

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

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Sri Ramakrishna was not a philosopher in the conventional sense of the term. And yet, who can deny that the highest spiritual truths he taught, out of the fullness of his profound realizations, constitute a philosophy eminently suited for the present age? Swami Harshananda makes a pioneering attempt to piece together the teachings of the Great Master under classified headings and formulate a philosophy in consonance with the ideas and ideals for which Sri Ramakrishna stood. In this article he also makes a comparative study between Sri Sankara and Sri Ramakrishna. The author is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and is the head of our centre in Allahabad.

Introduction

Man is often described as a rational animal. Once the animal in him is reasonably satisfied by the provision of basic biological and some psychological needs, the rational part gets an opportunity to evolve to higher levels. Philosophy, including metaphysics, is one of the highest aspects of this evolution.

The Indian philosophical systems have developed not only as a result of intellectual speculations but also of mystical intuition. Hence the name 'Darśana' (lit., 'seeing'), usually applied to them. The topics most commonly discussed by these Darśanas are generally four: the world and its creation or evolution; the existence, nature and attributes of the Absolute or God; the nature of man; and the goal of human life.

Different standpoints and differing views on these topics of discussion have naturally led to a variety of schools. These schools are broadly divided into two classes: the *āstika* and the *nāstika*. The former accept the authority of the Vedas whereas the latter do not. The Vedanta Darśana belongs to the former class and has gained a pre-eminent place in it due to its judicious combination of reasoning and acceptance of the authority of the Vedas as also due to its long and unbroken tradition.

The word Vedanta means the 'end or essence of the Vedas'. The Upanishads, the Brahma-Sutras and the Bhagavad Gita (collectively known as the *prasthāna-traya*), as also all other allied literature based on them, form the sources of Vedanta. Differing interpretations of the *prasthāna-traya*, especially of the Brahma-Sutras, have given rise to different schools of Vedanta, of which Advaita, Visishtadvaita and Dvaita are well-known.

Advaita of Sankara

Among these three schools, again, it is the Advaita which has gained greater currency and is more widely known.

According to Sankara, the chief expounder of this school, the ultimate Truth is one and one only, and it is Brahman. This Brahman is Sat-Cit-Ananda ('Existence-Knowledge-Bliss-Absolute') and is without form (*nirākāra*) and without attributes (*nirguṇa*). The world in which we live, move and have our being, is unreal since it is only an appearance in Brahman, like that of a snake in a rope, due to ignorance or illusion. However, as long as this ignorance or illusion is not transcended and Brahman is not realized as It is, this world of appearance, which is the ground of our experience, is given a tentative and empirical reality. When this empirical reality is admitted for the world, its

creation or evolution, its sustenance, and its destruction or involution have also to be admitted. Looked at from this angle and conceding Brahman as the ground of evolution and involution of the world, It becomes Ísvara or God, the supreme ruler of creation. This Ísvara creates, sustains and destroys the world out of His power of Maya.

As regards the individual souls, Sankara posits that they are really identical with Brahman, their separate identity and bondage in the world being due to the ignorance (*avidyā*) of their real nature. This ignorance is beginningless (*anādi*) but can be ended through knowledge (*jñāna*) of their real nature as Atman or self identical with Brahman or Absolute. Since it is ignorance (*avidyā* or *ajñāna*) that has caused bondage for the individual soul, Sankara maintains that knowledge (*vidyā* or *jñāna*) alone can give liberation, though he admits that selfless action (*niṣkāma karma*) and devotion to God (*bhakti*) can be useful preliminary disciplines. In the state of liberation, the individual self merges in Brahman, completely losing its identity.

Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna

Brahman

Now let us see how the philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna compares with that of Sri Sankara. At the very outset, it has to be made clear that Sri Ramakrishna never propagated a system of philosophy of his own. He experienced the Truth directly and then spoke out of the fullness of that experience. Hence, we have to piece together his teachings on these aspects of philosophy given at random in his conversations.

Like Sankara, Sri Ramakrishna also accepts Brahman as the highest and the only reality. He also accepts It as *nirguṇa* and *nirākāra* in Its aspects as the Absolute. But, unlike Sankara, he does not accept God (*Ísvara*), the aspect of Brahman with form (*sākāra*) and with attributes (*saguna*), as either illusory or as a reality of a lower order. To him, God is both formless and possessed of form. Not

only that, He is beyond both these too! Says he: 'God is formless, and God is possessed of form too. And He is also that which transcends both form and formlessness. He alone knows what all He is.' (*Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, 871).

