

Sri Ramakrishna-Vedanta

SWARAJ MAZUMDAR

Swami Vivekananda says that we should try to understand the purport and significance of the Vedas and the Vedanta in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's incomparable life and teachings. Academic scholars may try in their own ways to achieve this goal, but those who want to practise and realize the essence of Vedanta in their lives, they would do well to pay heed to Swamiji's call. I confess I belong to the second category which lays no claim on academic scholarship. So, with this limited understanding let me proceed to discuss a difficult and, maybe, a controversial subject.

Let us now go back to an event that had taken place in America in October 1900, during Swamiji's second trip to the West. Swamiji was then staying in New York at the Ridgely Manor of Mr Leggett. It was evening and he was talking with Sister Nivedita, Sara Bull and others present. At one point during this lively conversation Swamiji made a very remarkable statement. Turning to Sara in particular, he said: 'Union is greater than Love. I do not love religion. I have become identified with it. Religion is my life.'¹

Indeed, love is impossible without a sense of separation and distance from the object of love. A sense of duality has to be there. I am one individual and the object of my love is another. Any relationship presupposes the existence of more than one and, obviously, a division between or among the units. It is because of this subject-object separateness that Swamiji considers the experience of unity to be greater than love and it is Vedanta that takes us step by step

towards that indivisible unity, the experience of oneness. This oneness is the soul of Vedanta.

One day, while talking with the devotees at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna frankly said, 'I do not regret that I have not studied Vedanta literature or philosophy. But I know its essence is that Brahman alone is Real, the world is false or illusory.'² Sri Ramakrishna stated literally the truth that he had not studied Vedanta philosophy; but it is also true that he heard a lot of discussions on the subject when he was a mere child. In those days many sannyasins used to come to Kamarpukur and stayed at Lahababu's guest-house. Child Gadadhar (boyhood name of Sri Ramakrishna) used to listen to their discussions, arguments and counter-arguments very eagerly and, being one of exceptional memory, remembered everything. In the Vedas spiritual aspirants have been instructed to have recourse to *shravana*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* for realizing the Upanishadic Truth. Gadadhar followed this path quite unconsciously. He heard the Truth, reflected upon It and meditated on It even though he was not under the tutelage of a Guru. And later, when he lived at Dakshineswar and practised all sorts of spiritual disciplines, especially non-dual Vedanta, he met many Vedantic monks, apart from his own Advaitic Guru Totapuri and other notable pundits of that time. Remembering that experience, he said, 'I heard a lot'. Swami Saradananda in *Sri Sri Ramakrishna-Lilāprasanga* says, '... do you know that the Veda, the Vedanta and all other scriptures had been read out to him

and he had completely mastered them all by virtue of his prodigious memory?³ Sri Ramakrishna therefore said that ‘Hearing is better than reading, but far better is seeing or having direct experience.’⁴ And he attained direct experience of the Absolute.

Encounter with Harinath

One may remember in this connection Sri Ramakrishna’s dialogue with a young disciple, Harinath (later known as Swami Turiyananda), on two occasions. Swami Saradananda in *Lilāprasanga* (*Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master* in English) gives a vivid account of the events.

Harinath started going to Dakshineswar since 1879-80. First he went there with a friend and Sri Ramakrishna’s attraction made him visit the place quite frequently. But soon he engaged himself so much in the study of Vedanta scriptures and spiritual practices that for some time he did not meet the Master. One day, as his friend had gone to Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna asked, ‘Hello! how is it that you have come alone! Hasn’t your friend come?’ The young devotee replied, ‘Sir, he is busy studying Vedanta. He hasn’t come perhaps he thought it would be a mere waste of time.’ A few days later, when Harinath had gone to Sri Ramakrishna, the latter asked, ‘Is it that you are too busy studying Vedanta nowadays? Well, that is fine. But what is Vedantic discrimination after all? Isn’t it simply this that Brahman alone is real and the world is illusory? Or anything else?’⁵ Harinath’s eyes were thus opened, though not fully as yet.

