

Sri Ramakrishna

“Nobody has been able to understand him who came on earth as Sri Ramakrishna. Even his own nearest devotees have no real clue to it. Only some have a little inkling of it. All will understand in time.” (Swami Vivekananda in Sil xvii)

How can we realize the presence of God? Sri Ramakrishna searched the answer of that question throughout his life in the Dakshinesvar Kali Temple, where he is reputed to have succeeded in gaining a vision of the gods and goddesses of many religions. To his devotees, Sri Ramakrishna represents an Avatar (incarnation) of the Divine, among the innumerable spiritual figures of India. Devotees also believe that he spreads the light of mystic radiance over the entire world.

In 1936, in Kamarpukur, a little Bengali village sheltered by banyan trees and mangoes and surrounded by rice fields and pools, Ramakrishna was born. His father was Khudiram Chattopadhyaya, and his mother was Chandramoni Devi (Paramahansa 29). According to legend, while Khudiram was on pilgrimage to Gaya, a god appeared to him during a dream and promised to be reincarnated in Khudiram's next son. Meanwhile, while Chandra Devi was visiting a Siva Temple, she too had a vision that foretold the birth of a divine child (Lemaitre 45). Dhani Kamarani, a blacksmith woman, was present with Chandramani Devi when this happened. In the memory of the dream at Gaya, he was named Gadadhar which means “the Bearer of the Scepter”, which is one of the names of Visnu (Lemaitre 45). It was later in life that he began to be called Ramakrishna. From a very early age he was disinclined towards formal education and worldly affairs, but he was a very talented boy who could sing spiritual hymns and paint. He was found to be absorbed in spiritual moods while listening to the discussions and discourses of Holy men.

According to his biographies, Gadadhar was six years old when he experienced his first ecstasy. It occurred while he was walking with his sister-in-law and some of her friends to a temple in their village. He was singing devotional songs and running around in the paddy field. The sky was covered by black clouds and when he saw a flight of white canes in front of the dark clouds, Gadadhar lost connection with outer consciousness and experienced an incredible joy in that state (Lemaitre 46). Gadadhar repeatedly experienced similar experiences throughout his childhood. At times when he was worshipping the goddess Vishalakshi or while playing with his friends, he would lose connection with his consciousness and move into his own happy land, *samadhi*. Once in his village during the festival of Sivaratri, there was a play being conducted about Siva but somehow the person who was going to act as Lord Siva was missing. So Gadadhar volunteered to act. While playing the role of Lord Siva, Gadadhar, once again, lost his consciousness. At the age of ten Gadadhar would experience this trance more often, until it became a common thing.

In 1855, Ramkumar, Gadadhar's brother, and his nephew, Redayram, became the priests of Dakshineswar Kali temple, which was built by Rani Rashmoni who belonged to Kaivarta cast. Gadadhar's task in the temple was to decorate Ma Kali. Gadadhar was also known as Thakur, a simple priest. He was unconventional. He believed that if you do not think that god is with you and a human being, then you cannot come close to god. So Gadhadhar did not follow all the rules and regulations of the Brahmin caste. Nevertheless, he was later appointed as the main priest of the temple. He then started looking at the goddess, Ma Kali, as his own mother and also the Mother of the Universe. He also worshipped his own wife, Chandra Devi as the Divine Mother and invoked the divinity in her. As Gambhirananda describes:

“By the by, the Mother lost all outer consciousness and the worshipper, too as he proceeded with his ceremonies, gradually lost himself in beatitude. On the level of ecstasy the Deity and the devotee became identified.” (Sil 147)

During the 1860s Sri Ramakrishna also practiced Islam under the Banyan tree of Daksinesvar. Govind Roy, a Sufi initiated him (Sil 73). Ramakrishna used to say prayers five times daily wearing a cloth like an Arab Muslim. The Hindu way of thinking disappeared from his mind. According to biographical accounts, he spent three days in that mood and a radiant countenance of Muhammad appeared to him in a vision. He also had an interest on Christianity. He was so surprised to see the shyness of the figures of Madonna and the child Jesus and became interested in Christian religion. Though his deep meditation he had a vision of Christ, as a great Yogi and son of the Divine Mother. He did not believe that any one religion could hold the whole truth to the exclusion to others (Lemaitre 112). One of his renowned teachings is: as many faiths so many paths.

One day Ramakrishna went on a pilgrimage to Varanasi with Mathur Babu, the son-in-law of Rani Rashmoni, and his family. They first stopped at the Vaidyanath Siva temple in Behar (Lemaitre 115). He was greatly distressed to see the wretched condition of the people in a nearby village. Moved by sympathy for them, he requested Mathur to feed the poor people and give everyone a piece of cloth. Unfortunately, they did not have sufficient funds to feed and clothe everyone as they had to bear their own expenses for the pilgrimage. However, Ramakrishna was inexorable; he canceled the journey to Varanasi and spent all the money for the poor villagers. He believes that God lives in every living soul. During a state of hyperconsciousness Sri Ramakrishna said, “Jiva is Shiva [the living being is God]” (Lemaitre 116).

Ramakrishna also met with many of the great sons of India. Among them Swami Vivekananda was one of his favorite disciples who became a messenger of Hinduism in the western world. According to legend, long before he knew Naren (i.e., Vivekananda), as in the case of Rakhhal, a young disciple who later became Swami Brahmananda, his other favorite son, the priest of Daksinesvar had seen him in a vision in the guise of a wise man plunged in the meditation of the Absolute, having incarnated in a human body in order to assist his master in the earthly task of which at that time Vivekananda was utterly ignorant (Lemaitre 186). Sri Ramakrishna went to Samadhi with Vivekananda before his death and gave everything to Naren to lead the work of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

After the death of the great master, his favorite disciple Narendranath assumed the role of organizer and evangelist following Ramakrishna's example. He took a leadership of the permanent monastery in 1898 at the Belur Math where Vedantic study got a promotion with the arts, sciences, and industries, teacher training, mass literacy and education, establishment of schools, colleges, orphanages, workshops, laboratories, nursing home for individuals and so on. The Math and the Mission together have 144 centers all over India and in different parts of the world (Lemaitre 205). Most of the missions and Maths are situated in India and Bangladesh.

Sri Ramakrishna was a successful priest of Kali as he had a vision of the Divine Mother through his restless devotion. On August 15, 1886, he had fallen into a trance and never awoke, but his teachings are still alive in the millions of his disciples. Sri Ramakrishna's chief apostle, Swami Vivekananda's organizations, Ramakrishna missions and Maths, are spreading out the concept of love and devotion among the people of all over the world and providing humanitarian aid. Being an illiterate sage, Sri Ramakrishna became a spiritual master of Hindu philosophy and a savior of twentieth century. The German philologist portrayed Sri Ramakrishna as "a

wonderful mixture of God and man” and as “a *bhakta*, a worshipper or lover of the deity, much more than a Gnanin or a knower.” (Paramahansa: 58)

References and Further Recommended Reading:

Lemaitre, Solange (1969) *Ramakrishna and the vitality of Hinduism*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls

Sil, Narasingha Prosad (1937) *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: A psychological Profile*. New York: Brill’s Indological Library

Gupta, Mahendranath (2001) *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. Chandigarh: Vedanta Press

Paramahansa, Sri Ramakrishna (2008) *Ramakrishna, His Life and sayings*. Toronto: Forgotten Books

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- Swami Vivekananda
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- The Dakshineswar Kali temple
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- Rani Rashmoni
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Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic:

<http://www.belurmath.org/>

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