

A Survey of Ramakrishna's Teachings

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In the Vishnu Purana it is said: "Those who do not perform their duties and practise religion, but say 'O Lord, O Lord,' are ignorant and are to be considered enemies of God, because God has to take human birth to show them how to practise religion."

Avatars, or divine incarnations, have a special mission in each age. Sometimes their teachings are specific to a particular time, and sometimes they are eternal and universal. For example, Ramachandra killed the demon Ravana, and he also established the religion of Truth. Krishna killed Kamsa and other demons, and he also established Dharma (righteousness) and harmonized the four yogas. Buddha censured the violence and hatred endemic to his time, and he also taught morality, ethics, and service. Christ attacked the hypocrisy of the established religious authorities and taught the religion of love and compassion. Ramakrishna destroyed the greatest demon that plagues the human mind: doubt in God's existence. He also taught the importance of purity and renunciation, and he preached the harmony of religions.

Avatars do not write autobiographies or record their teachings. They bring devotees with them who are ordained to write their biographies and record their messages. As the same moon rises again and again, so in every age the same God comes to earth to eradicate evil and establish the eternal religion. Perhaps the chroniclers of the avatars are actually the same soul, who is reborn over and over to record the avatars' lives and teachings.

Sage Valmiki wrote the Ramayana, the life and teachings of Ramachandra. It is said that once Valmiki went to the Sage Narada and asked: "O great Sage, is there any human being living on this earth who is endowed with all divine qualities and with great power, who is filled with gratitude, truthful, firmly resolved, of noble character, and is the benefactor of all beings? And who is learned, skillful, handsome, brilliant, steady, and who has conquered anger and jealousy; and to whom even the gods are respectful? I am eager to know about such a person." Narada then described Ramachandra, who had just returned to Ayodhya after conquering Ravana. Later, at Brahma's command, Valmiki wrote a great epic, the Ramayana, consisting of 24,000 verses.

Sage Vyasa compiled the four Vedas, composed the greatest epic the Mahabharata, which consists of 100,000 verses, and also wrote 18 Puranas. Vyasa chronicled the life of Krishna and his different incarnations in the Bhagavata, which contains 18,000 verses. He also recorded Krishna's main teachings in the Bhagavad Gita, which is part of the Mahabharata. Krishna's last message was recorded by Vyasa in the Uddhava Gita, which is part of the eleventh canto of the Bhagavata.

Buddha did not have a single chronicler, but immediately after his death 500 chief *arhats* (illuminated disciples) held a convention under the leadership of Mahakassapa in Rajagriha to record the doctrines originally taught by their Master. Ananda, Buddha's cousin and attendant, knew 82,000 teachings of Buddha by heart, and he collected 2,000 sayings from other disciples.¹ Ananda recited the *Dhamma*, and Upali recited the *Vinaya*. Later the arhats recorded the profound philosophy of the Buddha's teachings in the *Abhidhamma*. The Buddhist scriptures are called *Tripitaka*,

which means “three baskets.” They are the Basket of Disciplines (*Vinaya Pitaka*), the Basket of Discourses (*Sutta Pitaka*), and the Basket of Ultimate Doctrine (*Abhidhamma Pitaka*).

In the beginning Buddha’s teachings were recited by monks and spread in an oral tradition. Towards the end of Buddha’s life, Ananda said to him: “After Buddha enters nirvana we want to compile the Sutras. What words should we introduce them with to show that they are the Buddha’s?” Buddha replied: “Use the four words ‘Thus I have heard.’”²

The *Tripitaka* was compiled and arranged in its present form by those arhats of old. During the reign of the pious Sinhala King Vattagamani Abhaya in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), about 83 B.C., the *Tripitaka* was, for the first time in the history of Buddhism, committed to writing. The voluminous *Tripitaka*, written on palm leaves, contains the essence of the Buddha’s teachings and is estimated to be about eleven times the length of the Bible.