A few days later Sri Ramakrishna went to Balaram Basu’s house. He was seated in the first floor hall surrounded by devotees. When Harinath reached the hall Sri Ramakrishna kept saying: ‘Knowledge, devotion, God-vision—nothing is possible without God’s grace. Is it a child’s play to understand wholeheartedly that woman and gold are false and the universe is eternally

non-existent? Such understanding can be had only if He allows us to have it out of compassion. Otherwise, how little is man’s power to attain it!’⁶

Having said these insightful words, Sri Ramakrishna went into deep *samādhi*. Again, after some time, when he regained outer consciousness he started singing, ‘*Ore kushi-lav karis ki gaurav? Dharā nā dile ki pāris dharite?*’—‘O Kusha and Lava, why do you boast that you have captured me? Can you really catch me if I do not surrender myself willingly?’⁷ As Sri Ramakrishna kept singing these lines evoking the mood of Mahāvīr Hanumān, tears streamed from his eyes and drenched the bedsheet he was sitting on. Harinath was so touched by this amazing sight, he too could not control himself and started shedding tears profusely. This went on for some time before both Sri Ramakrishna and Harinath came to their normal state. Harinath later said, ‘That teaching has for ever been imprinted on my mind. I have known from that day that nothing can be achieved without the grace of God.’⁸

Vedas and Vedanta

Let us now turn to the Vedas and Vedanta. The Vedas, you all know, have been broadly classified into two portions. One is the work portion or *karma-kānda* and the other is the knowledge portion or *jnāna-kānda*. Vedanta is found in the knowledge portion, commonly known as the Upanishad. It deals principally with six subjects, namely *jīva* or the individual soul, *jagat* or the phenomenal universe, *Ishvara* or God, *Ātman*, *Brahman* and *Māyā* or *Shakti* (the cosmic illusive power). Scripturally speaking, Hinduism rests strictly on three *Prasthānas*—*Shruti Prasthāna*, *Nyāya Prasthāna* and *Smṛiti Prasthāna*. *Prasthānas* literally mean the escape paths following which one can transcend one’s phenomenal existence and attain liberation

from the repeated cycle of birth and death. The Upanishads belong to the *Shruti Prasthāna*, the *Brahma-sutras* of Vādarāyana belongs to the *Nyāya Prasthāna* and the *Gītā* belongs to the *Smṛiti Prasthāna*. Different sects have flourished in Hinduism based on the interpretations of these three *Prasthānas*. *Dvaitavāda* or dualism, *Vishishtādvaitavāda* or qualified non-dualism and *Advaitavāda* or non-dualism are based on such interpretations and commentaries made by the founders of these sects. Besides the three Vedantic schools already mentioned, there are also Shākta and Shaiva Vedanta and the Vedanta propounded by Nimbārka, Madhva and Ballavāchārya. However, Madhvāchārya, Rāmānuja and Shankarāchārya are the three outstanding teachers who have put Dvaita, Vishishtādvaita and Advaita philosophies on strong foundations through their respective commentaries on the *Prasthānas*.

In Dvaita Vedanta as propounded by Madhvāchārya, *Ishvara* whom he calls 'Vishnu', is *svatantra* or independent and *jīva* is *paratantra* or dependent. It accepts duality, that is, the devotee and God are two different entities. It holds that *jīva* can never become *Ishvara*.

In the qualified Advaita philosophy of Rāmānuja, the relationship between God and a devotee (*jīva*) is that of a part and the whole. It is *amsha-amshi* relationship. Take a spark, for example. A spark is essentially non-different from a huge fire. The nature of both is the same. The difference lies only in terms of magnitude. Again, think of a wave and the ocean. Is wave essentially different from the ocean? No, but at the same time it is true that it is not the entire ocean. This is what *Vishishtādvaita* of Rāmānuja tells us.

By contrast, in Advaita Vedanta, according to Shankara, only Brahman exists. The Absolute Reality or Brahman is one without a second.

Conflicting sects

Based on these diverse interpretations of great teachers, three distinct schools evolved over the centuries and often they were at loggerheads. The principal commentators of these sects have frequently twisted the meaning of the *Shruti* texts in order to establish their respective viewpoints and sought to suggest they were right and others were wrong. Swami Vivekananda himself has pointed out this shortcoming and narrowness of the otherwise remarkably venerable commentators including Shankara. He says, 'One non-dualistic commentator takes up an Upanishad; there are so many dualistic passages, and he twists and tortures them into some meaning . . . of his own. . . . If a dualistic commentator comes, there are as many non-dualistic texts which he begins to torture, to bring them all round to dualistic meaning.'⁹ Again, 'You find even great commentator like Shankarāchārya making meanings of texts, which, to my mind, sometimes do not seem to be justified.'¹⁰

As a result of these different interpretations sectarian quarrel and animosity persist even today. Each sect believes ardently that it is right and loyal to the Vedas while others are not. I have heard personally some Goswamis of Vrindavan saying that the Advaitists are demons (*rākshasas*) because they do not accept Personal God—in their case, Bhagavān Krishna. In their view, it is blasphemy to say, 'I am God'.

