

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

Spirituality : The Essence of the Ramakrishna Movement

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First of all, let us be clear about the term 'spirituality'. The word spirituality is derived from spirit. A piece of matter comes into being and it is temporary and spatially segmented. A piece of matter undergoes dissolution finally through successive stages of transformation. But Spirit or God is not limited by time and space.

Then, there is a Sanskrit term called *itaravyavritta* which means particular or specific. For example, you call this a table because you want to express some idea which is different from the idea of the floor or ceiling or the glass that is on the table. So the idea of the 'table' is in your mind and you express it. Thus every name is an expression of this *itaravyavritta*. That means you want to convey the idea that this object, say the table, is something particular and that this particular thing is different from other objects.

The spirit, however, is the opposite of all these things. In the second chapter of the *Gītā*, Sri Krishna talks about the permanence of the individual soul. But even there He cannot avoid totally the reference to the Cosmic Soul. So He says, '*Avināshi tu tatviddhi yena sarvamidam tatam*' (2.17)—'Know That to be imperishable by which all this is pervaded'. Now, individual soul cannot permeate everything. You see, '*sarvamidam tatam*' is a very general expression. In Sanskrit it means whatever comes in the field of your cognition, whatever you objectify. That simply means that the Spirit is universal. If you talk about Spirit, It is universal. It cannot be something localized or something individual. As we commonly say in Vedanta philosophy—this *ghatākāsha*, ie the space within the pot. The space in the pot is an illusion. It is always one with the cosmic space. So, that is spirituality. This spirituality is or rather the Spirit is the other name of the Impersonal God. It is God but Impersonal God. It is nothing different from the Paramātman or Brahman of Vedanta. So that is one idea of spirituality.

Then, who is a spiritual person? You can have a minimalistic view and say that a person who is struggling, who is putting an effort to manifest spirituality in his life is a spiritual person. Or, you may take the other kind of view and say that one who is really manifesting spirituality—not just struggling—is a spiritual person. In the case of *dharma*, you can have many many definitions. In the *Mahābhārata*, for example, *dharma* has been defined briefly in one place as a conduct which does not create a situation which is considered disadvantageous to others. This is a minimalist view of *dharma*. But you can also have a maximalist view as Swami Vivekananda says: Whatever one does for oneself is *adharmā*, and whatever one does for others is *dharma*. This is a very higher concept of *dharma*. So, like this, we can have many many views on spirituality. But the idea is quite clear that real spirituality is universal in bearing.

Now, we come to the term 'Ramakrishna Movement'. Movement in Physics is motion, ie cessation of the state of inertia. Sociologically, it is a drift towards a certain direction. Normally the term is used when a great number of people try to bring about social changes in a particular direction, having a particular goal.

Then, man-movement may have a leadership or may not have one. For example, the New Age Movement, which is bothering the Vatican and others so much. This New Age Movement does not have a leadership. Still, many many people are involved in it. The Movement reflects a change in the attitude of young persons, specially in America. Of course, the wave is coming also to Europe. Again, such a movement may be successful, or may be unsuccessful. For example, Communism generally is a failure in Europe due to various reasons. But the point is that even though it has failed, it is not a total failure. It affects, for instance, the so-called free market. Countries dedicated to the free market

idea are adopting many measures so that the difference between the privileged sections of the society gets minimized. Thus, while in a way you are rejecting Communism, in another way you are accepting the ideal. Malthus is another example. By and large, Europe does not accept Malthus today. But they have already taken measures to prevent the type of situation predicted by Malthus. So, you see, a movement may be apparently unsuccessful, yet it may exert some subtle pressure and influence. In the light of this preliminary discussion we shall discuss what is the Ramakrishna Movement and then how spirituality is the essence of this Movement.

The Ramakrishna Movement

The Ramakrishna Movement has begun with Ramakrishna surely. Swami Vivekananda in many places had tried to describe his ideas about his Master. He said that Sri Ramakrishna is the summation of all divine incarnations who came before him. He said that one can understand the seemingly opposite doctrines of different denominations of Hinduism only through the life of Sri Ramakrishna. You know, Hinduism is highly rarefied and the most complex among the major religions of the world. It is complex because it is ancient. In the light of the latest discoveries it seems that classification of the Vedas has been done about 6,000 years ago. Yet there had never been a Pope in Hinduism; there was no directional body guiding Hinduism. But the history of many other religions (including Buddhism to some extent) is quite opposite. So, in that sense, it is very difficult to understand Hinduism.

When you ask a Muslim boy or a Christian boy—I mean those who are educated and have an optimal education—to talk about their religion, they can briefly talk about it. They may not talk about it in a Vedantic way, all the same they talk about it. But Hindus, even the highly educated Hindus, are unable to do so normally. Of course, it is not their fault because, firstly, their religion is highly complex. You must study deeply in order to have a global view of Hinduism. Otherwise it is always partial. If you are a Vaishnavite, you try to describe Hinduism from the Vaishnava standpoint. Similar is the case with other sects. It is, however, only through Sri Ramakrishna that you can understand Hinduism, or you can have a global view of it, a view that harmonizes everything.

