

Sri Ramakrishna, the Teacher Supreme

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(The air today is rife with eloquent talk about man-making, character-building education as the panacea for all our ills. But education is essentially the interaction between the teacher and the taught. So everything revolves round the qualities of the Guru and the Sishya. Swami Harshananda, Head of Ramakrishna Math, Allahabad, and a veteran educationist, elucidates how Sri Ramakrishna, who came to revalidate many verities, embodies in himself all the excellences that go to make a good teacher, who ipso facto must also be a good student.)

WHILE eulogising knowledge, Bhartrhari, the author of the famous didactic poem *Nīṭisataka* says that a person without knowledge is a brute (verse 17). It is knowledge that raises a person from the brute level to the human level and ultimately, to the divine level. Secular knowledge gives a man the capacity to earn his livelihood, to take care of himself and his family and live a decent life in the society. Spiritual wisdom, on the other hand, helps him to transcend all human weaknesses and limitations, and rise to superhuman heights.

The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (1.1.10) declares that whatever is done with full knowledge and understanding becomes more effective. It further emphasizes (4.9.3) that, 'Knowledge acquired from teachers alone surely becomes well-established.' So, apart from the fact that knowledge is necessary, that it should be acquired from a competent teacher to become effective, is equally important.

This has naturally led our ancient thinkers to delineate, or even to prescribe, the qualifications for a good teacher as well as for a student.

The foremost qualification that a student must possess is a genuine desire to learn. It is only a hungry man that can really relish food. Similarly, it is the earnest student eager to learn that can really learn and enjoy it. The second qualification required of him is

humility. If knowledge imparts humility to a person by making him realize how little he knows compared to what is yet to be known, the opposite should equally hold good. If one wants knowledge, he should be humble, especially before them from whom he wishes to learn. The third requisite, which is a corollary of humility, is obedience to the teacher. This is a necessary virtue since it often takes time for the teachings to sink into the mind of the student and flower out from there. So, the student must have patience and obediently accept the teaching. This however does not mean intellectual slavery. He is free to ask intelligent and searching questions in the process of exploring new horizons of knowledge, to solve his doubts and get clarity of understanding. Lastly, the student is advised to offer useful personal service to the teacher (vide *Bhagavad Gita* 4.34). This advice, of course, was delivered when the Gurukula system was in vogue where the students used to live with their teachers. In the modern context, it can be interpreted as an advice to establish a personal rapport with the teacher.

As to the qualifications of a teacher, especially in the secular field, it is said that he should possess three kinds of love: love of knowledge, love of teaching and love of students. Since acquisition of knowledge is a continuing process, a good teacher is ever eager to learn

more and more. He is equally eager to impart to his students what he has learnt by adopting suitable techniques and methods. Again, teaching being a transference of knowledge from one living mind to another living mind, it becomes smooth and easy when the two minds are in rapport through love. Hence the emphasis on loving one's students.

Now, let us turn our attention to Sri Ramakrishna and see whether and how he fits into this framework of a teacher. A good teacher is a good student first. And Sri Ramakrishna who unhesitatingly declared, 'As long as I live, so long do I learn!' was an eternal student, ever eager to learn. When he was not in Samadhi or in any overpowering spiritual state, he would observe things with a keen eye and ascertain their truth through searching questions. Two incidents from his life need particular mention here. He was once taken to a photographer's studio. Since he evinced some interest in the process of photography he was shown round the studio. There it was explained to him how a plain glass sheet can get the image permanently impressed upon it when coated with certain chemicals. On another occasion, he was taken to the Calcutta museum. He saw the fossil of an animal there. The authorities of the museum explained to him how a live animal, when buried under heavy mass of earth and rocks, gets converted into a stony formation after a few thousand years. Both these pieces of information created a lot of excitement in him.