He calls the Absolute as Brahman, in Its eternal (*nitya*) aspect, when It is at rest and inactive. The same in Its sportive (*līlā*) aspect, when involved in the process of creation, preservation and destruction, he calls Sakti or Kali, the same as Isvara or God. So, according to him, Brahman and Sakti are one and inseparable. 'The distinction between Brahman and Sakti is really a distinction without a difference. Brahman and Sakti are one (*abheda*), just as fire and its burning power are one. Brahman and Sakti are one, just as milk and the whiteness of milk are one. Brahman and Sakti are one, just as a gem and its brightness are one. You cannot conceive of the one without the other, or make a difference between them' (*Sayings*, 857). 'God the Absolute and God the Personal are one and the same. Belief in the one implies belief in the other. Fire cannot be thought of apart from its burning power, nor can its burning power be thought of apart from it. Again, the sun's rays cannot be thought of apart from the sun, nor the sun, apart from its rays. You cannot think of the whiteness of milk apart from its milky whiteness. Thus the Absolute cannot be thought of apart from the idea of God with attributes, i.e., Personal God and vice versa.' (*Sayings*, 856). 'The Primordial Power and Supreme Brahman are identical—It is like the snake and its wriggling motion.' (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 1947 edn., p. 263)

Maya

Sri Ramakrishna accepts Maya as the veil that keeps God hidden from our sight. He compares it to a small patch of cloud that can hide the big sun from our view, or like the weeds that cover placid water. He also holds, like the Samkhyas, that as soon as Maya is discovered, it disappears. But he is a little more considerate towards this Maya than the Advaitins, because

he accepts that it has two aspects, the *vidyā-māyā* and the *avidyā-māyā*. The former helps a bound soul to get liberation by giving him discrimination and non-attachmnt. It is the latter, manifested as lust, lucre and egoism, that really binds him.

Again, this explanation which leads to the corollary that a spiritual aspirant should take recourse to *vidyā-māyā* to nullify the effects of *avidyā-māyā*, even as one thorn (needle) is used to remove another thorn and then both are thrown away, adds a new dimension to the philosophy of spiritual practice (*sādhana*). By ingeniously avoiding the need to propitiate a Personal God to remove this Maya, the purely Advaitic standpoint is maintained.

As regards the locus of Maya, there is no unanimity among the traditional Advaitic schools. But Sri Ramakrishna solves the problem convincingly by saying that it is located in Brahman, but acts on the individual souls (*jīvas*), like the poison of a snake which is contained in its mouth and yet does not affect it in any way, but acts on those bitten by it. He thus absolves Brahman of any imperfection or limitation due to Maya.

Creation

Coming to creation, Sri Ramakrishna gives it a much greater degree of reality than Sankara. He calls it a *līlā* aspect of Brahman and hence real, though not eternal. It is like ice crystals appearing on water and again dissolving back in water. The ice crystals are as real as water—but do not endure permanently.

A person ascending the staircase to reach the roof of a building denies at first any 'roofness' to the stairs. But he discovers after reaching the roof that the stairs are also made of the same material as the roof. In the same way, though a man of wisdom (*jñānī*) may deny the world as not Brahman, when he becomes a man of 'supreme wisdom' (*vijñānī*), through more complete realization, he accepts that the world is also Brahman since nothing exists

apart from Brahman. This theory gives us a greater insight with the help of which we can understand better the activities of a *jīvanmukta*, one who is liberated even while living.

Īsvara or God

In Sankara's Advaita, Brahman the Absolute is not very responsive to human emotions or prayers. The Īsvara we bank on is either unreal or has a precarious existence. But according to Sri Ramakrishna, Īsvara who is Brahman in Its *līlā*-aspect, is real and responsive, and hence the entire gamut of devotional practices (*bhakti-sādhana*) acquires validity and leads to fulfilment. Instead of being a secondary Sādhana, as in traditional Advaita, Bhakti is a primary Sādhana placed on an equal footing with Jñāna; and this is achieved within the broad framework of Advaita which both accept as the final truth.