The life and teachings of Christ are recorded in the New Testament of the Bible. The authors of the Four Gospels were Matthew, a publican (tax collector); Luke, a physician; John, a fisherman; and Mark, whose profession is unknown. Matthew and John were companions of Jesus. Mark was a companion of the disciple Peter, and his Gospel seems to contain what Peter told him about their master. Luke was a companion of Paul, and his Gospel seems to contain what he had heard Paul preach throughout the Roman Empire, and verified by his own investigation.³

The word *gospel* comes from *godspell* or *goodspell*, which means glad tidings, good news. This good news uplifts human minds. We may notice that some of Ramakrishna’s teachings have been recorded differently by

different writers. Although each of his teachings is the same, the wording and language he used were different. Stories have been recorded in more or less detail, depending on the writer. When we read the Bible, we find the same phenomenon: The same teachings or stories of Jesus were recorded differently by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The wording of each gospel is different; some stories have more details than others. It is quite natural for two persons to see and hear the same thing at the same time and yet record different descriptions of the event.

The first gospel of Ramakrishna was recorded in 1878 by Girish Chandra Sen, a disciple of the Brahma leader Keshab Chandra Sen; it consists of 184 of the Master's teachings. The second gospel was recorded in 1884 by Suresh Chandra Datta, a householder devotee of Ramakrishna, and comprises 950 teachings of the Master. The third gospel was recorded in 1885 by Ram Chandra Datta, a householder devotee of Ramakrishna. It consists of 300 teachings of the Master. The fourth gospel was recorded in diary form by M. (Mahendranath Gupta) from 1882 to 1886. Published in five volumes between 1902 and 1932, it has 176 entries. M. is regarded to be the main chronicler of Ramakrishna's teachings. The fifth and last gospel was recorded by Swami Brahmananda, a monastic disciple of Ramakrishna. It was published serially from 1898 to 1900 in *Udbodhan* magazine. In 1905 the teachings were collected in a book, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Upadesh*, which includes 248 teachings of the Master.

All of these gospels were recorded in Bengali, Ramakrishna's mother tongue. The first three of these gospels have not yet been translated into English in their entirety. M.'s record was published in five volumes, which in 1942 were published in English as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Swami

Nikhilananda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre in New York translated this huge work, and Aldous Huxley wrote the foreword. The gospel according to Swami Brahmananda was translated into English and edited by Jnanendra Nath Mukhopadhyay and F.J. Alexander as *Words of the Master* by Udbodhan Publication Office, Calcutta, in 1924. In addition, Ramakrishna's monastic disciples, householder devotees, and Brahmo admirers left eyewitness accounts, which were translated and published in the book *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*.

If someone were to ask for the quintessence of Ramakrishna's teachings in one sentence, the answer would be: "The goal of human life is to realize God (*Manav-jivaner uddeshya iswar-labh*)."

How? Ramakrishna has the answer: "Repeat God's name and sing His glories. Have the company of the holy. Go into solitude now and then and think of God. To meditate, you should withdraw within yourself or retire to a secluded corner or to the forest. Discriminate between the Real and the unreal -- God alone is real and all else is unreal, that is, impermanent. Cry to the Lord with an intensely yearning heart and you will certainly see Him."

People in general are content with worldly life and are not interested in knowing God. This reminds me of a story:

Brahma was the creator of the universe and every creature within it. After creating human beings, He generously gave them every worldly enjoyment, except peace and bliss. He wished to play a game with His children. Brahma put peace and bliss in a jar and asked the other gods and goddesses where he should hide it.

Indra, the god of heaven, suggested keeping the jar in outer space. Brahma said: "My American and Russian children will come here with the space shuttle and get it."

Varuna, the god of water, suggested putting the jar at the bottom of the ocean. Brahma said: "It won't work. Many countries will have submarines and they will dive into the ocean and find it."

