

that she had seen and known the manifest divinity of the Master, the Mother wanted the devotees to have firm faith in Sri Ramakrishna and in the ways of all-engulfing love in which he moved and lived. We see faults in others only when we lack love. But we shall cease to find faults in them and thus gain abiding peace, if we begin to love them. And the only way of making others one's own is to win over them by loving care and service, by giving help and consolation and what little we can without asking for a return. This is what the Holy Mother did and taught.

RELEVANCE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA TO MODERN LIFE

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

Nearly a century ago when Sri Ramakrishna, the priest of Dakshineswar Kali temple, breathed his last very few people realized the far-reaching influence his message was going to have in the days to come. Seven miles away from Calcutta, the metropolis of western culture in India in those days, this virtually unlettered priest lived a life of constant communion with God, absolutely oblivious of the social norms of the so-called cultured and the educated. Yet society veered round him. After nearly 75 years of his Mahasamadhi, Ramakrishna slowly began to emerge as the pathfinder for the modern times. Arnold J. Toynbee concluded his monumental *Study of History* with the idea that today's problems are neither economic nor social, nor scientific. They are primarily spiritual. After coming in contact with Ramakrishna's life and message, he wrote:

Sri Ramakrishna was born and brought up in a village in Bengal. He spent most of his life in a temple on the bank of the Ganges, only a few miles away from Calcutta. Outwardly his life might seem uneventful. Yet in his own field, the field of religion his life was much more active and more effective than the lives of his contemporaries, Indian and English, who were building the framework of modern India in Sri Ramakrishna's lifetime. Perhaps Sri Ramakrishna's life was even more modern than theirs, in the sense

that his work may have a still greater future than theirs.¹

Ramakrishna brought the power of religion to solve the problems of life. He brought, as it was often said by his disciples, the Vedanta of the forest to the homes of life. With him Vedanta, the eternal values of India's spiritual culture, became practical and effective in solving day-to-day problems of life.

Problems are and will always be there in human life. Except two, none is free from problems: the perfect being who has transcended them, and the perfect fool who does not understand them. All other human beings in-between these two extremes, at various levels of evolution, are beset with them. Modern world, notwithstanding all the wonders that have been wrought by science and technology raising our civilization to higher levels of comforts, has multiplied psychic problems and tensions. If lack of basic amenities of life worries certain segments of the world society, a surfeit of them is threatening life on earth itself in other sections. The various problems that our society is facing at the individual level (like alcoholism, drug-addiction, and sex-

1. *Vedanta and the West*, Hollywood Vedanta Centre, No. 141 (Jan-Feb, 1966). p. 9,

perversions), social or national level (like exploitation, crimes, and violence, group animosities, and conflicts based on pride and prejudice), and the inter-national level (like wars, and violations of human rights) are all, in the ultimate analysis, simply the symptoms of a sick mind. Today's problems have to be tackled at a more fundamental level and more fundamental solutions have to be found and applied.

This is what we find in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna who stood out, in the vision of Vivekananda, 'as an object lesson for future generations'. Ramakrishna (1836-1886) more known as the 'Parma-hansa' is the brightest star that rose on the spiritual firmament of India in the nineteenth century. Born of pious parents in the tiny village of Kamarpukur in a remote part of Bengal (b. 18 February 1836), he spent his early life there itself. Ever since he shifted to Calcutta in 1852 to assist his elder brother, until his Mahasamadhi on the 16 August 1886, it was a long life of total dedication to God. Starting his life as an unknown temple priest—the vocation which was not considered as a very honourable one—he rose to be a world-teacher of religion and spirituality, by dint of intense austerity culminating in an uniquely comprehensive spiri-experience. From simple image worship right up to the highest flights of Advaita philosophy, the whole gamut of Indian spiritual culture, was traversed by him. Not being satisfied with it, he experimented with alien religions like Christianity and Islam, and found, to his joy that they too lead to the same super-conscious mystic state. Being thus armed with the direct experience of Truth through the known and unknown paths of various cults and religions, he proclaimed the great message of his life: *Harmony*; harmony not only of religions but of *all* aspects of life, within the framework of the ultimate spiritual welfare of man. He specially prepared a band of disciples under the leadership of Narendra-

nath (Swami Vivekananda) to give a practical shape to his teachings and spread them far and wide for the benefit of humanity. Through Sri Sarada Devi, his consort, he exhibited to the world the possibility of raising conjugal life to the highest spiritual level and the nature of universal motherhood.