After returning to Dakshineswar he used these two principles very effectively to convey some wonderful truths of spiritual life to his devotees and disciples. While talking to Keshav Chandra Sen at Dakshineswar, he said: 'Today I enjoyed very much the machine by which a man's picture is taken. One thing I noticed was that the impression doesn't stay on a bare piece of glass, but it remains when the glass is stained with a black solution. In the same way, mere hearing of spiritual talk doesn't leave any impression. People forget it soon

afterwards. But they can retain spiritual instruction if they are stained inside with earnestness and devotion.' (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 1947 edn., p. 1013)

On another occasion, addressing the devotees that had gathered in his room at Dakshineswar, he spoke thus: 'I visited the museum once. I was shown fossils. A whole animal has become stone! Just see what an effect has been produced by company! Likewise, by constantly living in the company of a holy man one verily becomes holy!' (*ibid*, p. 349-350)

Recounting another incident here will not be out of place. Once Sri Ramakrishna was taken to see a circus. One of the most exciting feats exhibited there was by an Englishwoman. She stood on one foot on the back of a horse which was racing round a circular track. Above the track large iron rings had been hung. As the horse raced round the track, the woman would jump through the iron rings, always alighting on one foot on the horse's back. Sri Ramakrishna enjoyed this thoroughly. Later on, he remarked to the devotees: 'Did you see how that Englishwoman stood on one foot on her horse, while it ran like lightning? How difficult a feat that must be! She must have practised a long time. The slightest carelessness and she would break her arms or legs; she might even be killed. One faces the same difficulty leading the life of a householder. A few succeed in it through the grace of God and as a result of their spiritual practice. But most people fail... A few only like Janaka have succeeded, through the power of their austerity.. Therefore, spiritual practice is extremely necessary; otherwise one cannot rightly live in the world.' (*ibid* p. 84)

As regards the third qualification of a good teacher, *viz.*, love of students, Sri Ramakrishna had plenty of it. His intense yearning for Narendra (Swami Vivekananda) is well known. All his disciples, without exception, felt in their heart of hearts, the depth of his love. Many, including Narendra, have confessed that even their own mothers did not love them as

much as he. Two incidents connected with Latu (Swami Adbhutananda), the humblest of his disciples, bespeak best of Sri Ramakrishna's love for the disciples. Once Latu went on a hot afternoon to one of the Siva temples at Dakshineswar for meditation. He did not return even by evening. Sri Ramakrishna anxiously went in search of him. When he saw him still sitting in meditation—with the whole body perspiring profusely—he started fanning him. When Latu opened his eyes after meditation, he felt very much embarrassed.

When Latu was living at Dakshineswar to serve Sri Ramakrishna, he used to sleep in his room. In the early morning it was his wont to call out to Sri Ramakrishna, with his eyes still closed, and when he responded, to see him first and take his blessings before starting his daily chores. One day Latu did not get the usual response. On opening his eyes, he found that Sri Ramakrishna was not in the room. So, Latu went out in search of him. At last he discovered him returning happily with a shoe of Latu in his hand. When Latu protested out of shock and dismay, he replied, 'Early morning I found that one of your new pair of shoes was missing. Since it was purchased only the other day and thinking how sorry you would feel, I went in search of it. A dog had taken it, I drove it away and recovered your shoe.' Naturally Latu was simply overwhelmed by his Guru's love.

So much with regard to the general qualifications of a teacher and how Sri Ramakrishna fitted into it ideally. But he was much more than all that. He was an ideal teacher in the field of moral values and spiritual disciplines.

