

Sri Ramakrishna : The Real Image of A Man

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Once Sri Ramakrishna asked his famous devotee, Girish Ghose, ‘Girish, what have you found in me that you are going about telling others that I am a Divine Incarnation?’ Girish replied, ‘What can I say about him whom even the sages, Vyàsa and Vālmiki, could not describe in words?’ That makes me also think—what can I say about him who was an embodiment of the unfathomable, infinite Divine? I am a humble servant of the servants of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna and it is for His service and empowered by His grace that I will now venture to say a few words.

Swami Vivekananda called Sri Ramakrishna the greatest of all Divine Incarnations. Why did he call him so? In a mythological drama once Mother Earth was weeping. Someone asked, ‘Mother, why are you crying?’ She replied, ‘So many evil deeds are taking place on my bosom. My children have fallen from the right track and are engaged in sinful acts. That is why I am crying and praying to God, “O God please come and show my children the right path.”’

There are times in the history of mankind when everything becomes chaotic. Man gets lost being unable to find the right way and fails to discriminate between good and evil, right and wrong. According to the Hindus, at such times God appears on earth to show mankind the right path. He bears grief, pain, disease and sorrow just like us and behaves entirely like an ordinary human being. Yet everything about Him is extraordinary. Why does He assume a human body? According to Sir Humphrey Davy, divine truth must be made human truth to be appreciated by us. If He had appeared with all His splendour and glory the ordinary humans would have become scared and would tend to run away in fear. This is what happened to Arjuna when he saw the universal form of the Divine. Sri Ramakrishna said, ‘A Divine Incarnation is like the morning sun at which we can stare. But we cannot stare at the midday sun. God assumes a soft attitude and hides His splendour and power when He appears as an Incarnation.’

Some other religions do not accept this doctrine of Incarnations. The Christians talk about the original sin, which was committed by disobeying God. Allured by the Satan, Adam and Eve, the first man and woman created by God, ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, ignoring God’s injunction. God banished them from paradise and made them take birth on earth. Since then mankind has been suffering so much. Jesus appeared in this world to redeem man from that sin. Jesus was the Son of God and the ‘only begotten son’ according to the Christians. He died on the cross in order to save mankind from all the sins they had committed.

Mohammed also came to dispel the darkness of ignorance in which the Arabs were immersed, having misunderstood the true meaning of religion. Thereafter Sri Chaitanya, the Incarnation of Love appeared along with Nanak and Kabir enlightening the whole of India. With their power of love they wiped off the difference between man and man. In Shankaracharya we see the glory of divine intellect. But a sort of vacuum exists if stress is laid only on intellect. Love is also necessary. Swamiji said: Now the world needed someone in whom the knowledge of Shankaracharya and the love of Sri Chaitanya would be manifested in unison, in whom Shankara’s brain and Chaitanya’s heart as well as Buddha’s love would be combined together. That is why came Sri Ramakrishna, a combined manifestation of Shankara, Chaitanya and Buddha as well as Ràma and Krishna.

Sri Ramakrishna himself said, ‘He, who was Ràma, He, who was Krishna, is now manifested as

Ramakrishna but this time He has come in disguise, just as the king sometimes goes out to survey his kingdom in disguise to see for himself the condition of his subjects.’ Sri Ramakrishna was also the King, the King of kings. He was God Himself. He came in disguise in a most humble form to see the plight of His created beings and to help them overcome their sufferings. He said, ‘I saw Satchidànanda come out of this sheath (Sri Ramakrishna’s body) and proclaim “I incarnate myself in every age.” I saw it was the fullest manifestation of Satchidànanda but this time the Divine Power is expressed through the glory of sattva.’ God was fully manifested in Sri Ramakrishna but we see in him the domination of sattva.

Sri Ràmachandra and Sri Krishna had physical prowess as well as royal splendour. In other words, they were endowed with a predominance of rajas. But this time he had neither the bow nor arrows of Sri Ràmachandra nor the disc of Sri Krishna. He also had neither the princely wealth of Buddha nor the wealth of scholarship of Shankara or Chaitanya. This time it was the wealth of graceful renunciation. This time it was the power of purity, truthfulness and humility, which are the characteristics of sattva guna.

