

# The Status of Man According to Sri Ramakrishna

AMIYA KUMAR MAZUMDAR

The subject that has been assigned to me this evening, 'The Status of Man according to Sri Ramakrishna', is indeed pregnant with profound significance. Sri Ramakrishna is not a philosopher or scholar. Even then whatever he says on this particular topic is most modern and refreshingly original. On one occasion he says: 'Man should possess dignity and alertness. Only he, whose spiritual consciousness is awakened, possesses this dignity and alertness and can be called a man. Futile is the human birth without the awakening of spiritual consciousness.'<sup>1</sup> But he did not expand the thesis. For the explanation we have to turn to Swami Vivekananda. Besides, we have to collect some sayings from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, which are scattered here and there.

What is meant by man's dignity? Sri Ramakrishna makes an unequivocal assertion: The goal of human life is God-realization. And that is the basis of man's dignity.

As you know, many scholars of those days used to come to Sri Ramakrishna and have discourses on various subjects such as man's relation to God, man's relation to the universe, and man's relation to his fellow-beings. Sri Ramakrishna is never a metaphysician in the accepted sense of the term. Being a realized soul, a person who has seen truth face to face, he could answer

all the different questions put forward by the pandits of his days and he could satisfy them all. What is the secret? The secret, as he used to say, in his own inimitable language, is that he has received the Divine Mother's blessings, that he is Her child, devoted, sincere, without any knowledge of the ways of the world. From this point of view also the status and dignity of man have to be assessed. And you can put an end to all philosophical wrangles, once you grasp this basic truth. All you have to say, all you have to do, is with the blessings of the Mother. The Mother is a personal God. The Mother is the highest reality, the supreme reality.

## I

Now if you take the Advaita view, you will find that so far as the status of man is concerned, Sri Ramakrishna is not out and out an Advaitist. He has different kinds of listeners, different categories of hearers, and to all of them he does not give one particular set of answer. In this respect he is just like Buddha. Buddha had different kinds of listeners. To some of them he used to say: Metaphysics is of no avail; lead a truthful and honest life and that is all. To some others he would seem to affirm: There is no soul. To others he would hint: Soul is nothing but name and form. In the case of Sri Ramakrishna, too, you will find different utterances in different contexts. If you do not know the context, you are apt to misjudge

him, for you will find his sayings to be full of contradictions. But if you are alive to the context, contradictions will be apparent and they will soon disappear. I will cite an example from the Advaita context—his parable of the salt doll. As the salt doll proceeds to the sea, it wishes to fathom its depth. But as soon as it enters the sea it melts away. It becomes identified with sea water. The salt doll is made of salt and the sea is the source of salt; when the former gets immersed in the latter, there is complete identification, with the result that the identity of the salt doll is lost altogether. The human soul is like the salt doll and the Absolute is like the vast sea. In the realization of Brahman, the individuality of the aspirant is obliterated. This is the Advaita view.

But, side by side, you find the other view of Sri Ramakrishna: It is only the Mother through whose will you can have your ego or 'I' completely effaced. Or it is through Her grace that She will allow a very thin 'I' to continue. In other words, 'God keeps a little of "I" in His devotee even after giving him the Knowledge of Brahman.'<sup>2</sup> Thus, two alternatives are possible. Either the Mother will efface your 'I' totally or if She chooses, She will retain the thin 'I' for the reason that you may serve humanity, looking upon it as an embodiment of divinity. Here, the question that arises from the Advaita point of view is: Once you realize the undifferentiated Absolute, how can you come back to this ordinary relative state of existence? Is that at all possible? Sri Ramakrishna answers this question not from the metaphysical point of view but from the point of view of a seer. What is the evidence on which his assertion is based? His evidence is the verdict of his own realization, which is self-validated, that is, which does not require any further proof for

validating itself. He says he has clear, unmistakable evidence which is obtained only through the grace of the Mother. It is the will of the Mother that he who has realized the undifferentiated Absolute can really come down for the good of the world, for the education of the people. That again does not lie in one's power, but in the power of the Mother. It is Her will that moves you, that takes you down from the undifferentiated stage to this relative one. Why is it necessary? Because you will have to educate the people. But you should not assume the role of an educator yourself; do not assume the role of a preacher or teacher yourself. It is through the grace of the Mother that this task is assigned to you. You are simply carrying out Her wishes.

