

## Ramakrishna of the Heart

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In the Boston Centre, among the many different programmes that we have, quite a number of groups of students from schools and colleges often visit our centre. As part of a regular routine I usually welcome them all, offer them some refreshments, give them a tour of the place, and then speak to them a little about Vedanta, Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda. Sometimes when I take them to our shrine and even before I had any chance to tell them about Sri Ramakrishna, they look at the pictures of Thakur, Ma, and Swamiji on the altar and invariably one or the other student will point to the picture of Thakur and ask—‘Who is that?’

In the beginning, when I was new there, I felt a bit sad and got mildly irritated. But now I am used to that sort of questions and do not get irritated at that sort of actions any longer. Then, however, it struck me that the question—who is Ramakrishna?—is not simply a question that strangers need to ask. Even those of us who consider ourselves as devotees of Sri Ramakrishna need to ask this question. We might think that we know him, know about him, but maybe we don’t. So I think it is important for all of us, no matter how long we have been devotees, to ask the question—‘Who is Ramakrishna?’

This is of course not a new question. Similar questions were asked in the Vedic period as well. We read in one very ancient part of the *Rigveda*—‘...*kasmai devāya havishā vidhema...*’. Even as they did the Vedic *yajnas* (sacrifices) and offered oblations in the fire, the sages still asked

‘*kasmai devāya havishā vidhema*’, that is, ‘who is this being to whom we are making these offerings?’ Asking these kinds of questions helped the Vedic sages to go beyond the superficial layers that cover the Reality and go to the heart of that Reality. Therefore this question—‘who is this person?’—is important.

All spiritual personalities live in two dimensions. There is the historical dimension and there is also the spiritual dimension. The historical dimension is within time and space, while the spiritual dimension is beyond both time and space. We can see that in Indian mythology as well. For instance, in mythology we know Ganesha who is the son of Lord Shiva. That is one way. Shiva is the father and Ganesha is the son. But in some books, specially in Tulsidāsa’s *Rāmāyana* we find that the scene of Shiva’s marriage has been described. And we read that at the time of Shiva’s marriage, the first deity that Shiva worshipped was Ganesha. Apparently, that does not make any sense. But the reason is that Ganesha has two dimensions. There is the spiritual dimension which transcends time—there Ganesha is eternal. But there is also the mythological dimension in which Ganesha is the son of Shiva. In this manner we find all spiritual personalities have these two dimensions—historical as well as spiritual.

So when we think of Sri Ramakrishna of the history, ie his historical dimension, it is possible for us to think about Sri Ramakrishna of the past and Sri Ramakrishna of the present because history is in time. That

is to say, we consider things that happened in the past and then compare them with things that are happening at present.

### How do we meet Ramakrishna?

The question is: How do we meet Ramakrishna? In fact, all of us who are now living were not alive when Ramakrishna lived in flesh and blood, not too far from here. Of course if you believe in re-birth, maybe in some of our past births we had seen him, only we just don't remember it. But at least in this birth none of us has seen him in flesh and blood. In fact, the first introduction to Sri Ramakrishna's life for all of us comes through books. The Ramakrishna that we meet for the first time is through books. We know there are plenty of books about him in all languages. Nevertheless, of the three foundational books one is Master Mahashaya's (Sri Mahendranath Gupta's) *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* in Bengali that has been translated into English as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. The book has been translated pretty much in most languages. The other book is Sri Ramakrishna's biography written by Swami Saradananda under the title *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*. One of the earliest books on his life was *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadever Jivanvrittanta* written by Ramchandra Dutta. So these are the three books. And there are many other books. For instance, we find a lot about Thakur from the Holy Mother Sarada Devi's conversations recorded in *Mayer Katha*, a Bengali book. Then, we know a lot about the Master from the writings and teachings of Swami Vivekananda and also of other direct disciples. So there is plenty of literature which gives us information about Sri Ramakrishna. From these sources we know that Sri Ramakrishna was born at Kamarpukur in 1836. We know about the

wonderful *lilā* of his childhood. We then see that he came to Calcutta and started his life as a priest of the Kali temple in Dakshineswar, the amazing mystical experiences that he had there and later on the coming of his disciples and so on. So we get to know this broad history surrounding the life of Sri Ramakrishna from a series of books. Reading his life educates us. It broadens our intellect and strengthens our emotional well-being. In fact, the first encounter of many of us with Sri Ramakrishna had taken place through a chance reading of some books. Some of you even might still remember which book about Thakur you read first, or who gave you the book to read.

