

The Magnitude of Ramakrishna's

Life and Message

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One of my friends used to tease me by saying, "Hinduism is a weak religion because God has to incarnate again and again to rejuvenate that religion, but Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam have only one prophet."

I would answer quoting from the Vishnu Purana: "There are some people who neither do their duties nor practise religion, but repeat, 'God, God.' They are enemies of God, because God has to take a human form to demonstrate true religion to them." Moreover, Krishna said in the Gita that when religion declines and irreligion prevails, God incarnates in every age to protect the virtuous and punish the wicked. That is why we find many avatars (divine incarnations) in Hinduism. As the same moon rises in the sky again and again, so the same God descends to the earth as a human being in different places and at different times to fulfill the need of the age and to lead us to the goal of human life. This is not a fantasy: the lives of Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, Chaitanya, and Ramakrishna attest to the Gita's statement.

On 6 February 1898 Swami Vivekananda composed the following salutation mantra to Ramakrishna: "O Ramakrishna, establisher of righteousness, embodiment of all religions, the greatest of the avatars, salutations to Thee." The word "greatest" created some controversy. Here are some explanations: Of course each avatar is God in human form and

they are all endowed with equal powers, but they do not all release the entirety of their power. Think of a golfer who has sufficient strength to hit a ball a long distance, but he strikes the ball only as hard as necessary to reach the next hole. Similarly, avatars release only as much power as necessary to fulfill their mission in a particular age. For example, Rama killed Ravana and other demons who were disrupting the peace; Krishna destroyed Kamsa and many unrighteous beings who were killing and torturing innocent people; Buddha fought against animal sacrifice, ritualism, and priestcraft; Christ wanted to establish the religion of love and compassion by trying to remove hypocrisy and injustice. We also find that all the avatars emphasized the virtues of truth, righteousness, justice, and good conduct.

In this modern age, Ramakrishna did not kill any demons, nor did he fight any person. Rather, he destroyed the greatest demon that plagues the human mind: doubt regarding God's existence. It is easier to kill a demon or an unrighteous person than to eradicate doubt. Ramakrishna's ecstasies, visions, and experiences of samadhi proved to him that God exists. In this way he removed all doubts about the existence of God from the minds of his devotees. Moreover, he demonstrated how one can realize God, and he even imparted spiritual experiences to many with a touch.

On 1 March 1885 Ramakrishna told M. about one of his experiences: "I saw Satchidananda come out of this sheath [his body]. It said, 'I incarnate myself in every age.'... I saw that it is the fullest manifestation of Satchidananda; but this time the Divine Power is manifested through the glory of sattva."ⁱ It is due to the preponderance of the sattva quality in

Ramakrishna that he experienced samadhi many times a day. According to available records, this was not seen earlier in other avatars.

As all rivers lead to the ocean, all religions are different paths to God. Among avatars, only Ramakrishna practised different religions and proclaimed, "As many faiths, so many paths." In this way he established an ideal harmony of religions for our present age, in which religions are continually in conflict and hatred and violence are rampant. Ramakrishna repeatedly stated that the goal of human life is to realize God. He taught a religion badly needed today, a religion that is constructive and not destructive, scientific and not fanatical, practical and not theoretical, rational and not superstitious, universal and not parochial. Truly, Ramakrishna worked to create unity in our time.

The followers of every religion think that their prophet is the greatest. Once Sariputra said to Buddha, "You are the manifestation of supreme knowledge, and none is greater than you."

Buddha replied, "Do you have knowledge of the past arhats?"

"No, I do not, Lord."

"Are you aware of the knowledge of the present Buddha?"

"No, Lord."

"Then how do you dare make such a bold statement?"

"I made this statement based on the limits of human understanding and by accepting the standard of the highest ideal of Buddhahood."ⁱⁱ Similarly, Vivekananda used the phrase "the greatest of the avatars" based on his understanding of Ramakrishna and his own spiritual experiences. Vivekananda himself admitted that he had understood very little of the infinite Ramakrishna. He said: "To remove all corruption in religion the

Lord has incarnated Himself on earth in the present age in the person of Sri Ramakrishna. The universal teachings that he offered, if spread all over the world, will do good to humanity and the world.”ⁱⁱⁱ Some of Ramakrishna’s Westernized disciples were amazed when they saw how their Master faced agnostics, atheists, sceptics, and materialists, and silenced them through his infallible logic, apt and convincing illustrations, magnanimous personality, and spiritual power -- even though he had no formal education.