A condensed expression of all ideals

Nevertheless, the essential characteristics of all the other Incarnations were all present in him. The other Incarnations showed one or two ideals for the mankind to follow. For example, Sri Ràmachandra showed his grit for truthfulness. He played his role, living in the forest, slaying Ràvana, and giving up Sità and Lakshmana—all for the sake of establishing truthfulness and righteousness. Similarly, the detachment of Sri Krishna, non-violence of Buddha, love of Jesus, divine ecstasy of Sri Chaitanya, non-dualism of Shankaracharya, all were manifested separately in them. They did not propagate the unified form of religion, perhaps because it was not necessary at those times. But we see in Sri Ramakrishna not a particular ideal or some certain ideals, but a condensed expression of all these ideals.

The characteristics of all Divine Incarnations were present in him. There is a devotional song that says: Sri Ramakrishna is the sum total of Sri Ràmachandra, Sri Krishna, Buddhadeva, Shankaracharya, Ramanuja, Sri Chaitanya, Kabir and Nanak. We can add the names of Jesus and Mohammed to this list. Each of their ideals was expressed through him. In the words of Swamiji, Sri Ramakrishna was endowed with limitless perceptions and views. Even the knowledge of Brahman might have a limit but no one could draw a limit to the versatility of Sri Ramakrishna. That is why Swamiji called him the greatest of all Divine Incarnations.

Swami Vivekananda has not belittled other Incarnations. The same God appears from time to time. The Incarnations who are known to have appeared so far, are not different from each other. The only difference is in the manifestation of their powers. God comes with that much power which is necessary for a particular age. So they must be judged from the standpoint of the purpose for which they made their appearance. From that point of view, none of them is less than the others, the contribution of none is small. But Swamiji has analysed the history and showed that in every subsequent Incarnation, God has manifested Himself a little more. That is, each Incarnation has come with a little more power than his predecessor. The advent of Sri Ramakrishna was to cater for the need of the age. To satisfy that requirement the highest Divine Power was expressed through him. Swamiji said, ‘Sri Ramakrishna, the Divine Incarnation of our age was more complete compared to the Incarnations of other times. He was endowed with all kinds of divine feelings and he assisted mankind with all levels of spiritual knowledge.’ He was the only person in the history of religion who made possible this unification through his life. We already knew from the Upanishad: *ekam sad viprà vahudhà vadanti*, ‘Truth is one

but the wise men call it in various names.’ But so long it was only a theory, which took a real shape for the first time in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. He went through all paths, experimented with all faiths and proved by his life that numerous are the ways to God and all paths are true. His doctrine—‘there are as many ways as there are faiths’—is not merely a phrase. It is the Truth personally realized by him. This is where Sri Ramakrishna stands out as the greatest Incarnation of God.

Swamiji once wrote to one of his disciples, ‘No other noble person has ever been endowed with such an exalted character as that of Sri Ramakrishna.’ He also wrote to Swami Shivananda, ‘Brother, one can never realize what’s written in the Vedas, Vedantas, Puranas and Bhàgavatam unless one studies Sri Ramakrishna. He was the living commentary on the Vedas and their aim. He had lived in one life the whole cycle of the national religious existence in India.’ To Swami Ramakrishnananda he wrote, ‘He was the embodiment of all past religious thoughts of India. His life alone made me understand what the shastras really meant and the whole plan and scope of the old shastras.’ Romain Rolland said, ‘Sri Ramakrishna was the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people.’

We find in Kathàmrita (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna) that Sri Ramakrishna has raised the topic of Divine Incarnations quite often. At those times the educated people (educated in the Western way) did not believe that God had ever appeared on earth in a human form. Swami Vivekananda was also in this group. He did not even accept the possibility of a God-incarnate in man, not to speak of regarding the Master as such. He used to say, ‘God is infinite. We cannot even say that anything or any person we see is a part of God. How can infinity have parts? How can we set a limit to the limitless? It is not possible that God, who is beyond all limits, would limit Himself within a human body and sport as a God-incarnate.’ But the Master says, ‘However great and infinite God may be, his essence can and does manifest itself through man by his mere will. He does incarnate Himself through a human body. He undoubtedly is present in all beings but man’s yearning is not satisfied unless he sees God in a human form. We need an Incarnation in order to learn from him. He descends to this world to spread pure love and knowledge.