Prior to the advent of Sri Ramakrishna, at least once an attempt was made to bring about such harmony through the *Bhagavad Gītā*. If you read the *Gītā*, you will find that so many paths are there. It made deliberate attempt to bring about harmony. We do not know exactly when the *Gītā* was composed. However, we know that the *Mahābhārata*, at least in its germinal form, existed at the time of Buddha because Pāṇini's grammar alludes to this epic. Anyhow, we can say this much that it was there during the golden period of the Guptas.

So, after the *Bhagavad Gītā* there had been no attempt to harmonize things and Hinduism itself became very much cornered in India's history. When the Guptas were trying to revive Hinduism, it was one of the three major religions of India. It was not the dominant religion of India at that time. Then, after the advent of Shankara there was a great change because Shankara himself was a big phenomenon. Evidently, Hinduism became very much complex and difficult for ordinary people to understand it.

Then came the Tantric paths. You can trace the origin of Tantra right in the Vedas. You find it specially in the *Atharva Veda*. But it was developed by the Buddhists later gradually from the third century, when Buddhism started retreating mainly because of the intellectual reverses which the Buddhists suffered in debates. That was the first cause. But the proximate cause of near-annihilation of Buddhism was the hostility of the Muslims. For them, Buddhists were enemy number one and as they entered India, Hindus became their enemy number two. Why? First, because they found that the Buddhists were organized. They had universities and so on. They were much more organized than the Hindus. And second, the Buddhists kept Bagdad under occupation for certain time. So they thought that the

Buddhists had to be wiped out first. After the collapse of Buddhism, all these Buddhists took shelter under the umbrella of Hinduism and Jainism to save their lives. In that process different non-Vedic customs and practices got mixed up and found berth in Hinduism. As a result, it became very difficult to have a global view of Hinduism.

Swami Vivekananda is the first person to define Hinduism in a positive way. And the definition of Hinduism given by the Supreme Court follows closely the lines and the ideas given by Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji said, Sri Ramakrishna is the only person through whom you can have a vivid, or at least some amount of understanding of global Hinduism. And, in this exemplary life of Sri Ramakrishna, he says again and again, one finds the rare catholicity of spirit plus the profundity of mystic intuition. He calls Sri Ramakrishna '*avatàravarishtha*', which means that he is the greatest among the divine incarnations.

Many people think that this is a piece of eulogy; he is Sri Ramakrishna's disciple and he is saying this to show respect to his guru. Actually, it is not that and Swamiji himself explains in many places why he says so. He says that images of the great teachers of humanity whom we adore have been sculpted over the centuries with attention and care. And the final result is what we get. Even without this calculated effort, you see, what we find in Sri Ramakrishna shines brighter. It does not mean that the God of Sri Ramakrishna is a higher God. It means that it is God who incarnated Himself as Ramakrishna, but this incarnation shines most brightly.

Swami Saradananda also again and again wants to impress upon the readers of *Lila Prasanga* that Sri Ramakrishna used to convey this idea to his intimate disciples that he should be taken as the greatest ideal. He was almost a humble person in front of ordinary devotees saying that 'I am just a speck of dust of your feet'. But to the intimate disciples he used to underline this fact. He would not be satisfied if his intimate disciples failed to accept him as the highest ideal.

So, this Movement comes from Sri Ramakrishna whose whole life was God-centred—God in a very general way, not just in the Abrahamic sense. Again and again he goes on saying to the Brahmo devotees: 'The entity you call Brahman, that same entity I call my Mother'. Thus Sri Ramakrishna transcends the impersonal-personal dichotomy created largely by our commentators. They came and highlighted one aspect of God to suit their commentaries. Their's is one-sided vision. But Sri Ramakrishna is not one-sided. His vision is comprehensive. He is, however, not the first mystic to say such a thing. But he said so boldly again and again.

The ideas of Swamiji

Now let us consider the ideas of Swami Vivekananda. Though Sri Ramakrishna is the founder of the Ramakrishna Math in more than one sense, Swamiji is almost the co-founder. Or you can say that he is the instrument in the hands of Sri Ramakrishna. There were many Maths in India, but they were amorphous. That means they were living a monastic life. They were praying, meditating, but truly speaking, they had no precise role which was relevant to the society. It was a kind of seeking personal liberation. So, when Swamiji inaugurated the Ramakrishna Mission the whole movement became much less amorphous. So, in a sense, it is true that he recreated the movement, though we believe that it was through the power and vision of Sri Ramakrishna. First of all, Swamiji himself was the great instrument of Sri Ramakrishna. Then, Holy Mother was there. She supported it. So it is certain that Sri Ramakrishna's consent was there behind the setting up of the Mission. It was not against his will. Though initially there was some doubt in the minds of some brother monks, that was dispelled subsequently.