Thanks to Mahendranath Gupta (pseudonym 'M'), Ramakrishna's teachings have come down to us in abundance. M's book *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, is an all-time classic by any standard. Even a cursory glance at the book will reveal the refrain of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings: *Bhagavan labh*, 'realization of God' as the only goal of life, and *kama-kanchana-tyaga* 'renunciation of lust and lucre' as the essence of spiritual life. To modern man deifying sex and material wealth, day in and day out, these solutions of Sri Ramakrishna appeared ridiculous some fifty years before. Today, however, his ideas are appealing to modern mind due to the socio-economic changes that have taken place. The Marxian concept of the economic determination of life is today put to severe doubt. Only money cannot solve the problems of the psyche which plague modern generation, especially the youth. In December 1984, the *People's Daily*, China's official news organ, openly declared that China has rejected the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin as their ideas do not apply to modern problems of China. The recent *Glasnost*, the liberalization policy in Russia, is a pointer to the same direction. The Freudian slogan of giving free release to impulses is largely responsible for bringing the black angel of AIDS which, according to recent statistics, may claim lakhs of lives by the end of this century. One can even find such slogans in the schools of some of the most advanced societies—spare the Freud and save the child.

When Sri Ramakrishna used the word *kama-kanchana-tyaga* or 'renunciation of lust

and lucre' he did not ask everyone to embrace monastic life. If the young men who were earmarked by him for a life of total renunciation and dedication, were advised 'not even to look at the picture of a woman' or to look upon *all* women as aspects of the Divine Mother, the householder couples were directed to live like 'brother and sister' after the birth of one or two children. He himself worshipped his own wife as the Divine Mother, and remained absolutely chaste throughout his life. If he himself had practised renunciation of money to such an extent that he could not even bear the least touch of metal, or reject outright the fabulous gifts by his admirers, he permitted a young disciple of his to earn money to take care of his mother. He even admonished severely an errant householder who had squandered his ancestral wealth by fast living, and who had abandoned his family, leaving them at the mercy of others. In other words, he tailored his teachings to suit the needs and capacities of his disciples, but always leading them, gradually though, to higher levels of spiritual perfection. To him none was damned, none was too bad to be reformed. He knew that everyone was groping at lower levels of development, and had to be led up to higher ones.

Almost all the problems that the modern man is facing, whatever be their ramifications, can ultimately be traced to two basic infirmities of the human mind: lust and greed. It is these two that manifest themselves through various desires. These desires, when unfulfilled, lead to frustrations and complexes. When fulfilled, instead of getting satiated, they grow further in intensity, like the fire that consumes inflammable substances. It is a strange fact that as desires are fulfilled in arithmetic progression, they seem to grow further in geometric progression! Fulfilment or satiation can never catch up with the desires: This will again lead to the same old result of frustration with all its concomitant evils.

At the same time total abandonment of all desires is a chimera except for the spiritually perfected being. So, the only way left for an ordinary person is to regulate his lust and greed, within the permitted perimeters of Dharma (the Law) as sanctioned by the scriptures, and gradually overcome them through disciplines prescribed for them. This is what Sri Ramakrishna taught to his householder disciples. One must cling to God with one hand and perform worldly duties with the other. When the worldly responsibilities are over, the mind will go to God and the renunciation of lust and greed will only be natural. Placing a limit on our lust and greed, and trying to gradually transcend them is a primary solution even for our complex problems. Given the chance of its trial it deserves, it can certainly prove its worthiness to us in our lives—both individual and social, as also national and international.

Another great message of Sri Ramakrishna is *Harmony*. Harmony of notes is a well-known concept in music. When various notes, differing in pitch and volume, coalesce, without jarring one another in any way, harmonious music is produced. And, such a music is a feast for the ears. So also, when the spiritual and the material aspects of our personal and social life, coalesce as to bring a successful life, we feel ready to proceed towards *Nisreyas* or a life of spiritual perfection.

The materialists consider themselves a combination of body and mind. They do not care for the Spirit, the undying Self the divinity within. On the other hand, the spiritual teachers, especially in the post-Vedic India, almost invariably relegated and even derided the role of the body, often picturing it as filthy and a formidable obstacle to spiritual progress. But Sri Ramakrishna's approach is positive and full of respect for life. He advised the ordinary aspirants to care for the body since the body is a great aid in obtaining spiritual experi-

enece. At the same time he taught, like Buddha, to make all possible sacrifice for God realization. He was conscious of the minimum needs of the body. He practically demonstrated this teaching in his life by arranging for treatment, nursing and nourishment of his wife or disciples whenever they fell ill. But with all this, he never approved bestowal of too much of attention on it, lest it develops into inordinate body-consciousness which is a great obstacle to spiritual progress, the ultimate goal of life. His discouragement of Hatha Yoga should be viewed from this angle.

Speech is the second aspect of our personality. Sri Ramakrishna used to teach that to speak the truth is the greatest austerity in this age. Ramakrishna's truthfulness was phenomenal. He was the very symbol of truth. Yet he never hurt others. Ramakrishna never condemned anyone. He only loved. In today's society even the educated and civilized people have assiduously cultivated the art of speaking untruths and half-truths to a degree of sophistication unknown, perhaps, in our previous history. Ramakrishna's life of absolute truthfulness may seem an impossibility for others. But this, nevertheless, is the ideal. Truth ultimately wins and brings fulfilment. Ramakrishna's life teaches us this great lesson. Have we ever, even for a moment, stopped to think of the disastrous consequences if everyone starts telling lies to everyone else? One cannot say that one can tell a lie or the truth as it suits one. One must not be a thief in the room of ideas, Ramakrishna used to say. He meant that one must shun hypocrisy and must try to make his words coincide with the thoughts in his mind.