When you have thus two almost opposite statements side by side, you would naturally ask this question: Is man to be completely identified with the Absolute Brahman or has he to retain some trace of ego or I-consciousness so as to serve humanity? Sri Ramakrishna prefers the second alternative from another consideration. He points out that in order to assess the status of man you have to be sure of two positive aspects of Reality: *Nitya*, the Absolute, and *lilā*, the relative. A man has to realize both *Nitya* and *lilā*. But once a man realizes the former, he may have an intense desire to get himself merged in that stage like Narendranath [Swami Vivekananda]. As you know from his life-history, Narendranath, having had the taste of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, wants to stay immersed in that stage for all time to come. The Master affectionately rebukes him and says that it is not enough. 'I thought you would be like a banyan tree,' he says, 'offering shelter to all people, particularly the helpless, the deprived, and the downtrodden who would

be coming to you for help.’ Mark the astounding expression: *Nirvikalpa samādhi* is not enough! Though the highest, it is not the last stage. Why? Because once you reach the topmost rung of the ladder, you have also to come down to the phenomenal plane. Otherwise the journey is not complete.

The end of life, therefore, is not to get oneself lost in the Absolute. Sri Ramakrishna’s story of an ant proceeding to a hill of sugar is appropriate in this context. One grain filled its stomach. Taking another grain in its mouth, it started homeward. On its way it thought: ‘Next time I shall carry home the whole hill.’ The ant was not aware of its limited capacity and hardly realized that the hill which consisted of numerous grains could never be removed by it. In fact, it was not necessary at all for the ant to crave for possessing the whole hill when a grain or two satisfied it. That is the way shallow minds think. Many labour under the delusion that what they have realized is the whole of Reality. In point of fact, however, what a human being can realize is just a fragment of Reality. If realization of a little of Reality fills the heart of the aspirant with joy, what is the necessity of attaining what is impossible to attain, viz. the whole of the Absolute?

Now both *Nitya* and *lilā*, ascent and descent, have to be welcomed in human life. Unless you realize both, the circle of life is not complete. That is why Ramakrishna says: ‘In the musical scale there are seven notes: *sā*, *re*, *gā*, *mā*, *pā*, *dhā*, and *ni*. But one cannot keep one’s voice on “*ni*” a long time. One must bring it down again to the lower notes.’<sup>3</sup> This passage from ‘*sā*’ to ‘*ni*’ and coming down from ‘*ni*’ to ‘*sā*’ again is the passage from *lilā* to *Nitya* and from *Nitya* to *lilā*. ‘It is a joy to merge the mind in the Indivisible Brahman through contemplation.

And it is also a joy to keep the mind on the *lilā*, the relative, without dissolving it in the Absolute,’<sup>4</sup> says Sri Ramakrishna. He puts it tellingly when he quotes: ‘I don’t want to become sugar; I want to eat it.’<sup>5</sup> He does not explain away the world as *Māyā* as a *jnāni* does, but accepts both the Absolute and the relative. After realizing both you will remain in this world as a servant of God or as His devotee. That gives you a glimpse of the status and dignity of man.

