

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: ALL PATHS LEAD TO GOD

Sri Ramakrishna lived in the nineteenth century (1836-1886 A.D.). He was a priest in charge of the Kali worship at a Temple in Dakshineshvar, and he was also one of the most influential mystics of our time, as the story of his life and teaching was brought to the West by his disciple, Swami Vivekananda. Many contemporary Westerners as well as his fellow Indian worshippers thereby learned of Sri Ramakrishna's mystical vision and his universal message. Today, he is famous as the voice of universal tolerance and appreciation for all religions. More information about his life and message may be found in the chapter on Sri Ramakrishna in my book, *History of Mysticism*. Here are a few of his words of wisdom:

“I have practiced,” Sri Ramakrishna said,

“all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once. Wherever I look, I see men quarreling in the name of religion—Hindus, Mohammedans, Brahmos, Vaishnavas, and the rest. But they never reflect that He who is called Krishna is also called Shiva, and bears the name of Shakti, Jesus, and Allah, as well—the same Rama with a thousand names. Let each man follow his own path. If he sincerely and ardently wishes to know God, peace be unto him! He will surely reach Him. ¹

“Some people indulge in quarrels, saying, ‘One cannot attain anything unless one worships our Krishna,’ or ‘Nothing can be gained without the worship of Kali, our Divine Mother,’ or ‘One cannot be saved without accepting the Christian religion.’ This is pure dogmatism. The dogmatist

says, ‘My religion alone is true, and the religions of others are false’ This is a bad attitude. God can be reached by different paths. ²

“You may say that there are many errors and superstitions in other religions. I should reply: Suppose there are. Every religion has errors. Everyone thinks that his watch alone gives the correct time. It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him.

“Don’t you know that God is the inner Guide? He sees the longing of our heart and the yearning of our soul. Suppose a man has several sons. The older boys address him distinctly as ‘Baba’ or ‘Papa,’ but the babies can at best call him ‘Ba’ or ‘Pa.’ Now will the father be angry with those who address him in this indistinct way? The father knows that they too are calling him, only they cannot pronounce his name well. All children are the same to the father. Likewise, the devotees call on God alone, though by different names. They call on one Person only. God is one, but His names are many. ³

“The inferior devotee says, ‘God exists, but He is very far off, up there in heaven.’ The mediocre devotee says, ‘God exists in all beings as life and consciousness.’ The superior devotee says, ‘It is God Himself who has become everything; whatever I see is only a form of God. It is He alone who has become maya, the universe, and all living beings. Nothing exists but God.’ ⁴

“Further, some say that God has form and is not formless. Thus, they start quarrels. One can speak rightly of God only after one has seen Him. He who has seen God knows really and truly that God has form and that He is formless as well. He has many other aspects that cannot be described.

“Once, some blind men chanced to come near an animal that someone told them was an elephant. They were asked what the elephant was like. The blind men began to feel its body. One of them said the elephant was like a pillar; he had touched only its leg. Another said it was like a winnowing-fan; he had touched only its ear. In this way, the others, having touched its tail or its belly, gave their different versions of the

elephant. Just so, a man who has seen only one aspect of God limits God to that alone. It is his conviction that God cannot be anything else.⁵

“He is indeed a real man who has harmonized everything. Most people are one-sided. But I find that all opinions point to the One. All views—the Shakta, the Vaishnava, the Vedanta—have that One for their center. He who is formless is, again, endowed with form. It is He who appears in different forms. The attributeless Brahman is my Father. God with attributes is my Mother. Whom shall I blame? Whom shall I praise? The two sides of the scale are equally heavy.⁶

“Nothing exists except the One. That One is the supreme Brahman. So long as He keeps the ‘I’ in us, He reveals to us that it is He who, as the Primal Energy, creates, preserves, and destroys the universe.