It is not proper to try and judge the greatness of avatars with our limited understanding, yet from a worldly standpoint we do see a difference in the manifestation of each avatar. God smiles at the ignorance of His children when Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and others quarrel among themselves about the greatness of their religion and their respective prophets. But all quarrels and hatred will stop when they realize that God is One without a second and that they all are His children. This is the attitude that Ramakrishna taught to humanity in the modern age.

Dimension of Ramakrishna’s Activities

All avatars travelled to some extent to fulfill their mission and spread their message among people. Ramachandra’s activities were confined to Ayodhya, Chitrakut, Dandakaranya, Panchavati, Rameswaram, and Sri Lanka; Krishna’s movements and activities took place in Mathura, Gokula, Vrindaban, Dwaraka, and Kurukshetra; Buddha carried his message to Nepal, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar during his lifetime; Jesus preached in Galilee, Samaria, Judea, and Idumea. At that time the population of the world was not as large as it is now and many parts of the world were unknown to others. People now call the world a global village. Although Ramakrishna went on pilgrimage to Deoghar, Varanasi, Mathura,

Vrindaban, Prayag, and Navadwip, he did not travel very far to spread his message. He mainly stayed at the Dakshineswar temple garden and now and then visited nearby Calcutta by horse carriage.

It used to be said that the sun never set on the British Empire. During Ramakrishna's time Calcutta was the capital of British India, the citadel of materialistic civilization. (Delhi became the capital in 1912.) Many people in Calcutta imitated the English lifestyle and were carried away by the current of Western culture. When the Master said "Calcutta people," he meant the city's Westernized and worldly inhabitants. They were slaves of the British and beggars in search of name and fame, and their main goal was the enjoyment of lust and gold. They were bound souls and atheists. When he referred to "Calcutta people," the Master meant all the atheistic hedonists of the world. "Calcutta people" can also be found in Europe, America, and other parts of the globe. Ramakrishna remarked: "It is not in England alone that one sees attachment to worldly things. You see it everywhere."^{iv}

With his sharp, discriminating intellect, Ramakrishna understood that a life based on worldly enjoyment cannot bring permanent peace and happiness. And he knew that by confronting the materialistic milieu of Calcutta, he could change the materialism throughout the world. If the capital is conquered, then it is not necessary to conquer the entire country.

In various ways, Ramakrishna gave his life to help the people of Calcutta. But he especially tried to build their spiritual life, the source of eternal peace and happiness. In fact, most people of the world run after lust and gold. Ramakrishna conquered those two invisible enemies of spiritual life, saying, "*Kamini kanchan maya* -- lust and gold are maya. They cannot

make people happy permanently.” The world was in need of Ramakrishna, who was fully capable of giving a suitable answer to the hedonistic and capitalistic philosophers of the West.

Once Ramakrishna went to see Fort William, the British fort in Calcutta. Just as he arrived by carriage, the Sikh regiment was marching there. When the soldiers saw him, they dropped their rifles on the ground and bowed down to him, shouting, “Victory to the guru!” The British commander-in-chief was nonplussed. When he asked the Sikh soldiers about their unusual behaviour, they replied that it was the custom of their religion to show respect for their guru in that manner. Thus Ramakrishna conquered the British fort by merely sitting in his carriage. It was not even necessary for him to step out of the vehicle. This was truly amazing! The Master later compared the road to Fort William with the path to perdition. He said: “Men do not realize how far they are dragged down by women. Once I went to the Fort in a carriage, feeling all the while that I was going along a level road. At last I found that I had gone four storeys down. It was a sloping road. A man possessed by a ghost does not know he is under the ghost’s control. He thinks he is quite normal.”^v