## II

The ego, in the narrow sense of the term, is the worst enemy of a man. It stands as a bar in the path of God-realization. The ego stands between the individual soul (*Jivātman*) and the Universal Spirit (*Paramātman*) and separates the former from the latter. It acts as a hindrance to the identification of the individual soul with the Universal Spirit. Sri Ramakrishna gives an example to clarify his point. He says: ‘The ego is like a stick that seems to divide the water in two. It makes you feel that you are one and I am another. When the ego disappears in *samādhi*, then one knows Brahman to be one’s own inner consciousness.’<sup>6</sup>

If the ego is there, let it remain as a servant of God or as His devotee. To quote Sri Ramakrishna: ‘Seeking the “I”, you discover “Thou”. In other words, nothing exists inside you but the power of God. There is no “I” but only “He”, ...It is not possible to rid oneself altogether of the ego; so, as long as it is there, let the rascal remain as the servant of God. The ego that makes a man feel that he is a devotee of God or a son of God or a servant of God is good. But the ego that makes a man attached to “woman” and “gold” is the “unripe ego”. That ego is to be renounced.’<sup>7</sup>

The ego, again, may be looked at from two sides: from the limited and the wide. Sri Ramakrishna speaks of the 'ripe ego' which is devoid of the wordly dirt and which holds itself as a servant or a devotee of the Lord. This ego, which is like that of a child, persists even after *samādhi* in the case of extraordinary souls. The ego in this case becomes a friend and not an enemy of the realized soul. Sri Ramakrishna gives the instance of Shukadeva. God did not destroy his 'I' altogether after his *samādhi*, but kept in him 'the ego of knowledge' for the purpose of reciting the *Bhāgavata* to King Parikshit.

### III

The philosophers, the metaphysicians, and the theologians have put forth so many defences to reconcile mutually contradictory systems with the result that ordinary human beings get puzzled and confused. On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna asks his disciples to be simple, devoted, sincere, and truthful. He says, so far as this *Kaliyuga* is concerned, one virtue is most important, i.e. truthfulness. To quote him: 'Truthfulness alone is the spiritual discipline in the *Kaliyuga*.'<sup>8</sup> Truthfulness is equivalent to divine life. That is his message to the people of the twentieth century, to the people of *Kaliyuga*. That again is another mark of the status of man. Man is not man unless he is truthful. The word 'truth' has not been used by Sri Ramakrishna in the ordinary metaphysical sense of the term. Philosophers, as you know, have given so many different definitions of truth. The correspondence theory, the coherence theory, and the pragmatic theory are well known to students of philosophy. Now, by truth Sri Ramakrishna means two things: (1) There should not be any dichotomy

between preaching and practice. (2) That is truth which is good for all.

### IV

You would like to know which path would suit you most. What is the method of knowing? An Advaitist will take you through the path of knowledge, a path which is almost a razor's edge, a very difficult path indeed. A devotee will ask you to follow the path of devotion. Here again Sri Ramakrishna has a unique message to give. He has made a significant experiment and comes to the conclusion that both these paths are equally valid. The path of pure knowledge and the path of pure devotion will lead you to the same goal. But, what you will choose depends on your temperament. God Himself, who is the Lord of the universe, has provided different paths to suit different men. There is a saying of Sri Ramakrishna—which you all know—that the mother loves all her children equally, but she does not offer the same kind of food to all her children. To one she might give fish curry, to another some soup, and to the third fried fish, and so on. Why? Because she knows what will be suitable for each of her children. This will make you realize that in Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy there is no regimentation, but respect for the individual temperament, the individual taste, the individual outlook. It is a kind of democracy and liberal outlook. If I hazard a remark, Sri Ramakrishna's is an existential approach. It is existential because there is no fixed theory urging upon an individual to follow this path or that path. Sri Ramakrishna is aware of the basic human values, he is sensible of the basic human character. That is why he does not prescribe one particular method for all. He tells you that unless a sense of discontent stirs your mind, you cannot long for salvation or freedom. So this sense of

discontentment is an essential precondition. Further he says that you must have intense yearning and it must be one hundred per cent sincere, without any reservation. That is the existential approach. Unless a man is seriously dissatisfied, the Advaita teaching is of no avail for him. Existentialism makes man aware of the deep underlying ontological necessity of feeling dissatisfied. Advaita begins where existentialism ends.