The position of a teacher of moral values is very peculiar. Where the teachings of secular sciences is concerned, it is enough if the teacher is competent in that subject. His personal life has little bearing on his teaching capacity. But, in the case of a teacher of moral precepts, practising those precepts in his own life is absolutely necessary. Three instances may be

cited from the life of Sri Ramakrishna to show how meticulously he practised what he preached. One of his well known sayings is: 'Forbear, forbear, forbear!' According to him one should bear with all the difficulties of life without complaining. Once a greedy priest of the Kali temple, having observed how Mathuranath (the owner of the temple complex) used to be meek before Sri Ramakrishna and gladly take care of his needs, wanted to know by what 'secret power' he had successfully mesmerized Mathur. When Sri Ramakrishna pleaded ignorance, the wretched man kicked him with the shoes on. But Sri Ramakrishna, the incarnation of *ahimsā* and compassion that he was, never disclosed this to Mathur or anyone else for quite a long time!

Sri Ramakrishna however knew very well that a householder cannot be and should not be so meek in this world where wicked people are ever itching to harm others. He has taught the need for self-defence through the parable of the snake and the Brahmacharin wherein the latter rebukes the snake for not protecting himself by hissing and frightening the cowherd boys. On another occasion he demonstrated the same principle in a slightly different way by destroying the bugs in his room in the presence of Balaram Bose who had extreme notions about *ahimsā*.

Speaking the truth is the most fundamental moral precept. Sri Ramakrishna considered that truth is God. So, while he could offer all dualities at the feet of the Mother, he could not bring himself to say, 'O Mother! Here is your truth. Here is your untruth. Take them both and give me devotion!' (*ibid* p. 255). Once he had told Jadu Mallick, who lived in the neighbourhood of Dakshineswar temple garden, that he would go to his house but forgot about it. When he remembered it, it was late in the night. Still he went to his house, got the gate opened by calling the watchman, stepped into the compound just to keep his word and returned to his room without disturbing the inmates of the house at that odd hour!

Throughout his life Sri Ramakrishna taught the need for renouncing lust and greed in order to realize God. He had practised it literally in his life. That he worshipped Sri Sarada Devi, his own wife as the Divine Mother and that he rejected outright the offer of a huge sum of money from both Mathur and the Marwari devotee are proofs enough.

Though a monarch of renunciation and an ideal even for the Sannyasins, he once severely admonished a householder devotee for having neglected his wife and children (*ibid* p. 86). To set an example to the householders he had got prepared a pair of gold bangles for Sri Sarada Devi and also made arrangements for her stay at Kamarpukur after his demise.

As regards the spiritual teacher, the scriptures have often given the qualifications he should possess. The *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.2.12) declares that he should be well-versed in the Vedas and absorbed in Brahman. The *Śāradā Tilaka Tantra* (2.141-144) (one of the most well known works in the Tantra group) defines him as a man of pure disposition and self-control. He should know the true meaning of the scriptures. He should always be doing good to others and engage himself in spiritual pursuits like repetition of the divine name, worship and meditation. He should be an adept in Yoga and capable of granting favour.

The *Vivekacūdāmaṇi* of Sankaracarya (verse 33) describes him thus: 'He who is well-versed in the Vedas, sinless, unsmitten by desire and a knower of Brahman *par excellence*, who has withdrawn himself into Brahman; who is calm like fire that has consumed its fuel, who is a boundless reservoir of mercy that knows no reason, and a friend of all good people who prostrate themselves before him.....'

Sri Ramakrishna was the paragon of all these virtues. He knew the essence of the scriptures not only by hearing much about them from many holy men and scholars but also by direct experience wrought by intense spiritual practices. That is why he could throw light on abstruse topics unintelligible to scholars or ordinary Sadhakas. He constantly lived in God and knew nothing but God. He was the very personification of compassion and love for the disciples. He was absolutely unperturbed even in disturbing situations of life because he was absolutely unattached. There was no Yogic state which had not been attained by him. He freely granted spiritual favours especially to his disciples who had dedicated their lives for realizing God. Suffice it to say that he had enough stock of spiritual virtues which can help replenish such lists.

Sri Ramakrishna thus stands supreme among the unique teachers of the world.

**Post-Centenary Golden Jubilee of
Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna's Advent**



**The 151st Birthday of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna
falls on Wednesday, 12 March 1986.**