

Reflections on Three Profound Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna

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Most revered Swami Suparnanandaji, distinguished Professor Kaushik Basu, Hon'ble Sri Anindya Kumar Mitra, Hon'ble spiritual luminaries in front of the dais, ladies and gentlemen, and friends. I am delighted to be here along with these distinguished personalities who are on and off the dais. As a student of English literature I remember what Dryden said about the characters of Chaucer. He said, here is God's plenty. And here, in this Institute, is God's plenty. I am glad to be here sharing the dais with eminent professor Kaushik Basu. I have always been his distant admirer though I had not met him earlier. I wanted to call on him in America when I was there. Now I am here with him and that is God's grace. As I remember, Sir, you were heading the World Bank. Close on heels came another Indian who was the chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, Gita Gopinath. I had the occasion to meet Gita. And then also I said, 'I have the ambition to meet Prof. Kaushik Basu'. Now it has come true. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

I also pay my deepest respects and homage to the great soul, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Right from my childhood my grandmother used to insist that I read the *Works* of Swami Vivekananda and the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. I never knew that I would be here in this great institution as its president. You see, God has His own

ways. I am thankful that I am here as the humble president of this organization—not as the Governor of the state.

Now, I am at a loss where to begin from because I had so many occasions in my childhood to read the anecdotes of Sri Ramakrishna. Now I repeat those anecdotes in my speeches here and there. Here I will confine myself to three most arresting observations or profound insights of Sri Ramakrishna.

Three observations of Sri Ramakrishna

The first statement is: A boat may stay in water, but water should not stay in boat. How beautifully the complexities of life are presented in this statement! The implication of this teaching is that a spiritual aspirant may live in the world, but the world should not live within him. This is a great thought which has been propounded in the *Bhagavad-Gitā*. The *Bhagavad-Gitā* explains the quintessence of the observation of the great Ramakrishna Paramahansa—'A boat may stay in water, but the water should not stay in boat'. This is the correlation between matter and mind, between the body and the soul.

Let me digress a little and say that Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the great Indian philosopher, was a respected professor at Oxford. When he was the Spalding Professor at Oxford, he is said to have delivered a lecture explaining the relation

between matter and mind, or science and spirituality, whatever you call it. Radhakrishnan came to the St. Albert Hall where many eminent scholars assembled to listen to him. Radhakrishnan stood up and delivered his shortest speech in life though the entire world was waiting to understand the complex meaning of matter and mind.

Dr Radhakrishnan asked, ‘What is matter?’ The audience stayed in rapt attention to hear what was the answer. He answered: ‘Never mind.’

Again a question was thrown: ‘What is mind?’ He answered: ‘Does not matter.’ And the speech ended there. Now this is capsule-like, as when we say, hold infinity in the palm of our hands and eternity in an hour.

What is mind and what is body? *Bhagavad-Gītā* establishes a relation between these two in very very simple terms. When Dhritarāshtra asked Sanjaya:

*Dharmakshetre kurukshetre
samavetā yuyutsavah /
Māmakāh pāndavāshcaiva
kim akurvata Sanjaya // (1.1)*

It was a very simple question, ‘Please tell me, O Sanjay, what is happening in *dharmakshetra* Kurukshetra between my sons and the sons of Pāndu’. Though apparently a simple question, the answer is so complex that in a few lines, Bhagavān Sri Krishna had given away a secret to the world by explaining the complex relation between body and the soul. What is life, what is death, what is body and what is soul? He said in verse 2.27:

*Jātasya hi dhruvo mrityuh
dhruvam janma mritasya ca /
Tasmād aparihārye'rthe
na tvam shocitum arhasi //*

That is, ‘Death is certain for one who has been born, and rebirth is inevitable for

one who has died. Therefore, you should not lament over the inevitable.’ Frankly speaking, as a student I could not understand the meaning of that. Even now I have not been able to understand fully the implication of this statement. For, when we say, if you live you have to die and if you die you will be reborn, that is almost like what is said by Omar Khayyam who said— ‘Dead yesterdays and unborn tomorrows, why fret about it, if today be sweet?’ The *Gītā* stands at the apex of spiritual sublimity, while *Rubaiyat* at the sublimity of the material. See, here more or less the same sentiments have been expressed in different ways,