How to yearn for God

By seeing Sri Ramakrishna we learn how to yearn for God, how to weep for Him, how to depend on Him and to acquire the qualities of renunciation, love, forbearance, simplicity and modesty. These qualities are the essence of religion. Ritualistic worship, observing vows, rules, fast, etc. are, no doubt, helpful to lead a spiritual life. But the essence of spirituality is love, purity, knowledge, mental control, forgiveness, magnanimity and renunciation. We shall declare him a God-incarnate in whom we shall find these qualities to the highest extent. In fact, it is the Power of God that incarnates Itself. Fire, as an element, is present more in wood than in any other object. If you seek God, then seek Him in man. He manifests Himself more in man than in any other thing. The sun sends its rays to all waters but it is reflected more clearly in that particular water which is calm, clean, pure and free of moss and weeds. Likewise, the person in whom we find the utmost modesty, greatest purity and the deepest spirit of renunciation, love and devotion, should be regarded as the highest manifestation of God and a Divine Incarnation.

Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘If you find a man full of ecstatic love, overflowing with prema, mad after God, intoxicated with his love, then know for certain that God has incarnated Himself through that man. By touching the horns, legs or the tail of a cow we actually touch the cow itself, but for us the essential substance of a cow is her milk, which comes through the udder. If a man goes to the Ganges and touches its water he will say, “I just saw and touched the Ganges.” To say this it is not necessary for

him to touch the whole length of the river from Hardwar to Gangasagar.’ Everything necessary for a man in the world of religion is found in the Divine Incarnation.

Sri Ramakrishna’s parables

In the spiritual history of the world it is commonly seen that great teachers have made use of stories with a moral purport for the enlightenment of the masses. The parables of Sri Ramakrishna fall in the category of this method, which he has used extensively all his life to impart to human beings the wisdom he gained in the long years of his intense spiritual practice.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, the stumbling-block between a man and God is the former’s egoism, ie I-consciousness. He used to say, ‘I’ and ‘Mine’—that is ignorance. True knowledge makes one feel: O God You alone do everything. You alone are my own. And to You alone belong houses, buildings, family, relatives, friends, and the whole world. All is yours. But ignorance makes one feel, “I am doing everything. All these things are mine.” Once a teacher was explaining this to his disciple. ‘God alone and no one else is your own. Come away with me.’ The disciple said, ‘But, Revered Sir, my mother, my wife and my other relatives take very good care of me. How much they love me! How can I leave them?’ The teacher said, ‘You are mistaken. Presently I will show you that nobody is your own. Take these few pills with you. When you go home swallow them and lie down on the bed. People will think you are dead. But you will remain conscious and will see and hear everything happening around you. Then I shall visit your home.’ The disciple followed the instructions. He took the pills and lay down on his bed. He appeared to have died. His mother, wife and other relatives began to cry. Just then the teacher came in the guise of a physician and asked the cause of their grief. When they had told him everything, he told them, ‘Here is a medicine for him. It will bring him back to life. But I must tell you one thing. This medicine must first be taken by one of his relatives and then given to him. But the relative who takes it first will die. I see his mother, his wife and other relatives here. Certainly one of you will volunteer to take the medicine. Then the young man will come back to life.’ At once everybody stopped crying and began to think. The mother said, ‘If I die, who will take care of this big household? I have a few more children. Who will take care of them?’ The wife was weeping bitterly too. With the medicine in her hand she said, ‘He has met his fate. If I die what will happen to my children? Who will keep them alive? How can I take the medicine?’ In the meantime the disciple had got over the effect of the pills. He was now convinced that nobody was really his own. He jumped out of his bed and left the place with his teacher. The Guru told him. ‘There is only one whom you may call your own and that is God.’

Speaking on the importance of the Guru’s grace he told the story of a flock of goats and a tiger cub and concluded that there can be no fear if the Guru’s grace descends on one. He will let you know who you are and what your true nature is.

Sri Ramakrishna often spoke about the futility of acquiring book knowledge without developing discrimination between the Real and the Unreal. To highlight this truth he used to tell the story of a boatman and a scholar who knew no swimming. ‘What will a man gain by knowing many scriptures? The one thing needful is to know how to cross the river of the worldly existence. God alone is real and all else is illusory,’ he added.

In order to teach how to live a detached life in the world, he repeatedly gave the example of a maidservant in a rich man’s house. Do all your duties, Sri Ramakrishna would say, but keep your mind on God. Live with all—your wife and children, father and mother—and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you but know in your heart

that they do not belong to you.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say: By meditating on God in solitude the mind acquires knowledge, dispassion and devotion. But the very same mind goes downward if it dwells in the world. In the world people have only one thought: 'woman and gold'. The term 'woman and gold' has been used repeatedly in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna to designate the two chief impediments to spiritual progress. This favourite expression of the Master, *kāmini-kānchan*, has often been misconstrued. By it he meant only lust and greed, the harmful influence of which checks the aspirant's spiritual growth. He used the word *kāmini* or woman as a concrete term for the sex instinct when addressing his male devotees. Similarly, he advised women spiritual aspirants to avoid the company of men. *Kānchan* or gold [or money, in modern context] symbolizes greed, which is the other obstacle to spiritual life. He never taught his devotees to hate women. He looked upon all women as so many images of the Divine Mother of the universe. At the end of his spiritual practice he literally worshipped his wife as the embodiment of the Divine Mother.

