

# Sri Ramakrishna and His Spiritual Tradition

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**I**t is certainly a great privilege to talk about Swami Kailashanandaji Maharaj. I joined the Madras Math at the age of twenty. I was with him for twelve years. Like a parent he brought me up. As I hailed from a village, I could not converse in English as fluently as other brahmacharins. So he taught me English though he used to speak with me in Bengali also. The parents bring up their children with lot of care, nourishment and affection. I received all these things from Swami Kailashananda. And what I am today, a member of the holy Order of Sri Ramakrishna, it is all by his grace.

You know, India was not like this a hundred years ago. We were ruled by the British. Even before that, we were ruled by the Mughals for about seven hundred years. As a result of these two foreign regimes and their administration India had become lifeless. There was no initiative or scope for it. The whole nation sank in poverty and suffered from all kinds of limitations. There was no hope of our coming up. And then dawned the renaissance from all the four corners of India. The Brahma Samaj in Bengal, the Arya Samaj in the North, the Theosophical Society in the South, and the Prarthana Samaj in the West—all these organizations worked hard to regain the pristine purity of our culture and religion and to remove the superstitious practices, then prevalent in our society. But the total impact was minimal. They could not make much headway. It was at this point

Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna came. As he lived in Dakshineswar temple, he was known as the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar. Educated people and the great luminaries from various walks of life used to go there to meet him. Even Swamiji's professor William Hastie had the occasion to know him, especially the ecstasy the Master used to experience now and then. These people heard or read about *samādhi* (trance) in the poems of great poets like Wordsworth. But here they could see the Master in trance. Maybe half of the time he was in ecstasy like Sri Shuka Deva. When Sri Shuka narrated the story of Bhagavan Sri Krishna, he used to be absorbed in the thoughts of Sri Krishna. In the same way Sri Ramakrishna was more or less all the time in ecstasy. When you read *Kathāmrita* (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in English), you will be able to see that. Maybe he was the only person in the whole country at the time to have this uninterrupted blessed experience. Keshabchandra Sen and other leaders of the Brahma Samaj used to meet him. Many dignitaries used to meet him and would have conversations with him for hours together. So he became very popular.

Normally, a person who gains this type of acceptance from the élite and the devotees remains satisfied. But Sri Ramakrishna was not. He prayed to the Divine Mother: Mother! My ears are well nigh burnt with the profane talks of the worldly people. Send me some pure souls with whom I can share my realizations. That is how Sri

Ramakrishna wanted to build up a group, a powerful group, that yearn for spiritual ideals, strength and armed with the zeal to renounce the world. He wanted youngsters. And he prayed: Mother, send me young people who are untouched by the evils of worldliness. And lo and behold, young people started coming to him one by one.

There were two groups of people among his ardent devotees. Students still in their teens belonged to one group, while aged householder devotees formed the other group. Swamiji himself was eighteen when he met Sri Ramakrishna. They were together with Sri Ramakrishna for about five years. During this time he gave his all to these youngsters, made them strong with the realization of the Lord. They were given the motto of renunciation and intense meditation. That was what Sri Ramakrishna advised his young disciples. He wanted to make them strong in their conviction, in their realization so that they could become teachers of men, gods walking on the earth with their spiritual wealth distributing the same to everyone through contact, talks, and action. That is how Sri Ramakrishna trained up the young *tyāgis*.

### **Human resource development**

Sri Ramakrishna was a perfect master of human resource development. These youngsters were of different types. One type was Narendranath (later Vivekananda). Narendranath was brilliant. He was a member of the Brahma Samaj and initially he was not willing to accept everything that the Master told him. He would examine. He would argue. He would contradict. But Sri Ramakrishna would accept and appreciate all this and then bring him up, mould him in his own way. For example, a member of the Brahma Samaj in the beginning, he refused to accept the concept of *Guru*. He also did

not believe in the idol worship. He did not believe in the Advaita philosophy either. Yet, Sri Ramakrishna always said—no this boy is brilliant and exceptional. He is extraordinary. So he trained him with great care and patience and instilled into Narendranath all the great spiritual ideals. There were occasions when Sri Ramakrishna, in order to mould him properly, took advantage of the distressing psychological conditions of his most favourite disciple.