In India, specially in Bengal, it is quite common that we hear about Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda from childhood. But even in distant places such as the United States where I have been living for the last twenty years, many people know exactly the day, the time and the year when someone introduced them to a book on Sri Ramakrishna. And many of them came to Ramakrishna through Christopher Isherwood's *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*. In spite of that, mere reading keeps him separate from us. We know he was a great personality. Some of us see him as a holy person, some as a great saint and many of us worship him as the Incarnation of God or *avatāra*. But still, we know he is separate from us; there lies a big barrier of time of more than a century. Of course, physically all of you, the Calcuttans are closer to Sri Ramakrishna than many others, since both Kamarpukur and Dakshineswar are not very far from this metropolis. But the devotees and students from other parts of the world are very much separated physically from Sri Ramakrishna. The only way to remove this time-lag between Thakur and us

is to somehow bring Ramakrishna of the past into Ramakrishna of the present.

The question, however, is: How do we bring Ramakrishna of the past to Ramakrishna of the present? One most important way of doing that is to start living according to his teachings. It is not enough to appreciate orally what he said or what he did. What we need to do is to look at our own lives and think if the teachings of Thakur inspire me, whether these teachings resonate with my head and heart. If they do, then how can I put them into practice? It is possible that we may not be able to do it perfectly, but even some faltering steps taken in that direction, some attempts to mould our life according to his teachings, will bring great changes in us. We would then suddenly find that Ramakrishna is no more a distant figure. Then he keeps coming very close to us because we have begun to see.

You see, memory belongs to the past. We read some books and then cultivate some knowledge and then comes memory—Oh! that's what he did! We actually start living according to his teachings and then we experience the fruit of living according to his words and the experience is always in the *present*. Memory is of the past. Experience is of the present. So when we experience that joy of practising even a little of his teachings, suddenly Ramakrishna of the past comes right into the present.

One important way of doing this is to modify the way we read books. We read *Kathamrita (The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna)*. Luckily, because it is from Master Mahashaya's diary, we know the exact dates on which certain conversations took place and Master Mahashaya often paints in great details the scenario, the backdrop of these dialogues. But if we read it simply as a historical document, then a thought at the back of our mind will be—

well, this is what Sri Ramakrishna said to his devotees and disciples more than a hundred years ago.

Now we need to change the ordinary style of reading this holy book. One way of changing that would be to study such descriptions that Ramakrishna is sitting on his bed and Naren, Rakhai, Baburam and others are sitting in that room. Now, if we employ a little bit of creative imagination we are free to insert our own names there mentally and say—I am sitting there as well. This thought came to me several years ago when I visited Italy and went on a tour of several churches there. Some of the churches have magnificent paintings, usually depicting different scenes from the life of Jesus. Let us say, Jesus is walking on a street and there are crowds of people. The guide explaining things to us would say pointing to a certain painting: Do you see that person amidst the throng? That person is the one who paid for this painting.

What happened was that there were patrons who paid for these paintings and they requested the painters to put them somewhere when they would paint the crowd scene. That gave them some satisfaction that in a particular event in Jesus' life which might have taken place some two thousand years ago, somehow they are able to see themselves there. Even sometimes the painter put his own figure there just to evoke this kind feeling—'Oh, I was also there at that time.' While viewing the paintings I thought that is something we all can do. Why not? So when we read *Kathamrita* we see Thakur sitting and speaking with Rakhai, Naren and others; we also may put ourselves there. And then the whole thing changes! Then we will no longer see that this was what Thakur spoke only to those people at that time, he is speaking to me as well because I am present in the room. Then suddenly the teaching

becomes very personal. This is how Sri Ramakrishna of the past enters into the present. He becomes more real. So that is another way of bringing effortlessly Sri Ramakrishna of the past into the present, into our very existence.

**The second way**

There is yet another way to see that Sri Ramakrishna is not simply someone who lived many years ago but is still with us in our midst even today. It is to see the *power* that works through the lives of many individuals and also organizations. We certainly know some people who have devoted their lives exceptionally to live according to Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. Such people who have taken Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji's lives seriously become a source of inspiration to us. Such people are present among the devotees, as well as among the sadhus. They continue to inspire us and suddenly we see that Ramakrishna is working in our midst even today! We see this phenomenon in a more powerful, tangible and vibrant way when we see it through organizations that are inspired by his life and teachings. Of course, the Ramakrishna Math and the Mission is the one major organization that proves this point. Indeed, all work that is done all over the world through the Math and the Mission testifies to the fact that the power of Sri Ramakrishna is working. But for that power, none of us would be sitting here today at the Institute of Culture; it would not have simply existed. That all of us are sitting here and share our thoughts, learn and inspire one another—all this has become possible due to the power of Sri Ramakrishna. Even when we look at other smaller organizations, not affiliated with the Order, we discover that the same power has been working in smaller or greater ways. So, in different parts of the world people are found to have been