There is no doubt that although the three aforesaid schools or sects belong to Vedanta, they are somewhat one-sided and monotonous. Commonly we think Vedanta means Advaita Vedanta only. But it is not the case. It is only Sri Ramakrishna who has made us to understand in modern times this great truth. None said this before. He says categorically that all the three are but

various aspects or stages of Vedanta.

One may ask: If Vedanta consists of the three schools of philosophy, namely Dvaita, Vishishtādvaita and Advaita, what then is Ramakrishna-Vedanta? Is it the fourth one? Though the Vedanta he believes in is perennial or *Sanātana*, it is something unique in the history of religion because it has recognized all the viewpoints of the three sects and harmonized them. This is the fundamental feature of Ramakrishna-Vedanta. Other Vedantic views are somewhat prejudiced and slanted while the Vedanta Sri Ramakrishna presents is all-embracing and inclusive. One finds there A to Z of spirituality. Swami Vivekananda has shown beyond doubt that the three systems of Vedanta are not contradictory but complementary. They represent different stages or steps of *sādhanā* and understanding of the spiritual aspirants.

Sri Ramakrishna was fond of quoting a statement of Hanumān to highlight his views. Asked by Rāma what he thought of Him, Hanumān replied: '*Deha buddhyā dāsoham; jīva buddhyā tadangshaka; ātmabuddhyā tvamevāham iti me nishchitā matih*'—‘O Rāma, when I think I am the body, then my attitude is that of a humble servant of Yours, and when I think I am a *jīva*, I believe You are the whole and I am your part. But when I feel I am Ātman, then, O Lord, I am rooted in the conviction that You and I are non-different.’

Sri Ramakrishna therefore compared the attitude of the conflicting sects of Vedanta with the attempt of a group of blind persons to describe an elephant. He says:

One of them said the elephant was like a pillar; he had touched only its leg. Another said it was like a winnowing-fan; he had touched only its ear. In this way the others having touched its tail or belly, gave their different versions of the elephant. Just so, a man who has seen only one aspect of God

limits God to that alone. It is his conviction that God cannot be anything else. How can you say that the only truth about God is that He has form? It is undoubtedly true that God comes down to earth in a human form, as in the case of Krishna. And it is true as well that God reveals Himself to His devotees in various forms. But it is also true that God is formless; He is the Indivisible Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. He has been described in the Vedas both as formless and as endowed with form. He is also described there both as attributeless and as endowed with attributes.¹¹

Sri Ramakrishna's attitude

Thus Sri Ramakrishna's view was that you cannot limit God; you cannot say God is only this much and He cannot be otherwise. Instead he says, begin your spiritual journey with *dvaita* (dualism) if you like and then gradually go towards *advaita* (non-dualism). ‘Go forward’ is his real message. That is to say, we should not remain stuck up to a particular point of achievement and understanding of spiritual truth. In the parable of the wood-cutter and a Brahmacharin he illustrates this point.¹² According to the parable, seeing the miserable condition of a poor wood-cutter in a forest, a Brahmacharin advised him to go ahead. Sri Ramakrishna says, he obeyed the injunction and discovered some sandal-wood trees. After a few days he reflected, ‘The holy man asked me to go forward. He didn't tell me to stop here.’ So he went forward and found a silver-mine. After a few days he went still farther and discovered a gold-mine, and next, mines of diamonds and priceless stones. With these he became immensely rich. It is precisely for this reason Swami Vivekananda said that ‘. . . it is good to be born in a church, but it is bad to die there.’¹³

According to the testimony of the Holy Mother Sarada Devi, Sri Ramakrishna was

basically an Advaitist. But in spite of that, he had practised all the Vedanta disciplines, attained God-vision through all kinds of *samādhi* and remained unshakeably rooted in the consciousness of Brahman. Nowhere do we find such an example. All his statements therefore are based on direct, personal and first-hand experiences. He attained *bhāva* and *savikalpa samādhi* (communion with God in which the distinction between subject and object is retained) as a devotee of God, as a follower of dualism. He also attained non-dual *samādhi* (the highest state of *samādhi*, in which the *sādhaka* realizes his total oneness with Brahman, ie *nirvikalpa samādhi*) while practising Advaita. The *Rigveda* declares ‘*Ekam sadviprāh vahudhā vadanti*’—‘The Truth is One, the sages call It by various names’. The actual demonstration of this truth is visible in Sri Ramakrishna’s life.