Dynamism of Ramakrishna’s Message

It takes time for the message of an avatar to spread. Ramachandra’s and Krishna’s eternal message of truth and righteousness were recorded by Valmiki and Vyasa in Sanskrit, and they are still spreading among the people. Buddha’s disciples recorded 84,000 of his teachings in the Tripitakas. After 400 years, his message spread during Emperor Ashoka’s reign in 250 BCE. Christ’s teachings were recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament. It takes only two and an half to three

hours to read what Christ said in the Bible, but those immortal teachings are still spreading. In 597 CE, during the time of Pope Gregory the Great, Augustine brought Christianity to England. At that time it was easy to proselytize: If the king and queen were converted to a particular religion, all of their subjects would accept that religion. But those days are gone.

Science and technology have made the world small. Ramakrishna's message encircled the globe within seven years after his passing away. His main disciple, Swami Vivekananda, presented his guru's message of universal religion at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Yet even now the spiritual current of Ramakrishna has not yet become fully manifest. The Master himself said: "I have seen big steamers going by on the Ganges, at the time hardly noticing their passing. But oh, my! What a terrific noise is heard after a while, when the waves splash against the banks!"^{vi} Similarly, people cannot recognize the avatar when he comes. His life and mission become more apparent after some time has passed.

Religion is supposed to bring peace and bliss. The Golden Rule is the same in all religions.

- Buddhism: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful."^{vii}
- Christianity: "Do for others what you want them to do for you; this is the meaning of the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets."^{viii}
- Hinduism: "Whatever you consider injurious to yourself, never do to others. This is the essence of dharma [righteousness]."^{ix}
- Islam: "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself."^x
- Judaism: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. That

is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.”^{xi}

Despite all these wonderful teachings, there is so much intolerance, narrowness, bigotry, fanaticism, unrest, mistrust, and the consequent bloodshed among people of all religions.

Once an old rabbi from New York told me that he wondered what Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, and Buddha think of all the hatred and animosity between followers of their religions. He thought they must be ashamed by the foolishness of their children, whom they never taught such things.

A professor of world religions at the Harvard Divinity School once asked this question of his students: “How can we solve the problem of religious intolerance and bloodshed in this world?”

A Muslim student replied: “This problem will be solved if all people in the world become Muslims.”

A Christian student said that there would be no more problems if all people become Christians.

The professor replied: “But I see sectarian fighting among the Muslims. See how the Shias and Sunnis are fighting among themselves.” Then, calling the students’ attention to the fighting between the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, the professor told this story:

“Once there was a peace conference that included a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, and a Jewish rabbi. An angel appeared before them and asked how peace could be restored in Ireland.

The minister said: ‘Peace will reign supreme if all Catholics leave Ireland.’

The priest said: ‘There will be permanent peace if there is not a single

Protestant here.'

The angel then asked rabbi for his opinion, and he said: "I have no personal opinion. Just attend to the wishes of these two gentlemen, and then there will be peace in Ireland."

Ramakrishna was born at a critical time of religious history. Referring to the significance of Ramakrishna's message for the modern world, Vivekananda said:

This is the message of Sri Ramakrishna to the modern world. "Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality; and the more that this is developed in a man, the more powerful is he for good. Earn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realization. Only those can understand who have felt. Only those that have attained to spirituality can communicate it to others, can be great teachers of mankind. They alone are the powers of light.

The more such men are produced in a country, the more that country will be raised; and that country where such men absolutely do not exist is simply doomed, nothing can save it. Therefore, my Master's message to mankind is "Be spiritual and realize truth for yourself." He would have you give up for the sake of your fellow beings. He would have you cease talking about love for your brother, and set to work to prove your words. The time has come for renunciation, for realization; and then you will see the harmony in all the religions of the world. You

will know that there is no need of any quarrel, and then only will you be ready to help humanity. To proclaim and make clear the fundamental unity underlying all religions was the mission of my Master. Other teachers have taught special religions which bear their names, but this great teacher of the nineteenth century made no claim for himself. He left every religion undisturbed because he had realized that in reality, they are all part and parcel of one eternal religion.^{xii}

In Ramakrishna's life we find a synthesis of four yogas: karma, jnana, bhakti, and raja. Moreover, the philosophies of the three main schools of Vedanta -- dualism, qualified nondualism, and nondualism -- were harmonized in his teachings. He lived his life at a crossroads where many religious sects of India met. He never spoke a harsh word against any faith. He was so all-embracing that members of every sect thought that he was one of them. His all-encompassing love and compassion transcended sectarian narrowness and bigotry. Truly, Ramakrishna's life was a bridge between the ancient and the modern, between the East and the West.