Closely connected with this topic is the concept of the Avatara or incarnation of God. Sankara, constrained by the extreme stance of Advaita which he is obliged to adopt, is very apologetic about the whole doctrine (vide his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, 4.6-9). Sri Ramakrishna however has no such constraints since he accepts both the *nitya* and the *līlā* aspects of Brahman as equally real and valid. Once the *līlā*-aspect is accepted as real, there should be no difficulty at all in according reality to the Avatara of God also. God being omniscient and omnipotent can do anything He likes. None can put any limitation on His power. If it is His will He can be born as a human being and sport through it. In fact, He does sport through the human body to bring enlightenment to the bound souls, out of His infinite compassion for them. And again, since the incarnation is God Himself, seeing Him is equivalent to seeing God. To touch the river Ganga, it is not necessary to touch the entire stretch of water from the Gomukh (the birth-place of the river) to the Gangasagar (the place where the river joins the sea). It is enough if it is touched at Dakshineswar!

Immanence of God

For Sankara the world is only an illusory appearance in Brahman, like silver in nacre. Brahman thus being the substratum of the world, appearance cannot be, strictly speaking, immanent in it. Immanence implies a much greater degree of reality for the substance in which immanence of the other is recognized. The Upanishads clearly speak of divine immanence in the world and the living beings (vide *Taittiriya Up.* 2.6; *Aitareya Up.* 1.3.12; *Chandogya Up.* 6.3.2). Sri Ramakrishna teaches not only of divine immanence in all beings and things but also of its manifestation in different degrees. Says he: 'Every object is Narayana (i.e., God). Man is Narayana, the animal is Narayana, the sage is Narayana, the knave also is Narayana. All that exists is Narayana. The Deity (Narayana) sports in various aspects. All things are His diverse forms and the manifestations of His glory' (*Sayings*, 890). 'God is in all men, but all men are not in God; that is why they suffer' (*Sayings*, 889). 'The manifestation of Sakti (the Divine Power) varies in varying centres of activity; for variety is the law, not sameness. God is immanent in all creatures; He is even in the ant. The difference is in manifestation only' (*Sayings*, 892).

Jīva or Individual soul

Coming to the nature of the Jiva or man, Sri Ramakrishna admits that in his essential nature he is God Himself: 'The soul enchained is man, but when free from the chain (Maya), it is the Lord.' (*Sayings*, 20) 'What is the relation between the Jivatman and the Paramatman? As a current of water seems to be divided into two when a plank of wood is placed against it edgewise, so the Indivisible appears divided into two, the Jivatman and the Paramatman, due to the limitation of Maya' (*Sayings*, 21). 'Water and a bubble on it are one and the same. The bubble has its birth in the water, floats on it, and is ultimately resolved into it. So also the Jivatman and the Paramatman are one and the same, the difference between them being only one of degree. For, one is finite and limited while the other is

infinite; one is dependent while the other is independent' (*Sayings*, 22).

Cause of his bondage

What then is it that causes his bondage? Sri Ramakrishna attributes it to egoism, brought in by the *avidyā-māyā*. On a deeper analysis of this 'I', it will be found to be non-existent even as nothing is left over when we go on peeling an onion. And yet it can create no end of troubles. Not only that, it is extremely difficult to get rid of it! How then can we get rid of it? Classifying the ego into two groups, the ripe-ego and the unripe-ego, Sri Ramakrishna advises us to cultivate the ripe-ego to counter the unripe one: 'If you find that you cannot drive off this feeling of "I", then let it remain as the "servant I". There is not much to fear from the ego which is centred in the thought, "I am the servant of God, I am His devotee." Sweets cause dyspepsia, but not sugar-candy which is an exception. The "servant I", the "I" of a devotee, the "I" of a child—each of these is like a line drawn with a stick on the surface of water; this "I" does not last long' (*Sayings*, 121).

In this connection he gives a unique example as to how the liberated souls continue to live in this world and teach others even after their egoism has been wiped out: 'As a piece of rope, when burnt, retains its form, but cannot serve to bind, so is the ego which is burnt by the fire of supreme knowledge' (*Sayings*, 132).

Four types of Jivas

Sri Ramakrishna, though conceding that all the Jivas, in the ultimate analysis, are equal, yet classifies them into four groups: the *baddha* (bound), the *mumukṣu* (struggling for liberation), the *mukta* (emancipated) and the *nitya-siddha* (ever-free).