V

According to the Hindu view, one has to pass through four stages of life: (1) *Brahmacarya*, (2) *Gārhasthya*, (3) *Vānaprastha*, and (4) *Sannyāsa*. For Sri Ramakrishna, God should be the centre or ideal in every stage of life. The effort for God-realization is coeval with life itself. That is the mark of unity all through. Not that you have a compartment at the last stage of your life and there you will have something like God-realization. You will have to be God-minded from the very beginning. Spiritual life has to commence in the first stage, that is, when one is young, energetic, pure, uncontaminated by the ways of the world. There is Sri Ramakrishna's parable: 'The new-born calf' looks very lively and gay. It runs and frisks about all day long, only stopping now and then to suck the sweet milk from its dam. But no sooner is the rope tied round its neck than it begins to pine away gradually, and, far from being merry, wears a dejected and sorrowful look, and gets emaciated. In the same way, so long as a boy has no concern with the affairs of the world, he is quite merry and gay. But when he once gets himself locked in the world, as it were, with the strong bar of wedlock, and is harnessed with the responsibilities of family life, all his joy vanishes. He wears a look of dejection, care and anxiety; no more is there the glow of

health on his cheeks, and deep wrinkles gradually furrow his forehead. Blessed is he that remains a boy throughout his life, free as the morning air, fresh as a newly blossomed flower, and pure as a dew-drop.<sup>9</sup> Sri Ramakrishna loves young persons because it is they who know how to sacrifice one hundred per cent. They have no reservation, no fear or favour, no inhibition, no hypocrisy; when they pour out their heart they do so fully, completely. From them and them alone can be expected one hundred per cent dedication or devotion. That is one of the marks of the individual human being. That is how he defined the status of man.

This spirituality is not something alien to human nature but something inherent, something inborn, something innate, and this point is developed by Swami Vivekananda, prince among his young disciples—the dynamic disciple who has broadcast the teachings of his Master throughout the world in a manner hitherto unknown. What he says is: There are by and large four methods—Karma-yoga, Jñāna-yoga, Rāja-yoga, and Bhakti-yoga. You choose one or more or all of these according to your temperament and reach the goal. The goal is to attain spirituality by controlling nature, both the inner nature and the outer nature. And then you shall be free. Rather man is born free. Only he does not know that he is free. On account of the cloud of ignorance he is under the delusion that he is in bondage. Swami Vivekananda has taken the cue from his Master's sayings and says the *mantra* you should meditate upon ceaselessly is: I am free, I am free, I am free; I can never be in bondage. Thereby you will not 'become' free but you will realize your freedom which is already there. This is called in technical language, *prāpta prāpti* (attainment of what is already attained). Whatever you are in essence you will regain through *sādhanā*,

you will be aware once again of your inherent freedom. That gives you an indication of the status of man.

Here again, leaving aside metaphysical controversies, Sri Ramakrishna shows you the path which is as bright as the sun. He says: *Jnāna* and *ajnāna*, knowledge and ignorance, both are like thorns. If you have got a prick of the thorn, which is *ajnāna*, then through *jnāna*, another thorn, you remove the first thorn, take the two and throw both of them away. That is how *vijnāna* is attained. Why should you throw away both of them? Because, as he says, God is beyond the scriptures, beyond philosophy, beyond concepts. His nature is only to be tasted, to be realized. *Ānanda* (bliss) is to be tasted. This is really a very important philosophical conclusion—though not put in a philosophical language—coming direct from the experience of a seer who has seen truth face to face. That is why when Sri Ramakrishna meets Pandit Shashadhar, he refers to the distinction between a *jnāni* and a *vijnāni*. ‘The *vijnāni*’, he says, ‘enjoys’ the Bliss of God in a richer way. Some have heard of milk, some have seen it, and some have drunk it. The *vijnāni* has drunk milk, enjoyed it, and has been nourished by it.’<sup>10</sup> He gives another illustration: ‘A *jnāni* is like one who knows beyond doubt that a log of wood contains fire. But a *vijnāni* is he who lights the log, cooks over the fire, and is nourished by the food.’<sup>11</sup> It is not enough that a man should be a *jnāni*, he should be a *vijnāni* also. *Vijnāna* means that you must put your knowledge to test, you must apply your knowledge to life. It is not enough to know what God is like. But you must be able to talk to God. You must be able to offer your prayers to God and have an answer from Him. Unless you have an answer from God, your prayer is futile. So, a *vijnāni*

is a perfect man who has applied his knowledge to life and its needs. A *vijnāni* is a person who has realized God with form, as also formless God. So, here is another test of man’s worth. Man must aim to be a *vijnāni*. He must have *vijnāna*, that is to say, knowledge which is worthy of application.