inspired by his life, and collectively they are doing a lot of good work such as providing medical assistance to the poor and undertaking different kinds of relief activities. We also see orphanages, schools and colleges are maintained by such organizations, especially the Mission where good quality of education is provided. All these things have become possible because of the power of Sri Ramakrishna. In fact, Swami Vivekananda said that the Math and the Mission together is the visible body of Sri Ramakrishna. That is the form in which Sri Ramakrishna lives amongst us today. These are the different ways that convince us that Sri Ramakrishna is not a very ancient figure of the past; he is in our midst even today.

We cannot really see Ramakrishna of the past and Ramakrishna of history. We can know about Ramakrishna of the past through books. But Ramakrishna of the present we can see when we observe the power working through various organizations, especially the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission and their myriad branch centres. Through their activities we are able to sense him. But yet we cannot see him. He apparently has come very close to us and yet until we see him we do not really feel satisfied. Let us say, someone has never visited Kashmir or seen the Himalayas and you give him a nice picture-book on the Himalayas. That might give him or her some ideas about the Himalayas, but still that will not prove very satisfying until and unless he himself goes and sees the Himalayan beauty and its towering expanse. Similarly, Ramakrishna of the past can come into the Ramakrishna of the present, but we want Ramakrishna of the present even closer—not just the kind of a generic presence, but immediate presence.

The question is: How can Ramakrishna come here right now? Where can I see him? Where can I actually get in touch with him at

this very moment? The answer is, that can happen not by looking outside, not by looking into books, not by looking into the power of Ramakrishna working in the world outside, but by looking deeply inside our own heart.

Ramakrishna of the books can inspire us, Ramakrishna of the present can goad us into actions. *But it is only Ramakrishna of the heart who can free us, who can give us moksha, mukti or liberation.* So, as devotees of Ramakrishna, it is not enough to simply read a lot about him, it is not enough to attend lectures and retreats, it is not enough to simply keep on talking about him. It is also not enough to do a lot of voluntary activities. All these are good and helpful, but if I want to experience Thakur truly and directly, then that experience can only occur in our hearts. So we need to find the real Ramakrishna, the real Thakur in our hearts.

#### Heart in Vedanta

The heart is often mentioned in the Vedanta texts. The Upanishads speak of the heart as a deep, inaccessible place. So the spiritual teachers oftentimes ask their disciples to meditate on the *Ishta* or Chosen Deity in the heart. But where is this heart really? We know its general location. But the only heart that we are aware of is the biological heart or anatomical heart. It is very difficult to think of Sri Ramakrishna sitting in that heart, for, in the first place, there is not enough space there and, secondly, it is just filled with blood. So it is very difficult to imagine that Thakur is sitting there.

However, we also know that the heart is not simply the organ that pumps and purifies blood. But besides the pumping of the blood there is another heart that we have—the heart that is the seat of emotions. That is why we often use such phrases as ‘with a deep heart’, or ‘with a heavy heart’. We know that when we become emotional and

sentimental we just feel something here. Therefore the second heart that we have is the emotional heart. The emotional heart and the physical heart are not one and the same, although they are located in the same area. This is not the end of the story since we have one more heart besides these two. That is *the spiritual heart*. The Upanishads again and again refer to this spiritual heart and call it a *guhā* or cave. The cave of the heart is the spiritual heart. There is also a reference to this heart in the *Gītā*.

What we read in books is that this spiritual heart is closed in most of the people. It is like this. If someone has never been to this Institute of Culture and if someone tells him that it is in the Golpark area of Calcutta, what happens? Even if I know the general location of the Institute, I would still have to go and search to find the exact address. Similarly, we have a general idea of where all these hearts are located. Of course, if you touch the physical heart you feel it is beating. Also we may become conscious of the emotional heart at times when we are able to feel our emotions here. But the spiritual heart eludes us so long as we do not become aware of it. Till then we may not be able to find that spiritual heart because that is exactly where the real *Ishta*, our real object of meditation, our real Thakur is hidden. That is why when we try to meditate we are often asked to shut out all other sensory data coming from the external world. One simple way to do this of course is to sit in a quiet place and close our eyes and ears so that all the sights and sounds are shut off. So we try to keep aside all the sensory data so that we may have the freedom to look inside. Ideally we should be able to find Sri Ramakrishna sitting there because he is already sitting there. But often, when everything is closed, we see nothing but darkness. What do we do then? Then the next best thing to do is to think about Sri Ramakrishna. However, we should note that

when we use the words—‘meditating on Thakur’, we do not use it in the most accurate sense because meditation, in the true sense of the term, really means *seeing*. So meditating on Thakur means seeing Thakur. However, the problem is that when I close my eyes and see only darkness and not Thakur, then what should I do? Then we say the next best thing we can do is to think about him.