*Jātasya hi dhruvo mrityuh
dhruvam janma mritasya ca /
Tasmād aparihārye'rthe
na tvam shocitum arhasi //*

We are told that the body is nothing but the clothes that you wear. You can, if you like, throw it away at will. However, the soul is not like that. I have been an ignorant person in the field of spirituality. I used to wonder, what does it mean? As an ordinary human being I can see and feel my body, but I cannot see my soul. I cannot touch my own soul; I have not seen my soul, I do not at all understand what is soul! However this complex question has been answered by the Lord in very simple terms through an allegory:

*Nainam chhindanti shastrāni
nainam dahati pāvakah /
Na c'ainam kledayanty āpo
na shoshayati mārutah // (2.23)*

—‘Weapons cannot shred the soul, nor can fire burn it. Water cannot wet it, nor can the wind dry it’.

The verse declares the indestructibility of the soul and the destructibility of the

body. Once you understand the meaning of this declaration, you will understand what Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa meant when he said that a boat may stay in water, but water should not stay in boat. The meaning of this statement is that a spiritual aspirant may live in the world but the world should not live within him.

I remember in this connection a poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins, *'The Wreck of the Deutschland'*. From Bremen in Germany a ship sailed. But on the way there was a shipwreck. The ship was about to capsize. Those who have seen the film 'Titanic' would know the panic that is there when a ship sinks. Similarly, when the ship called 'Deutschland' was sinking, people were running helter-skelter in the same vessel, pushing each other thinking that they will be able to overcome the forces of nature; so there was panic and chaos everywhere, only five nuns stood unruffled and serene. They were going to the passengers and pacifying them.

Now, the poet asked; When all the passengers knew that their lives were in danger, how could the nuns remain so calm and quiet? That was because of their total supplication to God. Indeed, once you leave everything to God, what is there to be afraid of? That moment we will realize the underlying meaning of what Sri Ramakrishna said—'A boat may stay in water, but water should not stay inside the boat.' This universal philosophy, or, in a sense, the whole cosmos has been encapsulated in this one sentence. That is what has been achieved here.

Then Dr Radhakrishnan. He had the quintessence of the best that is there in the realm of Indian thoughts. We had also great masters like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and others who have kept this place safer for generations to live

in. That is a great contribution which has been made by these great personalities who are from Bengal. They have not only enriched Bengal but the whole world as a whole.

The second observation

Then I came across another profound statement of Sri Ramakrishna that 'All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.'

Recently, the media asked me: 'What is happening in Bengal?' You know, the media hinted at the ongoing political conflicts between this and that. Is it because of the ego? the media said. And I said: 'When, I see ego in front of me, I say, "You go"'. Whenever you are infected with ego, please tell, 'You go'. That will be the only way to achieve what Sri Ramakrishna said, 'All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.' As we know, the greatest, the most valiant, the most scholarly, and the most blessed being ever born in society was Rāvana. He was the greatest among the greats in every field—as a warrior, as a scholar, even as a singer. Do you know that Rāvana was also a great singer and Mahādeva called him His great devotee? He was all-powerful and desirable in every way, gifted in every way. But then, why did he fall? Because of his ego, *ahamkāra*, that destroys everybody.

When does the ego die? It dies when you realize your self within. There is always a conflict between the self and the soul in everyone. Once you are able to overcome this conflict, once you realize the *real* man in you, the *real* manifestation of God in you, then you can overcome this. In Hindu thought, as I understand, there is a goddess called *tathā-astu*, who resides in your forehead. *Tathā-astu* means 'Let it be so'. After every Christian prayer they say 'Amen'. That means, 'May it be so'. Suppose before venturing upon any task, you say in your

mind—‘Oh, I do not know what to do with this’, or ‘I do not have the manpower’, ‘I do not have the capital’, or ‘I may not succeed in this venture’, the goddess in you will then say ‘*tathā-astu*’—let it be so. But suppose, you say, ‘I am born to win. Who is there to stop me? I will never take a no for an answer; I will win’. The goddess within will say *tathāstu*. So, you see, you are your own master. The mind, as it were, is very crucial. That is why Milton said, ‘The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.’

