

2. The Supreme Brahman is without attributes or form. The same becomes the Supreme Lord (or God) with form and attributes due to the cooling effect of the devotees, even as ice forms itself out of water due to intense cold. This very Supreme Lord is also the indwelling Spirit of the whole world.

### COMMENTS

Advaita Vedānta of the orthodox variety posits two aspects of Brahman, the Nirguṇa and the Saguṇa, the latter being considered as inferior to the former. Obviously, Sri Ramakrishna does not subscribe to this view. It is the *same* Brahman, whether it is Saguṇa or Nirguṇa. The way of description of the Saguṇa evolving out of the Nirguṇa is unique. Incidentally, it should be noted that the devotees of God have been given an equally important place as that of the men of knowledge, in the philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna.

### Aspects of Saguṇa Brahman

राम-कृष्ण-शिव-विष्णु-गाङ्-अल्ला-इत्यादि-विविध-  
नामभिर्निर्दिष्टं परं तत्त्वमपि स एव । स एव लक्ष्मी-दुर्गा-  
काली-सरस्वतीत्यादि-देवीनामभिरपि निर्दिश्यते ॥ ३ ॥

*rāma-kṛṣṇa-śiva-viṣṇu-gāṅgā-allā-ityādi-vividha-nāmabhir  
nirdiṣṭam param tattvamapi sa eva. sa eva lakṣmī-  
durgā-kālī-sarasvatītyādi-devī-nāmabhirapi nirdiśyate.*

3. He, verily, is the Supreme Principle that is designated by various names such as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa. Śiva, Viṣṇu, God and Allah. It is He again who is alluded to by the various names of goddesses such as Lakṣmī, Durgā, Kālī, Sarasvatī and so on.

### COMMENTS

This is not only an echo but also an extension of the Ṛgvedic dictum: *ekam sad, viprā bahudhā vadanti*, 'Truth is One, sages call It by various names.' The various deities of the Hindu pantheon are all different forms or aspects of the same Parameśvara or Supreme Lord, even as the various dolls made of chocolate are all chocolate only and taste sweet. This should dispel all misgivings that Hinduism is a polytheistic religion.

### Concept of Śakti (Goddess)

व्यवहारदशायां यत्र पुरुषोऽज्ञो द्वैतमिव पश्यति  
तदा काल्यादिदेव्यः परस्यैव ब्रह्मणः शक्तय  
इति मन्तव्यम् । दाहिकाशक्तिर्यथाऽग्नेः ।  
वस्तुतस्तु तयोरत्यन्तमभेद एव ॥ ४ ॥

*vyavahāradaśāyām yatra puruṣo'jño dvaitamiva  
paśyati tadā kālyādi- devyaḥ parasyaiva brahmaṇaḥ  
śaktaya iti mantavyam. dāhikāśaktir yathāgneḥ.  
vastutastu tayoratyantamabheda eva.*

4. In practical life, where a person, due to ignorance of (the Truth) sees as it were the world of duality, then, (in that state), he should understand that the goddesses like Kālī and others, are all-like the burning power of fire—power of the Supreme Brahman. In reality there is absolutely no difference between them.

#### COMMENTS

What baffles one, who is not conversant with the Hindu philosophical systems based on the Vedas, is not only the apparent polytheism of the Hindus but also their worship of God in male-female pairs.

Ultimately the entire universe of multiplicity is nothing but Brahman. So, it is basically one substance, one power. If multiplicity is being perceived, it is because of ignorance, technically called 'ajñāna,' 'avidyā,' or 'māyā.' As long as this state of ignorance lasts and one sees duality as a matter of course, one naturally conceives of God also from that angle. Since such concepts proceed from the seen to the unseen or from the known to the unknown, the unseen or the unknown being conceived in the light of the seen and the known, it is but natural that the concept of a God and His Śakti or female counterpart has evolved in the human society over the centuries. Lest this duality be considered permanent, Sri Ramakrishna time and again, has pointed out the basic oneness between the Deity

and His Śakti using such similes as fire and its burning power, milk and its whiteness, snake at rest and snake in motion and so on.