You see, if your friend is living far away and you remember him, then you can think about your friend. But suppose you invite your friend to your home and you are sitting in front of each other across the table having tea or coffee, then you do not say—‘Let us close our eyes and think about each other’. There is no need to think about each other. It is ridiculous because you are right in front of your friend. You just open your eyes and see your friend. So we keep saying that if God is sitting in our heart, why do we have to think about God? *We just have to see God!*

The problem is we do not see Him. Thinking is of course helpful, but thinking is not meditation. The human mind is often described in the Yoga literature as a lake. If we go to the ocean you find the water on top is turbulent and full of waves because there is a lot of disturbance. But as you dive deeper inside the water and go to the bottom of the sea, you discover that the water is clear and quiet. Our mind is somewhat like that. That is why Sri Ramakrishna used to sing a beautiful song very often—‘doob doob doob rup sāgare āmar mon’—‘Dive deep, O mind, dive deep in the Ocean of God’s Beauty....’ Therefore we have to dive deep inside our own mind. Only when we dive deep inside, that is where you will find that quiet mind.

The analogy of sleep sometimes helps. Sometimes you say, it is evening; I had my dinner and now I am going to sleep. But we cannot will ourselves into sleep. The best thing we can do is to find a comfortable bed, switch off the light, try not to get worried

about anything and then wait. Then somehow sleep comes. So sleep is something that *happens*. It is something we cannot control. None of us knows the exact moment we fall into sleep. We never know it. If you say, I am going to note the time I am going to sleep, you will never be able to find it; suddenly sleep will overtake you. So sleep is something that happens. In exactly the same way, meditation is something that happens. All that we can do is to think. And when you start thinking about Sri Ramakrishna or your *Ishta*, whoever he might be, your mind becomes more focused and you are able to keep all other thoughts away. Suddenly, at some point, none of us knows when, and how, your *thinking* will stop and *seeing* will begin. So thinking intensely about Sri Ramakrishna or your *Ishta* is very important. But it is good not to mistake it for meditation. In fact the *japa* that we do, the *mantra* that many of us have, is very useful, a very powerful tool to keep our mind fixed on our *Ishta*. And that practice at some point matures into meditation. That is why I have seen that many of our elderly swamis will never even say they are going to meditate. They will say, ‘Now it is time for me to go and sit’.

Well, that is what we really do. We sit in one place and try to think about our *Ishta*, and hope that when our concentration becomes deep suddenly, at some point, thinking will stop and seeing will begin. Moreover, when I will actually see Sri Ramakrishna in my heart, time will come to a standstill. There is then no more separation from him in space and time. That is the real form of Sri Ramakrishna if you like.

In the beginning we ask ourselves a number of questions such as: What is the goal of my life? Why is it that I like to read books on Sri Ramakrishna? Why is it that I feel inspired by him? What is it that makes me want to meditate on him? When we ask

these questions we have to see what will I get as a result of all this. If we want to get the highest benefit of associating our entire being with and merging it into that of the Divine, then we need to see the Divine first.

So these three Ramakrishnas—Ramakrishna of history, Ramakrishna of the present and Ramakrishna that we perceive in our heart—they are all connected. As I said, for most of us, our first introduction to Sri Ramakrishna took place through books. But gradually that knowledge that we get from books needs to be deepened and that occurs when we try to relate it to our own lives. When that study or *adhyayana* is related to my own self, that becomes *svādhyāya*. *Sva* means self. So simply reading something is *adhyayana*. But if I connect what I read to my own life, that becomes *svādhyāya* or spiritual study which is beneficial. So it is not very advisable and a good idea to read a whole lot in one sitting. In fact, reading becomes much more productive if you, say, read just one page and then keep the book aside. Then ask yourself: Which of these teachings that I have read now is relevant to me? Now it is not necessary that everything should be relevant to us all the time. Some of the things that Thakur said in a particular page may not seem relevant to me right now.

But, just because something is not relevant to me now does not mean that it will not be relevant in future. Who knows! Maybe five or ten years later I may suddenly say—‘Oh! this particular statement did not make sense when I first read it; but now I know what Sri Ramakrishna meant.’

