

Sri Ramakrishna (1836 -1886)

Sri Ramakrishna was born Gadadhar Chatterjee in 1836 at Kamarpukur about sixty miles from Calcutta. His parents, Khudiram and Chandramani, were poor and made ends meet with great difficulty. They spent most of their time worshipping their family deity, Raghuvir, whom they looked upon as their patron and protector.

Gadadhar was the pet of the whole village. He was handsome and had a natural gift for the fine arts. He, however, disliked going to school. When asked why he did not want to go to school, his reply was: 'The so-called education is for earning money only; I don't care for this kind of education.' He loved Nature and spent his time in fields and fruit gardens outside the village with his friends. Now and then, he went into ecstasies. A line of white cranes against black monsoon clouds, singing religious songs or acting in a religious drama sent him to ecstasies.

Gadadhar lost his father at the age of seven. He became more serious from now on, but he did not change his ways and habits. For instance, he would not go to school. Instead, he was seen visiting monks who stopped at his village on their way to Puri. He would serve them

and listen with rapt attention to the arguments they often had among themselves over religious issues.

Gadadhar had now attained the age when he should be invested with the sacred thread. When arrangements were nearly complete for this, Gadadhar declared that he would have his first alms as a Brahmin from a certain Sudra woman of the village. This was something unheard of ! Tradition required that it should be a Brahmin and not a Sudra who would give him the first alms. This was pointed out to him but he was adamant. He said he had given his word to the lady and if he did not keep his word, what sort of Brahmin would he be then ? No argument, no appeal, no amount of tears could budge him from his position. Finally, Ramkumar, his eldest brother and now the head of the family, had to give in.

Meanwhile, the family's financial position worsened everyday. Ramkumar ran a Sanskrit school in Calcutta and also served as priest in some families. What he earned was pitifully small and he could not send any money home regularly. He decided to bring Gadadhar to Calcutta. His plan was to try to make him study Sanskrit. Perhaps he could also do some priestly work and make some money of his own. Gadadhar arrived, but he lost no time in making it clear that he was not going to study. He, however, did not mind doing some priestly work, not for money but for the pleasure of it.

About this time, a rich woman of Calcutta, Rani Rashmoni, founded a temple at Dakshineswar. She approached Ramkumar to serve as priest at the temple of Mother Kali and Ramkumar agreed. After some persuasion, Gadadhar agreed to decorate the deity. When Ramkumar retired, Gadadhar took his place as priest.

When Gadadhar started worshipping the deity, he began to ask himself if he was worshipping a piece of stone or a living Goddess. If he was worshipping a living Goddess, why should she not respond to his worship? This question nagged him day and night. Then, he began to pray to Kali, 'Mother, you've been gracious to many devotees in the past and have revealed yourself to them. Why would you not reveal yourself to me, also? Am I not also your son?' He would weep bitterly and sometimes even cry out loudly while worshipping. At night, he would go into a near-by jungle and spend the whole night praying. One day he was so impatient to see Mother Kali that he decided to end his life. He seized a sword hanging on the wall and was about to strike himself with it when he saw light issuing from the deity in waves and he was soon overwhelmed by those waves. He then fell down unconscious on the floor.

Gadadhar was not, however, content with this. He prayed to Mother Kali for more religious experiences. He specially wanted to know what truths other religious systems

taught. Strangely enough, teachers of those systems arrived as and when necessary as if directed by some invisible power, and what is more surprising, he reached the goals of those experiments in no time.

Soon word spread about this remarkable man and people of all denominations and all stations of life began to come to him. From now on he came to be known as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and like a magnet he began to attract real seekers of God. He taught ceaselessly for fifteen years or so through parables, metaphors, songs and above all by his own life the basic truths of religion. He passed away in 1886, leaving behind a devoted band of young disciples headed by the well-known scholar and orator, Swami Vivekananda.

What did Ramakrishna teach ?