### Goal of Life

परमेश्वरदर्शनमेव मानवजीवनस्य चरमेदेशः ।  
 तथैव मुक्तेः साध्यत्वात् । परमेश्वरस्तु द्रष्टुं  
 स्पष्टं च शक्यः । तेन सहालापोऽपि साध्यः ।  
 सर्वे धर्माः समानास्तमेव गमयन्ति च ॥ ५ ॥

*parameśvaradarśanameva mānavajīvanasya  
 caramoddeśah. tathaiiva mukteḥ sādhyatvāt.  
 parameśvarastu draṣṭum spraṣṭum ca śakyah.  
 tena sahālāpo'pi sādhyah. sarve dharmāḥ samānās  
 tameva gamayanti ca.*

5. Realization of the Supreme Lord is the ultimate goal of human life, because it is thus that a person can attain liberation. The Supreme Lord, however, can be seen, can be touched. It is even possible to talk to Him. All religions are equal and it is Him that they reveal.

### COMMENTS

The Hindu value system puts forward four goals for human life and calls them 'puruṣārathas' (ends to be sought for by man). They are: dharma (virtue), artha (wealth and possessions), kāma (pleasures of the flesh) and mokṣa (final beatitude). Though wealth

and pleasure have been given the status of a goal of life, as a concession to human weaknesses, it is mokṣa that is the real or ultimate goal of life. Mokṣa or liberation from transmigratio, can best be attained, according to Sri Ramakrishna, by devotion to Personal God, the Supreme Lord of the universe. This God is not an airy being nor a mere conjecture of mythology. He is *real* and can be seen in the highest states of mystical experiences. Not only that, one can even talk to Him, even touch him! Hundreds of mystics all over the world, throughout human history, have vouched for this.

It is this God that all religions talk about or preach, though the language and the modes of teaching naturally differ. Consequently all religions are equal in the final analysis. They are equal in another sense also: Anyone who follows his religion sincerely gets the same ultimate mystic experience which is ineffable. Sri Ramakrishna discovered this by direct experience after following these diverse paths himself.

### Paths to Perfection

अपि तु मायाजवनिकाच्छत्रः सः सुखेन  
 द्रष्टुं न लभ्यः । कामकाञ्चनकामनैव माया ।  
 तदपगमे सः स्वयमेवाविर्भवति मेघापायेऽशुमानिव ।  
 ज्ञानमिश्रितभक्तिश्च मायानाशोपायः ।  
 स एव सर्वमित्यतो दीन-दरिद्र-रोगि-अज्ञादीनां

नारायणदृष्ट्या सेवाऽपि अद्यतनकालेऽनुत्त-  
मोपायश्चित्तशुद्धिद्वारा तं साक्षात्कर्तुम् ॥ ६ ॥

*api tu māyājavanīkācchannah sa sukhena draṣṭum  
na labhyaḥ. kāmakāñcanakāmanaiva māyā.  
tadapagame saḥ svayamevāvirbhavati meghāpaye  
amśumaniva. jñānamīśritabhaktiśca māyānāśopāyah.  
sa eva sarvamityato dīna-daridra-rogi-ajñādīnām  
nārāyaṇadr̥ṣṭyā sevāpi adyatanakāle anuttamopāyaś  
cittaśuddhidvārā taṁ sāksātkartum.*

6. But, being veiled by the screen of māyā, He is not easily beheld. Lust and lucre, are themselves māyā. When that disappears, He automatically reveals Himself, even as the sun reveals himself when the clouds (hiding him) depart. Devotion associated with knowledge, is the means of dispelling māyā. Since God is all, service to the downtrodden, the poor, the sick and the ignorant, by seeing Him in them, is also an excellent path suited to these days, to realize Him, through purity of mind (wrought out by this service).