In this context let me narrate an incident that took place at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in America. Swami Sarvagatananda, the former Minister-in-Charge, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, was a chaplain of the MIT for forty years from 1955 to 1995. One MIT student used to come to him quite often for counselling. He was a bright student. After graduating from the MIT he got a job there and then married a nice girl. Swami Sarvagatananda then presented him a copy of The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. They were both interested in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna but they felt uncomfortable whenever they came across the words 'Woman and Gold'. When he told the Swami about this, he told him to read what they liked and ignore the rest.

After a long time Swami Sarvagatananda again met this young man at a meeting organized by the faculty and the chaplains of the MIT. He asked the Swami, 'How many copies of The Gospel have you got?' The Swami laughingly said, 'Why, you want to burn them all?' He said, 'No, I want to distribute them to my friends.' The Swami said, 'Why, what happened?' The young man replied, 'You know there was a seminar some time ago in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The topic was 'The Modern American Trend'. There many psychologists, religious leaders, scientists, professors, and many others had gathered. They talked about many points like Power, Profit, Pleasure, Politics, etc. Finally a social scientist got up and said, 'Many of us in America worship the 'Dollar King and the Sex Queen.' I immediately remembered what Sri Ramakrishna said in The Gospel the same way: 'Woman and Gold'. He then continued to say, 'We in America need the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna more than in India. That is why I am interested to give some copies of The Gospel to my friends.' The Swami gladly gave him as many copies of The Gospel as he could.

Today, man has acquired a tremendous materialistic power. If he cannot rightly utilise it, a total destruction of the world is inevitable. To correctly use this power, it is necessary for him to practise mental control and develop an attitude of love, friendship, fraternity and renunciation. Today the whole mankind is afraid of a possible third World War, which may lead to a nuclear confrontation causing total annihilation of the human civilization. In this atmosphere the world thinkers should now receive the message of Sri Ramakrishna loud and clear. Practise control and renunciation, learn to regard everybody as your own and respect all religions. Practise not only to tolerate, but also to accept the view of others. There are as many ways as there are faiths. Swami Vivekananda says: Now the centre is India. Which India is that? That is the eternal India, which has taken shape in Sri Ramakrishna. The British historian Toynbee says, 'If we do not follow the way of India in this nuclear age, the civilization will come to an end.' The way of India is what Sri Ramakrishna showed to the mankind. It is the way of control, renunciation and purity. The civilization of today is the slave of lust and greed—*kāmini-kānchan*. And Sri Ramakrishna was totally averse to even hearing these two words. He revolted against

them from his very childhood. The message of India is one of renunciation—Tena tyaktena bhunjithà—Tyàgenaike amritatvamànashuh This renunciation is not a negative idea. It means giving up of a small thing for the sake of a bigger thing, giving up a momentary pleasure for a permanent joy. It is renouncing the sense pleasures for the bliss of God-realization. Sri Ramakrishna established that ideal of renunciation and created a new definition of humanity. He declared, 'He is a real man who has consciousness, self-knowledge and attained God realization'. He was the living example of that man. We see in Sri Ramakrishna the real image of a man endowed with beauty, purity, love and selflessness. He left an example for the mankind to follow, as if he said: 'If you want peace and joy, if you want to forget the differences and quarrels, make me your ideal and try to mould yourself in my way.' We do not know about the future but there is no doubt that a new age has started with the advent of Sri Ramakrishna. It may not catch our eyes instantly, but then, the deepest, the most permanent and the noblest deeds are done silently and without publicity. We become enchanted to see the morning flower but we do not see the dew that made it bloom. The influence of Sri Ramakrishna is like that dew. Unnoticed by people he is still engaged in his work silently. Some personalities come with divine power to bring about a radical turn of the history. Sri Ramakrishna was such a personality. Whether we understand it or not, whether we accept it or not, even if we obstruct it, Sri Ramakrishna will continue his work, his message will spread to every corner of the world leading to the consummation of his life's work, for which he appeared in this world.

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