

## RELEVANCE OF RAMAKRISHNA TO MODERN LIFE

Life is full of problems; modern life is full of modern problems. None is free from them except two: the perfect being who has transcended them and the perfect idiot who does not understand them. All other human beings in between these two extremes, at various levels of evolution, are beset with them. And, ironically enough, our modern world, notwithstanding all the wonders that have been wrought by science and technology, in spite of raising our civilization to higher levels of comforts, has also multiplied them. 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. Both these, though it may appear rather strange, are the creations of the modern civilization.

Problems and worries beget tensions. Tensions adversely affect the individuals, often forcing them to react more adversely, thereby getting entangled more deeply.

If a disease is to be rooted out, any sensible doctor knows that it should be tackled at the root-level and not at the symptom-level. The various problems that our society is facing at the individual level (like alcoholism, drug-addiction, sex-perversions and orgies), social or national level (like exploitation, crimes and violence, group animosities and conflicts based on pride and prejudice) and the international level (like wars and violations of human rights) are all, in the ultimate analysis, simply the symptoms of a sick mind. Hence all our problems have to be tackled at a more fundamental level and more fundamental solutions have to be found and applied.

This is exactly what Ramakrishna has given us.

Ramakrishna (1836-1886), better known as the 'Paramahansa,' is the brightest star that rose on the spiritual firmament of the India of the nineteenth century. Born of pious parents in the tiny village of Kamarpukur in a remote part of Bengal (b. 18th 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 16th August 1886, it was a long life of total dedication to God. Starting his life as an unknown temple priest- which vocation 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 a uniquely comprehensive spiritual experience. From simple image worship right up to the highest flights of Advaita philosophy, the whole gamut of Indian spiritual life was traversed by him. Not being satisfied with it, he experimented with alien religions like Christianity and Islam and found, to his amazement, that they too lead to the same superconscious mystic state. Being thus armed with the direct experience of Truth through the known paths of various cults and religions, he proclaimed the great message of his life: HARMONY; harmony 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 Narendranath (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 Mahendranatha 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 standards. Even a cursory glance at the book will reveal the refrain of Ramakrishna's teachings: *Kama-kanchana-tyaga*, 'renunciation of lust and lucre'.

To our 'modern' friends, the products of a 'modern' society, which is deifying sex and material wealth, day in and day out, this solution of Ramakrishna may appear to be simply ridiculous. But, it is often the ridiculously simple things that are the greatest truths of life!

True, Ramakrishna was a village rustic, 'uneducated' in the modern sense of the term. But the subtlety of his intellect or the range and the depth of his wisdom were beyond compare since they came from the beyond. Scholars of repute and confirmed agnostics would be disarmed by his simple, yet majestic, teachings because he always spoke out of the fulness of intuitive wisdom.

When Ramakrishna used the word *kama-kanchana-tyaga* or 'renunciation of lust and lucre', he did not use it in the absolute sense. He was not that naive as to attempt to fit the same helmet to everyone's head! His was a cap with an elastic band. It could even change its colours and hues if need be. But it never lost its 'capness,' the capacity to protect and adorn the head that cared to wear it. 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. It is good to remind ourselves here that he 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 had abandoned his family, leaving them to 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.

It should not be presumed that Ramakrishna has given individual solutions to every conceivable modern problem. No sage, saint or godman has ever done that. What Ramakrishna has done is to give a basic and time-tested solution, after verifying it in his own life. Given the will and the honesty, and a modicum of intelligence, anyone can easily derive and devise the right solutions to his problems from this basic teaching.

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 satisfied, they grow further in

intensity even as fire that consumes inflammable substances does. It is a strange fact that as desires are fulfilled in arithmetic progression, they seem to grow in geometric progression! Fulfillment 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.

If thus, the fulfillment of all desires to one's utter satisfaction is utterly impossible, 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 parameters of Dharma (the law) as sanctioned by the scriptures and gradually overcome them through disciplines prescribed for them. This is all that Ramakrishna means when he uses the word *kama-kanchana-tyaga* and hence, none need be scared of it.

If only our modern man can give this time-tested principle a fair degree of trial, he will not only understand that it works, but also that it reduces our problems, frustrations and tensions to manageable proportions, if not eliminate them. It is not possible, in a short essay like this, to deal with all the details or all aspects of all our problems. We can at best give a direction to the line of thinking, point out fresher or newer vistas for solving our problems. No one has ever heard of venereal diseases among dogs or juvenile delinquency among kittens! Why not man, the crown of God's creation, take a lesson or two from the animal kingdom? They are not gluttonous or lecherous. They always keep within the limits of their biological instincts. (Even if they transgress, it is pardonable since they are, after all, beasts and not 'brainy beings' like us!) So, 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 it deserves, it can certainly prove its worthiness to us in our lives-both individual and social, as also national and international.

As already pointed out, the central message of Ramakrishna's life is harmony. More often than not, this word 'harmony' has been restricted to harmony of religions and philosophies only. But Ramakrishna's life and message being the very epitome of universalism, cannot stand such constrictions and confinements.

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 various aspects of our personal life and social life, so coalesce as to bring out the very best in us, it produces that 'divine music' or the 'music of the spheres.' And this is harmony in the truest sense of the term. It is this harmony that Ramakrishna has really taught.

It is common knowledge that the over-whelming majority of us consider ourselves as a combination of body and mind. Whatever we do, or want to do, we achieve through these two. Spiritual teachers, especially in the post-Vedic India, almost invariably relegated, even derided, the role of the body, often picturing it as filthy and as a formidable obstacle to spiritual progress. But Ramakrishna's approach is refreshingly different. He advises us to care for the body since the Lord Himself resides in it! And the body is a great aid in obtaining spiritual experience. Don't we cautiously protect even an ordinary wooden box if we know that it contains gold ornaments or jewellery? Ramakrishna practically demonstrated this principle in

his life by arranging for treatment, nursing and nourishment, of his wife or disciples whenever they fell ill. He too, unhesitatingly, underwent treatment whenever he was sick.

But, with all this, he never approved bestowal of too much attention on it, lest it develop 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. We know that speech can make and unmake human relationships, can bring bliss or cause blisters on the mind.

Following in the footsteps of the great ancient sages, Ramakrishna gives us a simple prescription : Speak the truth; but, do it gently so that it does not hurt. In a society where 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, this simple remedy of Ramakrishna may appear like the blabbering of a Simple Simon. But, have we ever, even for a moment, stopped to think of the disastrous consequences if everyone starts telling lies to everyone else? Again, one cannot say that one can tell a lie or the truth as it suits one. You cannot declare that fire does not burn, then, keep your hand in fire and expect not to be burnt! So, the truth of the whole matter is that speaking the truth, sincerely, is an eternal truth that deserves to be taken in all seriousness.

Mind is the third, and perhaps, 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 little schooling, 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 disciples 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 cultivation 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 Kamalakantha) 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 fulfillment through individual fulfillment by a harmonious development of all aspects of human personality. And in this, the role of self-control as taught by him cannot be overemphasized.

Ramakrishna's message of harmony and self-control, is admirably tailored to fit the modern society which is now in the throes of greed, lust and consequent conflicts often leading to conflagrations. May be, we are too near him in time to understand the true impact of his tremendous 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 Rama-krishna's message of harmony and self-control only at our grave peril.