#### COMMENTS

It is true that God is our inmost Self. And yet, we cannot easily behold Him. Why? Because, the screen of māyā is hiding Him. Suppose a person is standing very near to us; but if he is covering his face with a towel, we cannot see him. Similarly, māyā acts like a screen hiding the face of the Lord from us.

What is this māyā? Sri Ramakrishna says that lust for the flesh and thirst for the lucre is itself māyā. Vedānta says that māyā hides the real nature of God and makes Him appear as this attractive world. This world of temptations, in the ultimate analysis, is nothing but 'woman and gold' as Sri Ramakrishna puts it. The *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* (verse 15) describes this world as *hiraṇmaya-pātra* or a golden disc, hiding the face of Truth. Hence, for all practical purposes, this world of lust and lucre is māyā. Once this māyā is set aside or transcended, God, the inner Self, automatically reveals Himself.

For dispelling this māyā two well-known sādhanās or modes of spiritual disciplines have been prescribed in our scriptures: jñāna and bhakti. In the path of jñāna or knowledge, the spiritual aspirant is strongly advised to eschew all actions, since actions are rooted in a sense of duality, are motivated by desires and bind through their results. Not only that, he is expected to deny even his own body and mind and assert that he is the pure spirit! On the other hand, in the path of bhakti or devotion to God, the aspirant has to surrender himself to God who alone can and will, dispel his māyā and give him salvation (vide *Gītā* 7. 14).

Thus, these two paths, stressing self-effort on the one hand and divine grace on the other, seem to be diametrically opposed to each other. Of course, one may try to resolve this enigma by arguing that

they are meant for different types of aspirants. Even then, due to immaturity, one following the path of jñāna may become a dry egoist, whereas the other, following the path of bhakti may degenerate into a sentimentalist or a hysteric. Sensing this danger, Sri Ramakrishna has advocated what he calls '*jñāna-miśritā bhakti*' or devotion tempered with knowledge. Nāma-japa or repetition of the divine name, vyākūlatā or intense longing to see Him are the most important elements of bhakti which he strongly recommended. Vicāra or discrimination that God alone is real and the world is not because of its transient nature, vairāgya or detachment towards all objects of the world with the idea that they belong to God—these are the elements of jñāna which he enjoined upon the aspirants with equal vigour. This balanced combination of jñāna and bhakti is the best means of dispelling māyā.

Sri Ramakrishna has also added a new dimension to the philosophy of sādhanā or spiritual discipline by propounding the doctrine of sevā (service) to the jīva (the individual soul) with the attitude of serving Śiva (God) Himself. If the same Brahman or Ātman or God exists in the hearts of all beings, then, serving the downtrodden, the poor, the afflicted, with the feeling that one is serving the Lord in them, raises the act of service from a merely social undertaking out of compassion, into a spiritual act of sādhanā. Here again, seeing the

Universal Self is a part of jñāna and serving with feeling is a part of bhakti. This type of sādhanā suits the modern temperament admirably.

### Be Free

कथञ्चित् तं ज्ञात्वा दृष्ट्वा स्पृष्ट्वा भवबन्धनाद्  
विमुक्ता भवत । विमुक्ता भवतेत्युपनिषत् ॥

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥ ७ ॥

*kathañcit taṁ jñātvā dr̥ṣṭvā spr̥ṣṭvā bhavabandhanād  
vimuktā bhavata. vimuktā bhavatetyupaniṣat.*

*Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ.*

7. Somehow, having known Him, seen Him and touched Him, be free from the shackles of transmigratory existence! Be free! This is the Upaniṣad (the sacred and profound teaching)!

### COMMENTS

According to the Hindu religious works, a living being gets birth in a human body after passing through 84,00,000 births in different kinds of wombs of different species. Hence, human birth is considered a rare privilege. Cherishing the desire for liberation from transmigration is rarer still since an overwhelming majority of human beings are interested only in sense pleasures. Securing the company and spiritual guidance of an enlightened soul is the rarest opportunity in life. Hence those who have secured all these three blessings should leave no stone unturned till the *summum bonum* of life reached.

OM! PEACE! PEACE! PEACE!

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