Sri Ramakrishna-Vedanta is therefore free from all kinds of dogmatism, and this being its second characteristic. It recognizes *Dvaita*, *Vishishtādvaita* and *Advaita*—all the three shades of Vedanta without reservation. He was as much a dualist and qualified-monist as an ardent advaitist. He was everything and much beyond. For this reason, Swamiji has described him as ‘*sarvadharmasvarupine*’—the embodiment of all religious faiths and ‘*bhāvasāgara*’—ocean of infinite spiritual moods. So the followers of Sri Ramakrishna have to remember that they are all Vedantists—doesn’t matter whether they follow dualism or non-dualism.

Sri Ramakrishna is like a chameleon. He assumes many colours and forms for the sake of the devotees. He gives a hint of his nature through the following parable. He says,

A man kept a solution of dye in a tub. Many people came to him to have their clothes dyed. He would ask a customer, ‘What

colour should you like to have your cloth dyed?’ If the customer wanted red, then the man would dip the cloth in the tub and say, ‘Here is your cloth dyed red.’ If another customer wanted his cloth dyed yellow, the man would dip his cloth in the same tub and say, ‘Here is your cloth dyed yellow.’ If a customer wanted his cloth dyed blue, the man would dip it in the same tub and say, ‘Here is your cloth dyed blue.’ Thus he would dye the clothes of his customers different colours, dipping them all in the same solution. One of his customers watched all this with amazement. The man asked him, ‘Well? What colour do you want for your cloth?’ The customer said, ‘Brother, dye my cloth the colour of the dye in your tub.’¹⁴

Sri Ramakrishna is like this wish-fulfilling dyer. He gives us whatever we want. He takes us by hand from wherever we are. He tells the dualist Vedantists, the devotees of God with form: ‘Form any relationship with God you like and call upon Him with great yearning.’ He approves of the ‘I’ of a devotee or that of a servant. He says, this ‘I’ is good and does no harm.

Again, to the qualified-monists he says: Devotion has to be boiled a little in the fire of knowledge. Should you not know Him whom you love a little? He urges them to hold firmly the view—‘O God, You are the whole and I am Your part.’ This is *jnānamishrā bhakti* or devotion mixed with knowledge.

And to those who aspire to follow the extremely sharp path of knowledge and discrimination, he would say that Brahman alone is Real, all else is mere appearance, hence false. It was Narendranath (Swamiji) alone whom he gave this lesson from the very beginning. That is why, even against Narendranath’s aversion, he would make him read to him the *Ashtāvakra Samhitā*, the unsparing Advaitic text.

Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘Kabir was a

worshipper of the Impersonal God. He did not believe in Shiva, Kāli, or Krishna. He used to make fun of them and say that Kāli lived on the offerings of rice and banana, and that Krishna danced like a monkey when the Gopis clapped their hands.¹⁵ But Sri Ramakrishna? What did he say? He said, ‘... I accept God with form when I am in the company of people who believe in that ideal, and I also agree with those who believe in the formless God.’¹⁶ His approach was: Why should I be monotonous? I want to taste fish in various ways—fried fish, fish curry, fish soup, sweet and sour fish and so on.¹⁷ This is the second unique feature of Sri Ramakrishna’s Vedanta.

Other characteristics with special reference to Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta

Thirdly, we find that Āchārya Shankara has given the highest emphasis on attaining *mukti* or *moksha* (liberation). By contrast, for average seekers, though Sri Ramakrishna lays stress on devotion and attaining God-vision through Bhakti and Karma-yoga, he considered *vijnāna* the supreme attainment. What is *vijnāna*? *Vijnāna* is the special knowledge of the Absolute by which one affirms the universe and sees it as the veritable manifestation of Brahman. According to Sri Ramakrishna, this knowledge is much higher than liberation or release from the cycle of birth and death. He says,