1. Ramakrishna taught no creed or dogma. His only concern was man's uplift. According to him there is infinite moral and spiritual potential in man. To develop that potential is man's foremost duty in life. He taught man to strive to develop that potential without wasting time over sense pleasure or religious quibblings.
2. Religions are like so-many paths leading to the same goal, i.e., God. Man reaches his religious goal when he attains his highest moral development.
3. God is both personal and impersonal. It is difficult to conceive an impersonal God. So, to begin with, God

has to be thought of as a person. Can anyone think of the white colour without thinking of a white object ? One can look at the morning sun, but not at the midday sun. Similarly, when God is manifest in a person we know what God is like, otherwise God is impersonal and beyond thought and speech.

4. Be in the world but not of it. Perform your duties as well as you can, but do not count too much upon the fruits of your action. Rather, surrender them to God. Try to feel as if you are only a tool at the hands of God.
5. Religion is an experience. Religion makes no sense unless its truths are experienced. Is your thirst satisfied unless you drink water when you are thirsty ?
6. God is everywhere but He is most manifest in man. So serve man as God. That is as good as worshipping God.

—*Swami Lokeshwarananda*

Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna

- You see many stars in the sky at night, but not when the sun rises. Can you therefore say that there are no stars in the heavens during the day ? O man, because you cannot find God in the days of your ignorance, say not there is no God.

- He is born in vain, who having attained the human birth, so difficult to get, does not attempt to realize God in this very life.
- Seekest thou God ? Then seek Him in man ! His Divinity is manifest more in man than in any other object. Man is the greatest manifestation of God.
- *Jīva* is Shiva (all living beings are God). Who then dare talk of showing mercy to them ? Not mercy, but service, service. For man must be regarded as God.
- There is one whom you may call your own, and that is God.
- I tell you the truth : there is nothing wrong in your being in the world. But you must direct your mind towards God.
- If you say, 'I am a sinner', eternally, you will remain a sinner to all eternity. You ought rather to repeat, 'I am not bound, I am not bound. Who can bind me ? I am the son of God, the king of kings.'
- It is said that truthfulness alone constitutes the spiritual discipline of the *Kaliyuga* (i.e. modern age). If a man clings tenaciously to truth he ultimately realizes God.
- All religions are true. God can be reached by different religions. Many rivers flow by many ways but they fall into the sea. There all are one.
- A truly religious man should think that other religions also are paths leading to truth. We should always maintain an attitude of respect towards other religions.
- Women whether naturally good or not, whether chaste

or unchaste, should always be regarded as images of the Blissful Divine Mother.

- Money can fetch you bread alone. Do not consider it as your sole end and aim.
- He is truly a man to whom money is only a servant; but, on the other hand, those who do not know how to make a proper use of it, hardly deserve to be called men.
- To become great one must be humble. The tree laden with fruit always bends low. So if you wish to be great, be lowly and meek.
- Rainwater never stands on high ground, but runs down to the lowest level. So also the mercy of God remains in the hearts of the lowly, but drains off from those of the vain and the proud.
- The ego that asserts, 'I am the servant of God' is the characteristic of the true devotee. It is the ego of *Vidyā* (Knowledge), and is called the 'ripe' ego.
- Wherein is the strength of a devotee? He is a child of God, and his devotional tears are his mightiest weapon.
- Look at the anvil of a blacksmith—how it is hammered and beaten; yet it moves not from its place. Let men learn patience and endurance from it.
- Visit not miracle-mongers and those who exhibit occult powers. These men are stragglers from the path of Truth.

- Don't find fault with anyone, not even with an insect. As you pray to God for devotion, so also pray that you may not find fault with anyone.
- Purify the spectacles of your mind and you will see that the world is God.
- As the dawn heralds the rising sun, so sincerity, unselfishness, purity, and righteousness precede the advent of the Lord.
- Every man should follow his own religion. A Christian should follow Christianity, and a Mohammedan Mohammedanism. For the Hindu, the ancient path, the path of the Aryan rishis, is the best.
- Dispute not. As you rest firmly in your own faith and opinion, allow others also equal liberty to stand by their own faith and opinion.