Ramakrishna came to make religion simple. He knew that human beings in this age had complex personalities, and they had little time to practise spiritual disciplines and think of God. Peace and bliss cannot be bought from the market. They can be acquired only through leading a spiritual life. For this reason, Ramakrishna's teachings are practical and universal, free from doctrines and dogmas. They do not need any commentary. 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. Rather, he taught from his personal experience and explained the deep truths of spiritual life in an utterly simple way. Here are some examples of Ramakrishna's teachings, which suit any temperament.

1. You see many stars in the sky at night, but not when the sun rises. Can you therefore say that there are no stars in the heavens during the day? O human beings, because you do not find God in your ignorance, say not that there is no God.

2. God dwells in all beings, but all beings do not identify themselves with God, so they suffer.

3. Some people shed a jugful of tears to have children; some cry for money and property; but who longs to see God? Those who want God, find Him.

4. In this Kaliyuga a human being can attain perfection in three days. Those who cry with a longing heart for God day and night see Him.

5. Question: "How can one ascertain the state of perfection?"

Answer: "As potatoes and eggplants become soft when they are boiled, so people become very soft or humble when they attain perfection. Their egos dissolve completely."

6. A room may be dark for a thousand years, but it is lighted instantly as soon as a lamp is lit. Similarly, one glance of God's grace can wipe away sins accumulated in thousands of births.

7. If one drops a salt doll, a cloth doll, and a stone doll in the ocean, the salt doll melts instantly and loses its individual existence. The cloth doll becomes soaked with water: It does not become one with it, and it maintains its own separate existence. Water does not enter into the stone

doll at all. A free soul is like the salt doll, a worldly soul is like the cloth doll, and a bound soul is like the stone doll.

8. The sun may shine equally everywhere, but it reflects more clearly in clean water, mirrors, and other transparent objects. Similarly, God may dwell in every heart, but He manifests more completely in the hearts of holy people.

9. Tears of repentance and tears of joy come out from opposite corners of the eyes: the former from the inner corner and the latter from the outer corner.

10. Question: "Nowadays many preachers are preaching religion. What do you think of them?"

Answer: "It is like a man who has food for one person, but he has invited one hundred. After practising a little sadhana, he has started to make money by initiating disciples like a professional guru."

11. Question: "What is real preaching?"

Answer: "Real preaching requires that one be absorbed in God before preaching spirituality to others. He who tries to make himself free, preaches well. Hundreds of people from all directions come to one who is free and they ask for instruction. When the flowers bloom, bees come of their own accord."

12. Let the boat be in the water, but not water in the boat. Let a spiritual aspirant live in the world, but not let worldliness enter inside him.

13. The same God manifested here as Krishna and manifested there as Jesus.

14. God laughs twice. When two brothers divide the land, saying, "This part is mine and that part is yours," God laughs. He says to Himself, "The

whole universe belongs to Me, but they say they own this portion or that portion." When the physician says to a patient's mother, "Don't be afraid, mother; I shall certainly cure your boy," God laughs. He says to Himself, "I am going to take his life, and this man says he will save it!"

15. When shall I be free? When "I" ceases to be. If "I" wants to remain, let it stay as a servant-I of God.

16. Neither sin nor mercury can be hidden.

17. One who eats radish belches radish; one who eats cucumber belches cucumber. What is inside of a person comes out through his or her speech.

18. One cannot see God without renouncing lust and gold.

19. Question: "What should I do with bad thoughts?"

Answer: "Let bad thoughts arise in the mind; they cannot do any harm until you do something wrong."