Dharitri, the goddess of the earth, suggested that the jar be kept underground. Brahma said: "No, that will not work. Most of the countries have dynamite and they will blast the beautiful earth to get at it."

Finally, Brahma made a decision: "I shall hide this jar in the heart of each human being. If they want peace and bliss in life they must search within themselves."

Peace and bliss are indispensable. Without them, life is dull and dreary, empty and sorrowful. One can buy everything except peace and bliss. Throughout human history, people have experimented by seeking peace and bliss in money, sensual pleasures, family, friends, home, car, and name and fame. In every case they have failed. When their external efforts bring no success, people finally begin to search within and realize the hidden Self, or God, the embodiment of peace and bliss.

The great teachers have taught human beings the way to attain peace and bliss after they themselves had gone within and discovered the Creator's game. Buddha taught his disciples mindfulness. He said: "The disciples of Gotama are always wide awake and thoughtful, and their minds day and night ever delight in meditation.... Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help."⁴ Christ proclaimed: "The Kingdom of heaven is within you.... Blessed are the pure

in heart for they shall see God.”⁵ Krishna said in the Gita (18:61): “The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings, O Arjuna, and by His maya causes them to revolve as though mounted on a machine.” The Taittiriya Upanishad says (3:1:1): “Brahman is bliss and It is established in the heart.”

Most of the avatars were well versed in the scriptures, and some were great scholars, but Ramakrishna was different. The sage Vashishtha and the sage Sandipani instructed Ramachandra and Krishna respectively. Buddha, Shankara, and Chaitanya studied the scriptures and were great scholars. But Ramakrishna could hardly read or write, yet great scholars were struck dumb while discussing philosophical matters with him. Once he told them the source of his knowledge: “I wept before the Mother and prayed, ‘O Mother, please tell me, please reveal to me what the yogis have realized through yoga and the jnanis through discrimination.’ And the Mother has revealed everything to me. She has shown me everything that is in the Vedas, the Vedanta, the Puranas, and the Tantra.”⁶

Ramakrishna taught what he himself had experienced and not what he learned from scriptures. But his life was the living demonstration of the truths of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and other scriptures. In Ramakrishna’s life can be found a synthesis of the four yogas (karma, jnana, bhakti, and raja); and the philosophies of the three main schools of Vedanta -- dualism, qualified nondualism, and nondualism -- were harmonized in his teachings.

Ramakrishna came to make religion simple enough for everyone to practise. He not only taught religion, but he also demonstrated religion to all. For example, while explaining samadhi, he went into samadhi. After he had renounced money, he could not even touch it. Once he told one of his

physicians, Dr. Bhagavan Rudra, “Put some money in my hand to test me.” As soon as the doctor placed a coin in the palm of Ramakrishna’s hand, his breathing stopped and his hand became numb. The doctor was dumbfounded; such an experience had never been recorded in the annals of science.⁷

Ramakrishna incorporated into his teachings parables, symbols, songs, stories, folklore, myths, scientific reasoning, anecdotes from ordinary life, and examples from nature as well as the behaviour of humans and animals. He seldom quoted the scriptures. He taught from his personal experience and explained the deep truths of spiritual life in an utterly simple way.

¹ Hellmuth Hecker, *Ananda, the Guardian of the Dhamma* (Buddhist Publication Society: Kandy, Sri Lanka, 1980), Foreword

² *The Middle Way*, The Buddhist Society, London: vol. XLVIII: 3, November 1973

³ H.H. Halley, *Halley’s Bible Handbook* (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, 1965), 414

⁴ Irving Babbitt, *The Dhammapada* (New Directions Pub. Corporation: New York, 1965), 46 and Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha* (The Publications Division, Govt. of India: New Delhi, 1961), 189

⁵ Bible: Luke, 17:21 & Matthew, 5:8

⁶ M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre: New York, 1969), 579

⁷ Swami Nityatmananda, *Srima Darshan* (General Printers and Publishers: Calcutta, 1970), 2:79