... There is a stage beyond even *Brahmajnāna*. After *jnāna* comes *vijnāna*. ... What is *vijnāna*? It is knowing God in a special way. The awareness and conviction that fire exists in wood is *jnāna*, knowledge. But to cook rice on that fire, eat the rice, and get nourishment from it is *vijnāna*. To know by one’s inner experience that God exists is *jnāna*. But to talk to Him, to enjoy Him as Child, as Friend, as Master, as Beloved, is *vijnāna*. The realization that God alone has become the universe and all living beings is *vijnāna*.¹⁸

In some Upanishads such as *Chhāndogya*, *Brihadāranyaka*, *Taittiriya*, *Mundaka* etc, the word *vijnāna* has been used in various senses, especially in the sense of knowledge. But this particular expression—*vijnāni*—I have not come across. Most probably Sri Ramakrishna has coined it. Even if it is not so, it must be said that he has popularized the term and gave it a new depth and dimension.

As Sri Ramakrishna gave *vijnāna* a higher status than ordinary *brahmajnāna*, he condemned his most beloved disciple Narendra who said at one time that he wanted to remain absorbed in *samādhi* like Shukadeva for days, and then come down to eat a little just to maintain his body and then again go up to the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. On hearing this wish of Narendra, Sri Ramakrishna said: ‘Fie on you! You are so selfish! You worry about your own salvation? I thought you will be like a huge banyan tree under whose shade the suffering and miserable humanity would take shelter and rest.’ Narendra then realized his mistake and found a new light from the utterance of the Master.

Once Swami Turiyananda was also reprimanded by Sri Ramakrishna who asked his disciple, ‘Why have you set *nirvāna* as your ideal? There is a higher state than *nirvāna* and it is attainable. Those who are only after *nirvāna* are mean and chicken-hearted. ...’¹⁹

Thus in Ramakrishna-Vedanta, *vijnāna* enjoys a higher status than Shankara’s *moksha* and Buddhist *nirvāna*.

The fourth characteristic of Ramakrishna-Vedanta vis-à-vis Shankara’s Advaita is that non-dual Vedanta does not accept that *Māyā* has any absolute existence. In other words, *Māyā* is unreal because Brahman alone exists, and when one realizes Brahman, for him *Māyā* exists no more. At first Shankara did not even care to recognize

the relative existence of *Māyā* or *Shakti*, but later, of course, he was forced to admit the temporary reality of *Māyā* and its product, the phenomenal world during the state of ignorance. But Sri Ramakrishna, in spite of being an Advaitist, from the very beginning laid stress on the *vyavahārika sattā* or relative existence of *Māyā*. Swami Vivekananda expressed this stand of his Master when he said beautifully that ‘*Māyā* is and is not at the same time.’ It is ‘simply a statement of facts as they exist. . . .’²⁰ Sri Ramakrishna therefore is found praying constantly: ‘O Mother, the great enchantress, please do not bind me with Your world-bewitching *Māyā*, for I have taken your refuge.’ This trait of Sri Ramakrishna is possibly due to the influence of Tantra that he practised under the guidance of Bhairavi Brahmani—Yogeshwari.

It may be mentioned in passing that by ‘*Māyā*’ Tantra refers to *Mahāmāyā* who is *Brahmashakti* or the dynamic eternal power of Brahman. In his later life Shankara also had worshipped *Shakti* and composed hymns to propitiate Mother Bhavāni saying ‘*Gatistvam gatistvam tvamekā Bhavāni*’ (‘O Bhavāni, You are my only refuge’).²¹

The fifth feature of Ramakrishna-Vedanta is that it underscores the great importance of the *grace* of *Māyā*. Self-effort or *purushakāra* is absolutely necessary for Self-realization or God-realization, ie the realization of the Oneness of *jivātmā* and *Paramātmā* or *Jiva* and *Brahma*. But self-effort alone is not enough. Unless *Māyā* steps aside from the door, obstructing the vision of God or the Self, this realization is not possible. In *The Gospel*, Sri Ramakrishna explains this hard truth with the help of the following parable.

Rāma, Lakshmana, and Sitā were walking together. Rāma was in front, Sitā walked in the middle, and Lakshmana followed them. But Lakshmana could not see Rāma because

Sitā was between them. In like manner, man cannot see God because *māyā* is between them. But *māyā* steps aside from the door when God shows His grace to the devotee. When the visitor stands before the door, the door-keeper says to the master, ‘Sir, command us, and we shall let him pass.’²²

In the *Katha Upanishad* (1.2.24) also we find this profound declaration—‘*Yamevaisha vrinute tena labhyastasyaisha ātmā vivrinute tanum svām*’—‘It [this Self] can be known through the Self alone that the aspirant prays to; this Self of that seeker [through Its grace] reveals Its true nature.’