20. Once the Master said, "If you want to understand after hearing one sentence, come to me. And if you want to understand after hearing a thousand words, go to Keshab Chandra Sen." A man asked him, "Please give me knowledge in one sentence." He said, "*Jagat mithya Brahma satya* -- This world is impermanent and Brahman is real."

21. One cannot achieve anything if there is any theft in the chamber of the heart [meaning hypocrisy].

22. Friend, as long as I live so long do I learn.

23. As many faiths, so many paths. Have steadfast devotion to your path, but never hate or criticize the paths of others.

24. God loves simplicity. Call on Him with a simple and pure mind. You will then surely find Him.^{xiii}

Ramakrishna lived for only fifty years, but the impact of his life and message is immense. It is not possible for ordinary people to comprehend the greatness of avatars, so we try to get some understanding of them through the words of great thinkers and savants of the world.

Romain Rolland, a French writer and Nobel Prize winner, wrote: "I am bringing to Europe, as yet unaware of it, the fruit of a new autumn, a new message of the Soul, the symphony of India, bearing the name of Ramakrishna. The man whose image I here evoke was the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people."^{xiv}

The famous English historian Arnold J. Toynbee wrote: "Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions ... can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family -- and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves."^{xv}

Joseph Campbell, an American writer and orientalist, wrote: "Sri Ramakrishna cut the hinges of the heavens and released the fountains of divine bliss."^{xvi}

The Russian novelist and social reformer Leo Tolstoy said: "Wonderful sayings! Ramakrishna ... a remarkable sage."^{xvii}

The Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi wrote: "The story of Ramakrishna's life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face."^{xviii}

It is said that we have enough religion to hate one another, but not enough to love one another. Religious sects are not bad, but sectarianism is horrible: It teaches people to hate others. This world would be an awfully boring place if all people looked alike, thought alike, ate alike, dressed

alike, drove the same type of car, prayed the same prayer, learned the same things, and died from the same kind of disease.

Vivekananda once said: "It is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought, that awakens thought. Now, if we all thought alike, we would be like Egyptian mummies in a museum, looking vacantly at one another's faces."^{xix}

In this diverse world, if we cannot live together in peace, we shall die together by killing each other. Love unites and hatred separates. Hatred cannot be conquered by hatred; it can be conquered only by love. All avatars teach us to love one another, but religious bigotry, narrowness, and superstition separate us from one another.

Variety is the spice of life. A restaurant that lists various kinds of food on its menu attracts many people, because people get bored if they eat the same food every day. Ramakrishna did not care for one-sidedness. He used to say, "In order not to become monotonous, I eat a variety of dishes."^{xx} Again, he said: "One player is producing only a monotone on his flute, while another is creating waves of melodies in different ragas and raginis. That is my attitude. Why should I produce only a monotone when I have an instrument with seven holes?"^{xxi}

In this present age, Ramakrishna played a variety of notes on his divine flute and created a symphony to blend all 'isms' of the world. He taught humanity to listen to the splendid symphony of the Soul and realize the divine unity in the diversity of this world.

ⁱ M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre (New York, 1969), 720

- ⁱⁱ Swami Basudevananda, *Astarage Alapan*, Sri Ramakrishna Basudevananda Sangha (Calcutta, 1956). 2:99-100
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama (Calcutta, 1968), 6:465
- ^{iv} *Gospel*, 452
- ^v *Ibid.*, 439
- ^{vi} *Gospel*, 322
- ^{vii} Udana-Varga, 5:18
- ^{viii} Matthew, 7:12
- ^{ix} Mahabharata, Udyoga Parvan, 39:71
- x Sunnah
- ^{xi} Talmud, Shabbat 3id
- ^{xii} *Complete Works* (1966), 4:187
- ^{xiii} Swami Chetanananda, *How to Live with God*, Vedanta Society (St. Louis, 2008), 348-50
- ^{xiv} Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, Advaita Ashrama (Calcutta, 1931), 14
- ^{xv} *Great Thinkers on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda*, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture (Calcutta, 2009), 6
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 32
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 33
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 35
- ^{xix} *Complete Works* (1968), 2:363
- ^{xx} *Gospel*, 782
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, 1009-10