Mind is the most important aspect of our personality. It is the quality of our mind that makes or mars our life. Uninformed people sometimes talk flippantly that Ramakrishna, himself being a 'non-intellectual', disdained and discouraged intellectualism. Far from it. Though he had had little schoo-

ling, he had 'heard much', as he himself confesses, from great intellectuals and sincere seekers. And, he had a photographic memory! He used to delight in explaining religio-philosophical truths, and would even encourage his disciple to read tough texts like the *Ashtavakra Samhita* or have friendly debates and discussions on metaphysical topics. What he really disliked and discouraged was dry intellectualism meant for public consumption, and not for self-realization.

As regards the spiritualisation of emotions and the aesthetic spirit, Ramakrishna was a supreme artist. Himself an adept in various fine arts like music, painting and clay-modelling, he could also appreciate the beauties of nature. It is now a well-known fact that his very first samadhi (superconscious experience) was brought about by the sight of an exquisitely beautiful scene of nature. He was sensitive to high class poetry and would often improvise lines, very aptly, when the matchless compositions of the poet mystics of Bengal (like Ramprasad and Kamalakanta) were being sung. He exulted in singing devotional songs in his golden voice, and delighted in listening to good music—as that of Narendranath or Trailokyanath. As regards the purity of emotions he was the last word. The whole philosophy of his life was, that all our faculties—physical, vocal, intellectual, aesthetic and emotional—should be directed to one single purpose of life, viz., God-experience. If this is not harmony of life and harmony in life, what else can it be?

Rama upheld the highest principles of Dharma in his life. Krishna fought relentlessly to destroy the enemies of Dharma and gave us a dynamic philosophy of work. Buddha and Mahavira quietly brought about the burial of the meaningless labyrinth of ritualism and substituted it with simple moral values based on non-violence and mutual love. Shankara heralded a revolution in metaphysical speculations and restored intellectualism to a respectable position.

Chaitanya, Nanak and a galaxy of saints of the Bhakti schools, brought back sanity into a society riven by caste-prejudices and ridden with superstitions, and strengthened the social fabric by preaching a philosophy of mutual love and respect. Everyone of them, without exception, fulfilled the needs of his times, both by precept and by practice.

The same Supreme Power that manifested through these incarnations, saints and sages, either partially or otherwise, has come down once again to show us the way, away from the way leading to total destruction of mankind; the way to universal fulfilment through individual fulfilment by a harmoni-

ous and God-oriented development of all aspects of human personality. And in this, the role of self-control, fidelity to truth and God-centred living as taught by him stands supreme.

Ramakrishna's message stands as the way out of modern problems. We are too near Sri Ramakrishna in time to understand the true impact of his epoch-making message. But, if the vision of Vivekananda is to be believed, the world is already Ramakrishna's! Even if we do not believe this, we can ignore Ramakrishna's message of harmony and self-control only at our own peril.

EGO AND SELF

DR. MARGARET BEDROSIAN

Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the selfsame tree. The former tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the latter, tasting of neither, calmly observes.

The individual self, deluded by forgetfulness of his identity with the divine Self, bewildered by his ego, grieves and is sad. But when he recognizes the worshipful Lord as his own true Self, and beholds his glory, he grieves no more.¹

This famous passage from the *Mundaka Upanishad* essentializes the central task of the spiritual quest, our need to discover the identity of the individual self and the divine Self. It also draws our attention to the "bewildered ego" and its bewildering role in this process of discovery. It reminds us that only after we have developed a clear understanding of the relationship between

the ego and the Self can the two golden birds emerge in the fullness of their beauty. As we begin to make friends with the ego and help it take its proper place in our growth, we come to appreciate it for what it is, a marvellous instrument designed by evolution to make possible greater and greater levels of Self-realization. But before we are able to consciously direct the powers of this instrument toward expressing the will of the Self, we have to go through an extensive period of sorting out: as the scriptures teach, we have to distinguish between the proper functions of ego and the primary will of the Self.

The term "ego" carries many divergent connotations in everyday speech. When we use it in its descriptive form, as in the word "egotistical," images of self-involvement, selfishness, self-aggrandizement, and conceit appear in our minds. We usually associate puffed up bellies and swollen heads, haughty looks and booming voices with the notion of egotistical. Even those who seem to

1. *Mundaka Upanishad*, *The Upanishads*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester (Hollywood, California: Vedanta Society of Southern California, 1948), pp. 46-47.