In my humble opinion, everything is born twice. First in the mind, and then in the field. Vision precedes action. Isn’t it? The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, said: ‘O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.’ So vision and action are all interrelated. Everything in the world begins with a vision. In the *Bible*, they say, in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. ‘The Word was God’ means that before the creation took place, it was all in the mind. And the vision of God is what man should be, what day and night should be.

In the Book of Genesis (1.3) we read ‘Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.’ And ‘Then God created man in His *own* image’ (1.27). Thus we see, first there is a vision, and then there is action. Look at the great revolutions of the world—The American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution. Think also about India’s freedom struggle. All started as a vision in the mind of one man or a group of men.

Then take for instance the great art world. Before Michelangelo dipped his brush in paint to draw the beautiful frescos in the Sistine Chapel—the Day of Judgement—he

had a vision of what it would be like. Again, before Shakespeare put his pen in ink he had a vision of what *Macbeth* is, what *Hamlet* is, or what *Othello* is. So vision should precede action. That is very important.

When these great men, Swami Vivekananda or Sri Ramakrishna made their profound statements, in their mind they had traversed through all these places. In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge speaks about three types of imagination—primary imagination, secondary imagination and esemplastic imagination. Primary imagination you and I have. Great poets have secondary imagination. But esemplastic imagination—that is what Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Tagore had. When this esemplastic imagination guides you, what happens is what Coleridge has written in his dream poem ‘The Kubla Khan’. The poem came to him in a dream. Later he wrote it on paper. But in dream itself the whole poem was composed!

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

With esemplastic imagination comes sublimity—‘For he on honey-dew hath fed and drunk the milk of paradise’. Visionaries like Vivekananda and Ramakrishna were the ones who had drunk the ‘milk of paradise’.

This is sublimity. When that touches you, it brings a change in you. So let us not forget that all statements made by these great men are the quintessence of wisdom and knowledge. They may act as a drop in the world of knowledge. But then a drop is very important. Sant Kabirdas said, when a drop

falls in the ocean, that drop merges into the ocean. But you do not know that the ocean also merges into that drop. That is the beauty of Nature in which everything is intertwined. Actually, there is nothing small or big as such. The unity of brotherhood of life is what is most important and this unity is what is underscored by the great sages and visionaries like Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo and, of course, Swami Vivekananda.

Knowledge leads to unity

Now I do not want to extend my speech. I only stress that knowledge leads to unity, while ignorance leads to diversity. This is a profound statement made by Sri Ramakrishna. What does it mean? It means that all religious fanaticism and factional feuds in the name of God take place because of ignorance. Once true knowledge comes, you know that all religions are the same. They flow in different directions like rivers, finally merging in the ocean. That is the ocean of unity. But now we perceive only diversity, and fail to see the unity within diversity.

Before I conclude, let me refer to an anecdote about the King of Ujjain who was on deathbed. His minister thought it was right time for the coronation of the prince. But the king said: No. He is not fit enough to be the king. Let him go out of the palace, live with the common people, learn from them and then come back.

The prince dutifully went out and lived with the common people. Then he understood how they thought, how they felt, how they reacted, what were their priorities, what were their problems and so on. Then he came back and told all that he learnt. The minister was happy and opined that the coronation could take place now. But the king said again from his deathbed: 'No, let

him go to the forest. There is a hermit there. Learn from him.'