You all remember one such touching state of Narendranath. He was suffering bitterly after the sudden passing away of his father. There were lot of problems and poverty at home. He tried to redeem himself from that precarious situation but he could not. He came to the Master and said, ‘You must do something for me. I cannot see my mother and brothers starving.’ Sri Ramakrishna said: Okay. You do one thing. You do not accept my Mother. That is one problem with you.

That is to say, Sri Ramakrishna wanted to make Narendra a wholesome personality who would accept the idol worship and understand the meaning of such worship. So he said: Today, now the *ārati* (vesper service) is over. Mother is alone in the temple. Go and talk to Her. Pray to her for the removal of poverty and your problems. She will grant you whatever you ask for.

Narendranath, who was coming to Dakshineswar for two or three years, never went to the temple because of his affiliation with the Brahma Samaj. This was the first time he was to go there. As a person, he was quite emotional. So he proceeded to the temple of the universal Mother. And you know what happened. The moment he went in he saw the Mother in all Her glory—joyous, blissful and beckoning him. That was the first experience. *He had not seen the*

*idol. He saw the Mother Herself*—all-loving, all-powerful, all-affectionate. Naturally, he was very happy and overwhelmed. As his devotional nature got stirred up now, he prayed to the Mother, ‘Mother! Give me devotion, give me dispassion, give me knowledge’ and then came away. But the old man (Sri Ramakrishna) was waiting to see what had transpired between the Mother and his disciple. He asked Narendra, ‘Did you pray and tell the Mother your problems?’ Narendra replied that he was so overwhelmed by Her gracious presence that he forgot all about his worldly problems and prayed for devotion and knowledge. He said: What is this! You went to the Mother for solving your problems. Go again.

So, Narendra went to the Mother second time and had the same experience. Being overwhelmed by the effulgent presence of the Divine Mother, he prayed for devotion and knowledge and came away. When the Master learnt that Narendranath could not tell the Mother to solve his family problems, he sent the former again to the Mother. Narendra went but the same thing happened. He felt ashamed to ask for the petty worldly things and came back.

The Master was waiting. When he knew what happened, he said to this effect: I knew that. You are not born for the worldly considerations. That is not the aim of your life. Anyway, your mother and other members of the family will not suffer from want of bare necessities of life.

So Narendranath was very happy. He came back to Sri Ramakrishna’s room with a mood charged with devotion. He then wanted to learn from the Master a song on the Divine Mother. Though himself a great musician, he never sang songs that dwelt on the glories of the Divine Mother. But this time he wanted to learn a song about the Mother. The Master taught him one song—

*Mā tvam hi tārā* (‘O Mother, You are the Saviour’) and Narendra went on singing that one song the whole night without sleeping. Next morning he slept like a log. That is how Sri Ramakrishna won him over and removed his prejudice created by the Brahmo Samaj about image worship.

In the same way Sri Ramakrishna removed all other prejudices of Narendranath and also of the other disciples. The Advaita philosophy was one such thing which Narendra refused to accept earlier. Sri Ramakrishna knew the basic personality of every disciple and so he guided each of them accordingly. Needless to say that all of them became spiritual stalwarts in time. Most of these young, strong and single-minded disciples spent about five years with the Master. Even in that short period of time Sri Ramakrishna instilled into their hearts the spirit of renunciation and made them adapt in meditation. Sri Ramakrishna wanted to build up this devoted and God-yearning group to defend Hinduism (*Sanātana Dharma*) and India’s national culture.

Of course, another group was also there—the householders who were perhaps about twenty-nine in number. Each one had their own prejudices. But Sri Ramakrishna tenderly nourished what was good in them and corrected where they did not fare well. Thus he built them up all according to their tendencies and capacity. He was always positive. He did not hate even Girish Chandra Ghosh. On the contrary, he turned him into a great devotee of adamant faith.

Even when Girish, fully drunk, came to him at midnight, Thakur used to be very affectionate toward him, gave him sweets to eat and water to drink. Sometimes Girish used to sleep in the room of Sri Ramakrishna during the night and go away in the morning. There was no other business. No doubt, Sri Ramakrishna was a unique Guru,

an extraordinary spiritual teacher, because no ordinary spiritual teacher could accept the way Girish Chandra behaved, or as Narendranath questioned and tested him. Sri Ramakrishna could accept everything.