“That which is Brahman is also the Primal Energy. Once a king asked a yogi to impart knowledge to him in one word. The yogi said, ‘All right, you will get Knowledge in one word.’ After a while a magician came to the king. The king saw the magician moving two of his fingers rapidly and heard him exclaim, ‘Behold, O king! Behold!’ The king looked at him amazed, when, after a few minutes, he saw the two fingers becoming one. The implication of the story is that Brahman and the Primal Energy at first appear to be two. But after attaining the knowledge of Brahman, one does not see the two. Then there is no differentiation; it is One, without a second, *Advaita*—Nonduality.⁷ Brahman is Shakti; Shakti is Brahman. They are not two. These are only two aspects, male and female, of the same Reality—Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute.⁸

“Brahman and Shakti are identical, like fire and its power to burn. When we talk of fire, we automatically mean also its power to burn. Again, the fire’s power to burn implies the fire itself. If you accept the one, you must accept the other.⁹ “The phenomenal world belongs to that very Reality to which the Absolute belongs; again, the Absolute belongs to that very Reality to which the phenomenal world belongs. He who is realized as God has also become the universe and its living beings. One who knows the Truth knows that it is He alone who has become father

and mother, child and neighbor, man and animal, good and bad, holy and unholy, and so forth.¹⁰

“Under the spell of God’s Maya, man forgets his true nature. He forgets that he is heir to the infinite glories of his Father.¹¹ Maya is nothing but the egotism of the embodied soul. This egotism has covered everything like a veil. All troubles come to an end when the ego dies. If, by the grace of God, a man but once realizes that he is not the doer, then he at once becomes a *jivanmukta* [a liberated being]. Though living in the body, he is liberated. He has nothing else to fear.¹²

“‘I’ and ‘mine’—that is ignorance. By discriminating, you will realize that what you call ‘I’ is really nothing but *Atman* [the Self]. Reason it out. Are you the body or the flesh or something else? At the end, you will know that you are none of these. You are free from attributes. Then you will realize that you have never been the doer of any action, that you have been free from virtue and faults alike, that you are beyond righteousness and unrighteousness.¹³

“The jnani—the Vedantist, for instance—always reasons, applying the process of “Not this, not this.” Through this discrimination he realizes, by his inner perception, that the ego and the universe are both illusory, like a dream. Then the jnani realizes Brahman in his own consciousness. ... In that state a man no longer finds the existence of his ego. And who is there left to seek it? Who can describe how he feels in that state—in his own Pure Consciousness—about the real nature of Brahman?

“Once a salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean. No sooner was it in the water than it melted. Now who was to tell the depth? Then the ‘I,’ which may be likened to the salt doll, melts in the Ocean of Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, and becomes one with It. Not the slightest trace of distinction is left.¹⁴

“The Vedantist says, ‘I am He.’ Brahman is real and the world illusory. Even the ‘I’ is illusory. Only the Supreme Brahman exists.¹⁵

“Even after attaining samadhi, some retain the ‘servant ego,’ or the ‘devotee ego.’ The bhakta keeps this ‘I-consciousness’. He says, ‘O God,

Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant; Thou art the Lord and I am Thy devotee.'

He feels that way even after the realization of God. His 'I' is not completely effaced. Again, by constantly practicing this kind of 'I-consciousness,' one ultimately attains God... One can attain the Knowledge of Brahman too by following the path of *bhakti* (devotion). God is all-powerful. He may give His devotee *Brahmajnana* [the knowledge of Brahman] also if He so wills. But the devotee generally doesn't seek the Knowledge of the Absolute. He would rather have the consciousness that God is the Master and he the servant, or that God is the Divine Mother and he the child. ¹⁶

"One cannot see God without purity of heart. Through attachment to "woman and gold" the mind has become stained— covered with dirt, as it were. A magnet cannot attract a needle if the needle is covered with mud. Wash away the mud and the magnet will draw it. Likewise, the dirt of the mind can be washed away with the tears of our eyes. This stain is removed if one sheds tears of repentance and says, 'O God, I shall never again do such a thing.' Thereupon God, who is like the magnet, draws to Himself the mind, which is like the needle. Then the devotee goes into *samadhi* and obtains the vision of God.