Accordingly the prince went to the hermit. The hermit only said: 'Go out and listen in the forest.' The prince listened to many many new sounds which he had never heard in the palace—the lullaby of the brooks, the rustle of the leaves, the cry of the wolves and other animals. Then he came back and reproduced everything to the hermit. But the hermit said: 'No, it is not enough. Listen, Listen.' The prince then listened with rapt attention and came back eventually to declare that he had heard two new voices. 'What is that?' asked the hermit. The prince said: 'I heard the voice of the daybreak. I also heard the voice of honey getting filled in the flower.' The hermit said: 'Yes, now you are fit enough to be the king because you should be able now to listen to the *sound of silence*; you should be able to see what others do not see; you should be able to hear what others do not hear.' That is knowledge. That knowledge enables you to listen to the half tones and quarter tones around you. That capability is what makes you a leader. As the great Ramakrishna said, 'Knowledge leads to unity but ignorance to diversity'.

Now I have to keep my promise that I will stop here. But, forgive me, I am not going to stop here. I remember once I felt a discomfiture which I would like to share with all of you. Once upon a time I was the district collector of a city called Kollam in Kerala. At that time, an international interfaith conclave was organized by a great organization for about one week, almost like the Chicago Congress which was attended by Swami Vivekananda. Great scholars came from all over the world and they gave very profound speeches. One particular day it was the

turn of Swami Chinmayananda who was supposed to give his discourse on *Bhagavad-Gitā*. So I also went there because I knew Chinmayanandaji and, being the district collector, I thought I will meet him and pay my respects to him and listen to his oration.

Then I heard an announcement: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, your attention please! Swami Chinmayananda's flight has been delayed by one hour.' Then came the next announcement. It was like a bombshell to me because the announcer said, 'In the meantime, our district collector, C. V. Ananda Bose, will speak to you.' My God! I had no prior information about it. I saw thousands of people had gathered to listen to Swami Chinmayananda. I asked the organizers, 'What is the topic of discussion?' They said, '*Dialectical Materialism and the Essence of Indian Philosophy*'. So I started speaking on Dialectical Materialism and the essence of Indian philosophy! Fifteen minutes somehow I could manage. Then I got a chit. I was very much relieved. Normally, when a speaker gets a chit, it means 'please wind up'. But do you know what was written in the chit? 'The flight has been delayed by one more hour, please go on speaking.' That was scene number one.

Scene number two. I was invited to address the United Nations General Assembly's special session on environment-friendly housing for which my organization was picked up for an award at that time. Three minutes were allotted to me to speak there. That was also well-received. I felt very happy and came to my hotel room in

Manhattan. At midnight I got a call. At that time mobile was not very popular. It was a long-distance call from Kerala. It was evident that an elderly lady was on the other end.

She asked: 'Is it Dr Bose?' I said: 'Yes, ma'am.' 'Dr Bose, I need your help'. 'Please tell me ma'am'. 'Dr Bose, I am not able to sleep for the last three days. I need your help.' *Maybe, she thought that I was a medical doctor.* I said: 'Ma'am, I am not a medical doctor.' 'I know, I know. I am Prof. Stella D'Cruz who was a Professor of English in Kollam College when you were a district collector there.' I remembered, 'O ma'am! How are you? Are you okay? How is your health?' She replied: 'Not very okay. I am not able to sleep. Please help me.' So I asked: 'Ma'am, do you have hypertension?' She said, 'I have.' 'Are you in the habit of taking sleeping pills?' 'Yes.' 'Maybe, you forgot to take it and that's why you are not able to sleep', I said. 'No, no, I have taken the pills.' Being a professor, she then reeled out all the names of the medicines she had taken. Then she said: 'Nobody can help me. Only you can.' 'How can I help you ma'am?' She said, 'Dr Bose, do you remember, when you were a district collector in Kollam, you gave a speech on "Dialectical Materialism and the Essence of Indian Philosophy?"' 'Yes, ma'am'. She said, 'Can you repeat that speech once again over phone? I want to sleep.'

So before you give me thanks for delivering the speech, I thank you in advance for giving me this opportunity. ■

* This article is based on the address, Dr C. V. Ananda Bose, the Hon'ble Governor of West Bengal and the President of the Managing Committee of the Institute, delivered at the 86th Foundation Day Anniversary Meeting on 29 January, 2024. *We have only added the title.* Professor Kaushik Basu gave the Foundation Day Oration on that occasion.