Towards the end of Girish's life he used to tell his brother-disciples: See, I do not sit and meditate like you. Do you know what my problem is? My problem is that I cannot forget him.

Sri Ramakrishna entered into his heart in such a way blessing him all the time, that Girish could not forget him. That is how his transformation had taken place.

In 1886, when the Master passed away, most of these young and dedicated disciples, who were students, did not go back to their studies. After a few months, when Swami Vivekananda (then Narendra) set up the Baranagar Math, the first monastery in the name of Sri Ramakrishna, many of them started living there, spending all the time in intense meditation and rigorous spiritual practices. There was no other agenda. The living conditions were very very poor. Swamiji in later life said: 'Who cared then whether the world existed or not?' They all had this mood at that time. They used to plunge in prolonged meditation and saturated themselves in the thought of the Divine. That was the instruction given to them by Sri Ramakrishna. What was the result of this fantastic *sādhanā*? All of them became spiritual stalwarts. All of them became walking gods on earth, as it were! All these great disciples kept on wandering from place to place, immersed themselves in austere *sādhanā*, and at the same time disseminated spiritual ideas to the people. It was a blessing to those who had the opportunity to see them.

### Three swamis

Swami Tapasyanandaji told us that

when he was a student in Madras, he went to the Mylapore Math to see the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. He saw three swamis there—Swami Brahmananda, Swami Shivananda, and Tulsi Maharaj (Swami Nirmalananda). Tapasyanandaji said that he felt as if three angels had come down from heaven. That was the feeling they had evoked in his mind. Swami Agamananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, told us, even to see him, ie his Guru, was an inspiration. That sort of spiritual vibrations and ambience they had created in India after Sri Ramakrishna had passed away. And you all know that that was the time when Swami Vivekananda went to America to represent Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions. But he did not stop there.

Coming back to India he went on spreading the vital ideas about the regeneration of India. All those ideas ignited the fire of the freedom movement in India. Swamiji said categorically that the new dispensation of the age inaugurated by Sri Ramakrishna is a source of great good to the whole world, especially India. The inspirer of this dispensation is Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, who is the reformed and remodelled manifestation of all the past great epoch-makers of religion. All this is a part of history now.

One of Mahapurush Maharaj's (Swami Shivananda's) disciples told me that his transformation took place simply by seeing him at Madras Math. His personality, his sweetness and spirituality were dripping like honey! He was an image of godliness. I did not need to do meditation in his presence, the swami said. That was the atmosphere they created around them.

After completing his studies, the swami, I am just referring to, joined the Belur Math. He belonged to a very rich family of South India. Naturally, his father was very much

upset and he tried his best to get him back. But he could not. Then he wrote a letter to his son: From the day you left home, you have been enjoying your days in the presence of your Guru who, to you, is like nectar. But on the other hand, your mother has stopped taking her food. If you want to meet her, come.

When it was the question of his mother, the swami's heart melted. So he decided to go and meet her. He told Mahapurush Maharaj about the letter. Mahapurush Maharaj said, 'Yes, yes, you must go. Parents are next to God. We have to adore them. Go.'

The swami made pranams to Mahapurush Maharaj. However, at the time of making pranams he thought, 'What is this? This man, this great one is like a god. His love is overflowing. When I said I wished to meet my mother, he gave permission saying "go". The same affection he has for me!' So, he got up and said, 'Maharaj, I am not going. My parents' love is selfish, while yours is unselfish. So I am not going to leave you.' Then Mahapurush Maharaj said, 'Yes, yes, that is very good. For the sake of God, you can forgo even the duties towards your parents.'

Then he became a sannyasin and was instrumental in bringing Sri Ramakrishna in thousands of home in Tamil Nadu. And the institution he started is thriving. One of the colleges started by him at Salem near our ashrama has 17,000 students. When that swamiji was alive I went to meet him—he said: Look here, everybody is praising me for all the work I have done. But all the work I have done for the benefit of society is because of the love I have received from my Guru.

The disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were all like this. Sri Ramakrishna had left behind this great group of sannyasins—Swamiji and others—and a great group of devotees who

were imbued with his ideal. For them also the discipline was meditation. They had to do their duties perfectly well and, in addition to that, spend all the time in meditation. As long as these twenty-nine householder disciples of the Master lived, they used to speak constantly of the glories of Sri Ramakrishna. They were not ordinary householder devotees. Akshay Kumar Sen was one such devotee who has written a book in Bengali titled *Ramakrishna Punthi*. You also know Master Mahashaya (Sri M.) whose book, *Kathāmrita*, is read by thousands of people today. That is Sri Ramakrishna's influence. That is the grace Sri Ramakrishna conferred on us through his disciples. That is the spiritual tradition that we are getting from his sannyasin as well as from his householder disciples.

### Personal experience

I was with Swami Kailashanandaji for twelve years. I came to him as a boy of twenty and he had brought me up. He was in charge of the Madras Math which was then considered to be the second important Math after the Belur Math. There are five institutions in Madras. One is the Math, and the other is the Vivekananda College. Then there is the Ramakrishna Mission Students' Home that has been going on for hundred years. There is an engineering college conferring diploma to the boys. And all the boys are recruited by big businessmen even before they complete their studies. That is because they are students of the Students' Home. Now it has 600 students. Ten years ago the number was 300. The other institution is a network of schools for the boys and a network of schools for the girls. Swami Kailashanandaji at that time presided over all these institutions.

Maharaj was a devout personality. With the swamis and brahmacharins he used to get up at four o'clock to attend the

*mangalārati*. At six most of us would leave the temple. But he would stay on right in front of Sri Ramakrishna whose presence was palpable. So he used to sit before him and do *japam* till eight—almost three hours at a stretch. He took his breakfast at eight-thirty. He used to attend the evening *ārati* also. That was his daily routine. Madras Math was then a training centre for brahmacharins. Even now it is so. And there were many stalwart swamis at that time—Swami Swahanandaji, Swami Budhanandaji. So he used to train us. He trained especially those who joined the Math early in life. He used to have chanting classes before the breakfast. He would arrange periodically brilliant lectures by the professors of the Vivekananda College. He wanted us to go through the study of *Prasthānatraya* and appointed a teacher for that. The teacher did not know sufficient English. Therefore he used to teach in Sanskrit itself. I was a Sanskrit student to begin with. So it was easy for me to follow him. Even the senior swamis used to sit and listen to him for the pleasure of hearing somebody teaching in Sanskrit. That is how Swami Kailashanandaji regulated our life. Personally he used to meet everyone and look after our health. We were given fruits everyday. That was his loving concern for the brahmacharins. That was one part of his personality.

The Madras Math celebrated the Durga Puja for three years (1953-1955) in an image. The image was to be brought from Calcutta itself. It was an event in the Madras city. People came thronging from all corners to witness this grand puja. However, the puja could not be continued afterwards for dearth of space. The year 1953 was memorable for Holy Mother's centenary. It

was sort of a festival and leading newspapers like *The Hindu* published articles on the Mother. The next great event was Swami Vivekananda's birth centenary in 1963.

Swami Kaliashananda enshrined Sri Ramakrishna into the hearts of all students and people who came in contact with him. He maintained the ideal and dignity of the Ramakrishna Order scrupulously, and passed on the same values to the students, brahmacharins and sannyasins—to all of us. All looked up to him for guidance in spiritual and secular matters.

One idea he laid stress upon was to strengthen the publication department. Madras Math, as you all know, is an important publication centre of our Order publishing books in Telugu, Tamil and English. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Indian edition) was first published from the Madras Math. Of course, the publication work was started by Shashi Maharaj (Swami Ramakrishnananda) himself. Swami Kailashanandaji watched over the activities of all departments. He was very liberal as far as our food was concerned, but strict in other matters. The monastic ideal of renunciation and service he kept alive in our hearts. It was really a blessing to be with him, to remain under his care. Till 1965 I was there. In 1971, he was brought to the headquarters as the Vice-President of the Order, and I was posted to Seva Pratishthan in 1978. Towards the end of his life he was in the Seva Pratishthan for ten days as he was sick. I had the privilege of being with him and serving him at that time. Even today I remember the last moments of his mortal life. He was slowly going to be absorbed in himself like a sleeping child and passed away. ■

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