"You may try thousands of times, but nothing can be achieved without God's grace. One cannot see God without His grace. Is it an easy thing to receive the grace of God? One must altogether renounce egotism; one cannot see God as long as one feels 'I am the doer.' ...God doesn't easily appear in the heart of a man who feels himself to be his own master. But God can be seen the moment His grace descends. He is the Sun of Knowledge. One single ray of His has illumined the world with the light of knowledge. This is how we are able to see one another and acquire varied knowledge. One can see God only if He turns His light toward His own Face. ¹⁷

"A man does not have to suffer any more if God, in His grace, removes his doubts and reveals Himself to him. But this grace descends upon him only after he has prayed to God with intense yearning of heart and practiced spiritual discipline. The mother feels compassion for her child

when she sees him running about breathlessly. She has been hiding herself; now she appears before the child.

“It is His will that we should run about a little. Then it is great fun. God has created the world in play, as it were. This is called Mahamaya, the Great Illusion. Therefore, one must take refuge in the Divine Mother, the Cosmic Power Itself. It is She who has bound us with the shackles of illusion. The realization of God is possible only when those shackles are severed.¹⁸

“The path of knowledge leads to Truth, as does the path that combines knowledge [*jnan*] and love [*bhakti*]. The path of love too leads to this goal. The way of love is as true as the way of knowledge. All paths ultimately lead to the same Truth. But as long as God keeps the feeling of ego in us, it is easier to follow the path of love.¹⁹

“Do you know how a lover of God feels? His attitude is: ‘O God, Thou art the Master, and I am Thy servant. Thou art the Mother, and I am Thy child.’ Or again: ‘Thou art my Father and Mother. Thou art the Whole, and I am a part.’ He doesn’t like to say, ‘I am Brahman.’²⁰

“The man in whom longing for God manifests its glories is not far from attaining Him. What are the glories of that longing? They are discrimination, dispassion, compassion for living beings, serving holy men, loving their company, chanting the name and glories of God, telling only the truth, and the like. When you see these signs of longing in an aspirant, you can rightly say that for him the vision of God is not far to seek.²¹

“You will feel restless for God when your heart becomes pure and your mind free from attachment to the things of the world. Then alone will your prayer reach God. A telegraph wire cannot carry messages if it has a break or some other defect.

“I used to cry for God all alone, with a longing heart. I used to weep, ‘O God, where art Thou?’ Weeping thus, I would lose all consciousness of the world. My mind would merge in the *Mahavayu* [the infinite sky of Consciousness].

“How can one attain yoga? By completely renouncing attachment to worldly things. The mind must be pure and without blemish, like the telegraph wire that has no defect. One must not cherish any desire whatever. The devotion of a man who has desire is selfish. But desireless devotion is love for its own sake. You may love me or not, but I love you; this is love for its own sake.

“The thing is that one must love God. Through intense love, one attains the vision of Him. The attraction of the husband for the chaste wife, the attraction of the child for its mother, the attraction of worldly possessions for the worldly man—when a man can blend these three into one, and direct it all to God, then he gets the vision of God.

“The sum and substance of the whole matter is that a man must love God, must be restless for Him. It doesn’t matter whether you believe in God with form or God without form. You may or may not believe that God incarnates Himself as man. But you will realize Him if you have that yearning. Then He himself will let you know what He is like. If you must be mad, why should you be mad for the things of the world? If you must be mad, be mad for God alone.” ²²

NOTES:

1. Nikhilananda, Swami (trans.), *The Gospel Of Sri Ramakrishna*, N.Y., Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942; p. 35
2. *Ibid.*; p. 38
3. *Ibid.*; p. 38
4. *Ibid.*; p. 191
5. *Ibid.*; p. 112
6. *Ibid.*; p. 265
7. *Ibid.*; p. 191
8. *Ibid.*; p. 490
9. *Ibid.*; p. 242
10. *Ibid.*; p. 271
11. *Ibid.*; p. 108
12. *Ibid.*; p. 328
13. *Ibid.*; p. 218

14. *Ibid.*; pp. 168-169
15. *Ibid.*; p. 208
16. *Ibid.*; p. 148
17. *Ibid.*; p. 181
18. *Ibid.*; p. 171
19. *Ibid.*; pp. 173-174
20. *Ibid.*; p. 116
21. *Ibid.*; p. 104
22. *Ibid.*; p. 134

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