Swami Atulananda, a disciple of the Holy Mother, once asked Swami Turiyananda: ‘Is not Sri Ramakrishna’s message somewhat different from Shankarāchārya’s *Māyāvād* (Theory of *Māyā*)?’ Turiyananda replied: ‘Yes, Shankara has just shown the way of attaining liberation or *nirvāna*. But our Thakur [Sri Ramakrishna] used to liberate man first and then taught him how to live in this world. His divine touch could free one from all fetters. However, those who will follow his advice, they too will get liberation.’²³

Swami Brahmananda, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna, also hinted at this truth one day at Benares. One day, when he went to ‘Lakshmi Nivas’ where Holy Mother Sarada Devi had been staying, Mother asked him through Golap-Ma: ‘Why a devotee propitiates *Shakti*, the Divine Mother, at the beginning of worship?’ The Swami answered, ‘It is because the key to the Knowledge of Brahman is in the Divine Mother’s keeping. There is no way of communing with Brahman unless the Mother graciously unlocks the door.’

The sixth characteristic of Ramakrishna-Vedanta is that it stresses emphatically that *Shakti* has to be accepted. Long before his practice of Advaita, Sri Ramakrishna had

plunged into Tantra *sādhana* and he practised 64 of them and got through them all with flying colours. Sri Ramakrishna's repeated emphasis on *Shakti* is obviously the outcome of that *sādhana*. An interesting point here is that many scholars think that Tantra is non-Vedic. But it is not so. Tantra is *vedamulā*, rooted in the Vedas. This is proved by the episode of Umā Haimavati in the *Kena Upanishad* (I-IV). So Vedanta and Tantra are not essentially antagonistic. The only difference is that Vedanta is *siddhānta-shāstra* or conclusive (deductive) while Tantra is *sādhana-shāstra* or performance-oriented (or ritualistic). Secondly, Vedanta speaks about *Māyā*, while Tantra talks about *Mahāmāyā*. Vedantic *Māyā* has relative existence, but no absolute existence. But Tantra's *Mahāmāyā* is *nityā* (eternal) that transcends Time. Brahman and *Mahāmāyā* or *Brahmamayee* are therefore considered non-different like fire and its power to burn, as Sri Ramakrishna used to say.

So, Vedantic knowledge, according to Sri Ramakrishna, remains incomplete and partial if *Shakti* is not accepted. That is why he induced even his Advaitic Guru Totapuri, who had the knowledge of Brahman, to recognize the Eternal Mother. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, so long as one has a body one is under the domain of *Māyā* or *Mahāmāyā* even though he is a knower of Brahman—no escape!

Nitya and Lilā

The seventh characteristic of Ramakrishna-Vedanta is that, in spite of being an Advaitist, he accepted *Lilā* (the divine play of God or the relative). Not only that he accepted it, he has said categorically that 'both *Nitya* (the Absolute) and *Lilā* (the relative) are the two aspects of the same Reality.' Again, '... if you accept the *Nitya*, you must also accept the *Lilā*. It is the process of negation and affirmation. You

realize the *Nitya* by negating the *Lilā*. Then you affirm the *Lilā*, seeing in it the manifestation of *Nitya*. One attains this state after realizing Reality in both aspects: Personal and Impersonal. The Personal is the embodiment of Chit, Consciousness; and the Impersonal is the Indivisible Satchidānanda. Brahman alone has become everything.'²⁴ Again, he said, 'That you call Brahman, I call It Kāli.' 'Kāli is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kāli. It is one and the same Reality.'²⁵

The Ramakrishna-Vedanta has another special feature. It is distinguished by the concept of *Vidyā-māyā* and *avidyā-māyā* which is not found so explicitly elsewhere. He says, both belong to the realm of *Māyā*. *Vidyāmāyā* is the *Māyā* of knowledge and *avidyāmāyā* is the *Māyā* of ignorance. The former endows one with knowledge, devotion, compassion and renunciation and leads him to God, while the latter takes him away from God and throws him in the cauldron of perishable world. How to get rid of this *samsāra* of birth and death, disease and decay? Sri Ramakrishna says, 'Suppose a thorn has pierced a man's foot. He picks another thorn to pull out the first one. After extracting the first thorn with the help of the second, he throws both away. One should use the thorn of knowledge to pull out the thorn of ignorance. Then one throws away both the thorns, knowledge and ignorance, and attains *vijnāna*.'²⁶