When Swami Vivekananda passed away in 1902, there were very few centres of the Ramakrishna Order. There was one he had already established in New York even before the Ramakrishna Mission in India was inaugurated. There was another centre in West Coast where he placed one of his brother

disciples. Just on the day of his passing away, one ashrama was inaugurated in Benares. There were thus a very few centres, you see. They were very modest in those days. I mean, their work was not so highly spectacular in those days. Still, a great movement had been inaugurated by Swamiji and he was some sort of a national hero already.

Sarada Devi

After his passing away, Sarada Devi became the point of reference for the monks and the householder devotees. And this was something unique—a lady being the de facto head of a monastic order! She was not the President, she was not the General Secretary, she was not a member of the Board of Trustees, she was not even a member. Yet she was the de facto head. So, this was something unique. In a way, this was the inauguration of the power of women in the highest field of spirituality. There has been in the past great ladies in India. At least 29 Vedic rishis were women. Then there had been women saints like Mirabai and many others in different parts of India. But still Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi were not just saintly persons. They were super-saints.

They touched a person with their grace and the person turned into a saint. You cannot categorize them as persons belonging to this *ashrama* (station of life such as a monk or a householder) or that, because Sri Ramakrishna himself did not put on a *gerua* or ochre robe, the typical dress of a sannyasin. He also kept contact with his family and never renounced his wife. So was Sarada Devi, our Holy Mother. Yet all the salient features of monasticism you find in their lives in extreme measure. So they were unique super-saints. I do not know how you view Holy Mother. She is a mother no doubt as she keeps on showering motherly affection all the time, but to me, she is so just because in all her actions she was guided very literally by Sri Ramakrishna. When you read the Bible you find there talks about the Resurrection of Christ and they talk about six resurrections. But in the case of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, it is not just six, but many. Living in the West, *I know they are appearing physically even now to people to help them, to console them*. After so many years of their passing away they continue to appear across geographical boundaries. So, they are not just saints. They are super-saints. They are very much special and their spiritual power is acting through the Ramakrishna Order.

Upto 1920, Sarada Devi was in her gross body. After that, the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna or the inmates of the Baranagar monastery were at the helm of the Order. After that came the period of the disciples of the Holy Mother. So this Ramakrishna-Sarada power is continuing. Once, in my presence, a gentleman, a devotee from Madras who was a director of the UNCTAD at Geneva, asked a great devotee of a venerable 'Baba' if the latter has produced a single saint, whereas Sri Ramakrishna produced so many. On being asked such a bold question, the man turned to me and asked: 'Swami, is every monk of the Ramakrishna Order a great saint?' I replied: 'No, every monk of the Ramakrishna Order is not a great saint. But I believe the greatness of the Order lies in this that at least 25 per cent of our monastic members are great saints, while another 25 per cent are struggling hard to achieve that goal.' Compared to other spiritual organizations, this is a very great thing.

A few years ago I followed a debate on TV about the sublimation of libido and its importance in spiritual organizations. A representative of the Vatican said on that occasion that such sublimation is necessary because through this the clergy finds more time for being accessible to the society. I do not know whether it is correct or not, but if this is the reason put forward by the Vatican, I should say that it has forgotten the message of Christ.

Vatican too is very important. The great convention of the Vatican held from 1962-1965 has certainly updated the Catholic church which now interacts with other religions, including the Eastern religions. But if you go through their official documents, you will find that the Catholics are reminded that they should not forget that the only flock of God is the Catholic church. That is narrowness. You may talk with others but at the same time you have in your mind the idea that your religion is only true and all

other religions are erroneous. Even if there is light in them, it is mingled with shade. So, that is a very dangerous thing.

By contrast, here, in the Ramakrishna Movement, you see a completely different picture, a truly liberal or universal attitude. I go to many inter-religious meets where I say that I accept all religions in the sense that I believe that in all religions, there is some power, some potentiality to bring peace and bliss to the individual. In that sense I accept. But I say, if you talk about the dogmas, we keep indifferent because we do not accept them, including the dogmas of Hinduism. Dogma is a belief or set of beliefs held by a group or organization, which others are expected to accept without arguments. These dogmas are not verified; nor they are verifiable. So we do not accept dogmas and yet we do not preach against dogmas in a militant way. We do not simply accept them. So that is the beauty of our Order and the spirit of the Ramakrishna Movement.

Finally, the Ramakrishna Movement is not exclusively a movement in which the monastics have been participating. There is a great army of householder devotees involved in it. And, during the past twenty-five years I have discovered that many of them have developed spiritual intuitions of some sort or other. They may be a small percentage, but the percentage is not important here. What is significant is the possibility.

So, the essence of this great Ramakrishna Movement is pure spirituality that incarnated itself in the form of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. They are not different spiritually. That is why we put them together on the same altar. They are the expressions of the same thing because whatever great things Holy Mother and Swamiji did, they did them being imbued with the spirit of Sri Ramakrishna, the focal point of the Movement.

* This article is the edited and abridged version of the lecture delivered at the Institute on 13 February 2007 by Swami Amarananda. The swami is Minister-in-Charge, Centre Vedantique, Geneva, Switzerland.