## VI

In *Kaliyuga*, man has concentrated much upon his physical life, on the kind of life which is beastly. There is, however, a higher aim in life. If he pursues that, he will find that a stage will come when nothing would be of interest except the thought of God. So man should aspire to reach that stage. That is possible provided you have a competent guru, provided you mix with holy people, you attune your life to the way of God. Sri Ramakrishna has classified human beings into four types, which may be compared with four types of fish. Fish of the first type are so clever that they never get entangled into the net. Similar to them are the men who remain ever-free—that is one kind of human beings. ‘There are other fish who get themselves caught in the net but know how to get out of it. They struggle hard and do succeed. Like them are the human beings who know how to get free and who are liberated through *sādhana*. This is the second category. The third are the people who seek liberation like those fish who get themselves caught in the net but despite repeated attempts have not yet been able to get themselves free. To the fourth category belong the fish who do not exert themselves to get out. On the contrary, they burrow into the mud with the net in their mouths and lie there quietly, thinking: ‘We are quite safe here.’ They are like the people who are in bondage. They do not even know what is inherent in them, the blissful state. They are very unfortunate indeed.

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But even for them, Sri Ramakrishna has a message of hope. He says: 'All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening; but none will go without food. All, without any exception, will certainly know their real Self.'<sup>12</sup> The bound souls also would be free one day through the grace of God. What is needed is to take the initiative. Sri Ramakrishna says: *kripābātās baiche, tui pāl tule de* (The wind of grace is blowing; all you have to do is to unfurl the sail). You have to take the initiative, the grace of God is always there. Only grace will not be enough, you have to exert yourself. Once you exert yourself, God's grace will dawn upon you. That grace is a reward of God for your unflinching devotion to truth. That is the reward. But this reward would come not without any condition. The condition is that you must give all your energy. You must be sincere and devoted. You must leave everything to God. Only in that case you will have His grace. That is the status of man.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, spiritual enlightenment is the essence of manhood. As Sister Nivedita used to say, the power to renounce distinguishes the human from all life known to us. An animal, you can see, is always anxious to protect itself, it wants to

feed itself and to procreate. But man's essence lies in sacrifice. So also here, the status of man can be measured only by the degree to which he has attained spiritual enlightenment. That is the measure of man.

I have already mentioned that according to Sri Ramakrishna the end of human life is the attainment of Truth. Sri Ramakrishna urges that one should go ahead in quest of Truth and the journey towards the goal is a ceaseless one.

Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes the dynamic character of human life. Man is not to rest satisfied with his lot but has to undertake his journey for the quest of Truth so as to manifest what is hidden in his personality. Sri Ramakrishna has endeavoured to make man fully conscious of his dignity, heritage, and destiny. To realize and love God is the only purpose of human life—this has been the refrain of the song of his soul.

Sri Ramakrishna's emphasis on the progressive unfoldment of human personality, on the place of basic human values in the scheme of reality as a whole, on the zeal for undertaking experiment with Truth at every stage of life instead of exposing oneself to blind loyalty to authority is of perennial interest and his contribution in these fields is strikingly original. ■

### REFERENCES

- 1 *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, Madras, 1974, p. 830.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 434.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 437.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 435.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 802.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 9 *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, Madras, 1954, p. 79.
- 10 *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 433.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 432.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 802.

\* Mr Amiya Kumar Mazumdar was formerly of West Bengal Senior Educational Service and General Secretary, Indian Philosophical Congress. This article is a revised version of his speech delivered at the Institute on 8 March 1979.