The ninth characteristic of Ramakrishna-Vedanta vis-à-vis Advaitist Shankara is that Shankara had acknowledged the path of devotion as valid for the so-called 'lesser' aspirants and composed for them many wonderful hymns in praise of different deities. Nevertheless, many scholars think that the Achārya's attitude was that the Advaitists were much superior to the dualists and his adherents particularly took pity on them. But Sri

Ramakrishna repudiated such presumptuous outlook. His stand was that each one's attitude or *bhāva* is best for him. That is why one should hold onto one's ideal and path sincerely with unflinching faith, devoid of any sense of superiority or inferiority. None is superior and none is inferior—that was what he believed and preached. That is why he said often that the devotees too can attain the knowledge of the Absolute. 'Let me tell you that the realization of Self is possible for all, without any exception', he said.²⁷ But most devotees do not want it. His conclusion was: 'Perfect jñāna and perfect bhakti are one and the same thing.'²⁸

The theory of Incarnation

Again, Advaita Vedanta does not accept the notion of *Avatāras* or Incarnations. According to the Advaitists, Godheads such as Rāma, Krishna and others are but small waves of the Infinite ocean of Pure Consciousness or Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute (*Sat-chit-ānanda*). But Sri Ramakrishna, despite being an Advaitist, did not repudiate the idea of Incarnations. On the contrary, over and over again he said, '... we see God Himself if we but see His Incarnation.'²⁹ And on several occasions he dropped a hint that he was an Incarnation of God. One day, for example, he said to his young disciples: 'There is no outsider here. The other day, when Harish was with me, I saw Satchidānanda come out of this sheath [meaning his body]. It said, "I incarnate Myself in every age." I thought that I myself was saying these words out of mere fancy. I kept quiet and watched. Again Satchidānanda Itself spoke, saying, "Chaitanya, too, worshipped Shakti".' Then he told Sri M., 'saw that it is the fullest manifestation of Satchidānanda; but this time the Divine Power is manifested through the glory of sattva.'³⁰ Again, a few days before he passed away, when Narendra was

alone by the bedside of the Master and thought, 'If in the midst of this racking physical pain he declares his Godhead, then only shall I accept him as an Incarnation of God', Sri Ramakrishna said distinctly, 'He who was Rāma and Krishna is now, in this body, Ramakrishna—but not in your Vedantic sense.'³¹ So this is another characteristic of Ramakrishna-Vedanta.

The eleventh characteristic of Ramakrishna-Vedanta is that it has harmonized the non-dual philosophy with dualism through the practical application of the former as a mode of serving *jīva* as Shiva. If according to the Advaita philosophy, *jīva* is essentially Shiva, *jīva* is verily Brahman—'*jīva brahmaiva nā parah*'—, then why the loving service to the living gods should not be considered as a higher form of worship of Shiva? None other than Sri Ramakrishna has put the absolute Advaitic truth into effect in our everyday life. Swami Vivekananda has based his philosophy of Karma-Yoga and the activities of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission on this wonderful aspect of Ramakrishna-Vedanta. Ramakrishna-Vedanta therefore does not make us inactive; rather it inspires us to love the world as the manifestation of Brahman, as the manifestation of God or *Ishvara*, and makes us active and dynamic. Thus it has removed the false barrier or distinction between the sacred and secular.

The thirteenth special feature of Ramakrishna-Vedanta is its catholicity. As a matter of fact, Advaita philosophy is rooted in the doctrine of oneness or sameness or *samatva*. The Upanishads say, '*Sarvam khalu idam brahma*'. Therefore there is no room for privilege in Advaita. But Shankara, in spite of being a staunch Advaitist and propounder of non-dual philosophy, had to abide by the norms of conventional caste system. He could not ignore the rigid caste

distinctions. As such he turned out to be an upholder of *adhikārivāda*, that is to say, he did not allow men of the so-called low caste to study Vedanta. But what do we find in Sri Ramakrishna? He stated categorically that ‘Lovers of God do not belong to any caste. The mind, body, and soul of a man become purified through divine love. . . . A brāhmin without this love is no longer a brāhmin. And a pariah with the love of God is no longer a pariah. Through bhakti an untouchable becomes pure and elevated.’³²