Do not accept anything blindly. Think it over. If you agree with what he said, if it makes sense to you, then you must try to put it into practice. That is the most important thing. Otherwise our reading will go on and our daily life will also go on as before. The two will never meet. That is the real danger—my intellectual life and my actual

life or experiential life will never meet. Swami Vivekananda therefore used to say that one ounce of practice is weightier than tons of theories. Sometimes people speak very highly about Advaita philosophy and non-dual experience, which no doubt is the highest, and they look down upon dualism or *Dvaitavāda*. But we forget that a person with a *dvaita* experience is better than the person with *no advaitic* experience. It is useless to simply talk about *Advaita*; it is better to have at least some dualistic experience, because, after all, it is experience that will change us. Nothing else matters. You may read any number of books, you may attend any number of lectures. But unless they transform you, change you for the better in some way, they are of little value. One way of finding whether something has changed you or not is to compare ourselves with our own selves, and not with other people. There lies a great risk when you are in a community and you always keep on comparing yourself with what other people do. It is a very worldly tendency to watch what kind of clothes my neighbours are wearing or what the people gossip about. That is not helpful at all. What I can do is to ask myself: I have been reading books on Thakur for five or ten years. But how I am today as a person and how I was five or ten years ago? Is there any change in me? Have I today become a better human being than what I was five or ten years ago? That is the way to compare and find out whether we are making any spiritual progress or not. It does not really matter much how many visions you have seen in your dreams. What matters is to find out if as a person I have changed for the better than what I was five or ten years ago. That is the true way to measure progress, and that progress will help me to go nearer and nearer to real Sri Ramakrishna. That will help me to bring Sri Ramakrishna of history

to the present moment of our lives. We can then see that Ramakrishna of the present right inside our heart.

All of us know how the first encounter between Narendranath and Thakur had taken place. Before Narendranath met Sri Ramakrishna he asked many religious leaders: ‘Sir, have you *seen* God?’ Look at this. He did not want to know if they have read about God. His question was: ‘Have you seen God?’ But nobody could give the kind of answer that he sought. It is only when he went to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar that Thakur said: ‘Yes I have seen God.’ The second statement that he made was equally important and that is— ‘You can also see Him.’ So it is not simply enough to have faith in Thakur. It is not enough to have high notion about Thakur. It is not enough that you can speak very fluently, very passionately about Thakur. Ultimately you have to see him and that seeing will occur only in the heart.

So these were some of the thoughts that were uppermost in my mind when I chose this title—‘Ramakrishna of the Heart.’ I began by saying that only the spiritual personalities live in this historical dimension as well as in spiritual dimension. However, really speaking, everyone of us lives in these two dimensions. Our historical dimension is the dimension of our body. We know that everyday our bodies are getting older. Maybe we do not realize it everyday or every year—even as you celebrate your birthday! This has been always a puzzle to me why do people celebrate their birthdays! It is not very logical really. What is there to celebrate it? Birthday really means I have gone one year closer to my death. So it is not a very happy thought. I am not saying you should not celebrate your birthday. But

what we can do is to recognize the fact that while we celebrate our birthday, we are still in the historical dimension. The more time and energy I spend in catering to the demands of my body and mind the more I sink into the historical dimension, the dimension that will perish!

I think it was Tulsidāsa, who said: When I came into this world, I was crying and everyone was celebrating the occasion and laughing in joy. Let me lead my life in such a way that when it is time for me to die I will be smiling and people around me will be crying.

Indeed, what a pity it will be if at the time of my death I keep crying and people around me rejoice. That will be a real tragedy. So the question is how can I live my life by which I will be able to live without fear. In the Upanishad, the highest state is described as the state of fearlessness. When Janaka attained enlightenment, Yājñavalkya told him—‘*abhayam vai Janaka prāptosi*’— ‘O, Janaka! Now you have reached the state of fearlessness.’ Now that state of fearlessness will be attained only when we see God face to face, and that seeing God face to face will occur in the heart. It will not occur in books, it will not occur anywhere in the world. So the goal, the main motivation behind every devotee of Thakur should be to see Thakur in his or her heart.

So my hope and prayer is that through his infinite grace may we all acquire that clarity of vision, that intense *shraddhā*, that intense devotion, so that we are all able to see Thakur, Holy Mother, and Swamiji in our own heart and make our own lives blessed and, to the extent that we make our life blessed, we will be a blessing to our family, to our neighbourhood, and to the world. ■

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