Those of the last group are born to teach mankind. The first group is so deeply engrossed in the world of senses that it is least interested in the life of the spirit. The last two groups have already reached the goal of their lives. Hence it is the second group that needs special attention.

The Goal of Life

Sri Ramakrishna says that the goal of life is God-realization. All our miseries will end, all our problems will be solved once for all, by realizing God. Following the ancient tradition he advises the aspirants to seek a competent spiritual teacher (*guru*) first and then practise disciplines according to his directions. Sri Ramakrishna's teachings contain a veritable mine of information and instructions on practical spiritual life. Unlike the traditional philosophies or religions he is not at all dogmatic about the path leading to the goal. Just as the Kalighat temple can be reached through several roads of Calcutta, God also can be realized through several spiritual paths and disciplines. In his philosophy of Sadhana, Jnana, Bhakti, Yoga and Karma—all have a place. One can practise them either singly or in combination. What is needed is *vyākulatā*, great earnestness. In fact, this approach of his can accommodate in its fold not only all the spiritual disciplines of Hinduism, but also those of other religions. He goes to the extent of according a place even to the abominable practices of some Tantrik Schools, calling them as 'backdoors', though he does not advocate or recommend them.

Jñāna or Bhakti?

As regards the controversy among the various schools about Jñāna or Bhakti being the direct path to liberation, Sri Ramakrishna advocates devotion tempered by knowledge (*jñāna-miśrita-bhakti*) as most suitable for this age. This standpoint avoids the extremes and prevents the aspirant from becoming dry or sentimental, the dangers to which he is generally exposed if he follows only one of them to the exclusion of the other.

What happens to a person when he realizes God? Here, Sri Ramakrishna follows the traditional descriptions given in the scriptures. The man of realization experiences unalloyed bliss within and sees the Divine everywhere. Outwardly he may not exhibit any signs of his inner joy and may even behave like an abnormal

person. But one thing is certain: he remains unaffected by the vicissitudes of life which affect others intensely. He lives in God and works for the good of others, seeing God in them.

Continuance of body after realization

Sri Ramakrishna says that normally a person who goes into Nirvikalpa Samadhi (the highest state of superconsciousness) remains in that state for twenty-one days and then passes away. However, a few who are destined to teach mankind return to the ordinary plane of consciousness by keeping a trace of egoism without which corporeal existence is impossible.

About *prārabdha-karma* (the result of past deeds, that have borne fruit in this life) Sri Ramakrishna accepts it as inevitable but assures us that a greater part of its effects can be offset by the power of God's name (vide *Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna*, 913).

Problem of good and evil

Concerning the problem of good and evil which has been debated much in philosophy, Sri Ramakrishna says that the very act of creation presupposes imperfection. Just as pure gold cannot be made into ornaments unless it is mixed with traces of baser metals, the world cannot come into existence without Maya. The simultaneous existence of good and evil is a fact of life which has to be accepted. The evil is to be counteracted through good as far as possible. But the ultimate solution is to transcend both good and evil by rising to supreme spiritual heights where everything is levelled in God. Then neither good nor evil is recognized, just as it is impossible to notice the difference in the heights of tall trees or clusters of grass when one is flying high in the sky.

Cause of disagreement

Finally, a word about why there is so much disagreement and difference among the various philosophical systems and religions. Sri Ramakrishna tackles this question from two stand-

points: the subjective and the objective. Through the well-known story of the blind men and the elephant, he tells us that when people get an incomplete or imperfect view of God and preach it as the whole truth, conflicts are bound to appear. This is from the subjective standpoint. From the objective standpoint, he says that God is so great that none can comprehend Him fully. He alone knows what all He is. Brahman or God is the one thing that has not become 'ucchiṣṭa' (food tasted and left over) since none has till now fully described Him. Any attempt to size Him up with our limited intellect and describe Him through our limited speech will be as futile as the efforts of the salt-doll that wanted to gauge the depths

of the sea! Hence, even when people who have had genuine and complete spiritual experience try to describe Him (who is really indescribable), their descriptions are bound to fall far short of the ideal and are also apt to be different from one another.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can safely assert that Sri Ramakrishna's experiences and utterances, though similar in many respects to the traditional Vedanta, have much more in them that can form the subject matter for a fascinating study, unravelling new vistas of Vedanta. After all, this is how our Sanatana Dharma has grown over the millennia.

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