Next, the conclusion of Advaita Vedanta is that Ātman is free from gender or sex-distinction because It is the One Undivided Existence. In spite of that, Shankara, the great Advaitist, did not recognize women’s right to study scriptures. But what do we find in Sri Ramakrishna? He accepted Bhairavi Brāhmani Yogeshwari as his Guru and practised Tantra under her guidance; he had worshipped Kāli, the female form of God, and viewed all women as the living manifestations of Primordial Energy or *Adyāshakti*. Is it all? No, he had worshipped ceremoniously his wife as Goddess Tripurasundari and respected her as her spiritual partner. During his last days he told her: ‘What have I done? You will have to do much, more than what I have done.’

Again, look at the lives of Advaitist Shankara and Advaitist Ramakrishna and mark their difference. Shankara lived the life of a stern ascetic. He was so rigorous and unrelenting a sannyasin that he did not allow even the faintest shadow of *Māyā* to fall on his person. By contrast, in spite of being the gem of a sannyasin and acme of renunciation, so unflinchingly rooted he was in the Advaitic dictum—*jīva* is of the nature of Brahman—that he even dared to play with fire! He tested the purity and invincibility of his *brahmajnāna* by rubbing on the touchstone of daily life of a householder. He shared the bed with his wife, Sarada Devi,

for eight months at a stretch. All the same, his mind would remain in *samādhi*! It was a phenomenal spectacle!

Finally, Shankara has developed the judgemental and logical aspects of non-dual Vedanta, while Ramakrishna has consolidated its humanistic and emotional aspects.

Conclusion

Sri Ramakrishna used to say, ‘A coin of the time of the Nawab is not legal tender during the period of the Badshas.’³³ Therefore he resuscitated the perennial Vedanta in such a lively manner that people of all nations, from all walks of life, may practise it and be free in this very life. Swami Vivekananda later presented it as ‘Practical Vedanta’. This Ramakrishna-Vedanta is comprehensive and all-inclusive, hence universal. The world today has started appreciating this Vedanta.

We need now to reflect seriously on the peerless life of Sri Ramakrishna in order to realize the profound implications of the Vedanta he professed. We get amazed how simply yet wittily he presents to us the essence and purport of the three streams of Vedanta with the help of parables and his extraordinary spiritual experiences. Indeed, many of us feel dizzy when we study the *Brahmasutras*, *Yogavāshishtha*, *Panchadashi*, *Ashtāvakrasamhitā*, *Advaitasiddhi*, *Vivekachudāmani* and the *bhāshyas* of Shankara, Rāmānuja, Madhva and others. But we feel a kind of divine intoxication when we read *Lilāprasanga* (*Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*), *Kathamrita* (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*), and Swami Vivekananda’s *Vani O Rachana* (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*). All confusion then disappears, giving rise in us an awareness of cosmic unity and oneness of existence.

We started this discussion with an

encounter of Harinath (later Swami Turiyananda) with Sri Ramakrishna. I intend to sum it up with a statement made by the great Vedantist a few moments before he passed away. He declared emphatically—‘Everything is real. Brahman is real. The world is real. The world is Brahman. The life force is established in Truth.’³⁴ This is the highest point of Ramakrishna-Vedanta, the reverberation of which we hear in the following peace chant of the *Shuklayajurveda*:

*Om purnamadah purnamidam purnāt
purnamudacyate /
Purnasya purnamādāya
purnamevāvashishyate //*

That is to say, *Parabrahma* or supreme Brahman is *purna* or infinite. Similarly,

aparabrahma or conditioned Brahman, that is, Brahman conditioned by names and forms, too is *purna* or infinite because the latter comes from the former. Then, through knowledge, when we remove the attributes of the infinite conditioned brahman (*kāryabrahma*), the infinite unconditioned Brahman alone remains. This is the Absolute Truth. Sri Ramakrishna, Turiyanandaji said, is the embodiment of this Truth and Knowledge. This Truth has to be realized. Otherwise there is no hope of transcending death and become immortal. The Rishi of the *Shvetāshvatara Upanishad* said—

*Vedāhametam purusham mahāntam
Ādityavarnam tamash parastāt;
Tameva viditvā ati mrityumeti
Nānyah panthā vidyate ayanāya.*³⁵ ■

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