

## **A Saint called Ramakrishna**

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### **Abstract**

India has time and again, been a witness to the divine presence of saints and seers, who have incarnated on Earth to save the souls of millions of people. Sri Ramakrishna was one of these saints. Born in the Hooghly district of Bengal, this son of Goddess Kali soon attained, through his will and dedication, the ultimate realization of the infinite. Adept in various Vedantic techniques and Tantric practices, he remained an innocent child of the Goddess throughout his life. He was an epitome of spiritual powers & a favourite of his disciples especially Narendranath (later, Swami Vivekananda). He supported the Vedantic ideal of seeing God in men, right through his life. This paper traces the life of this saintly icon who was a true example of living for the service of mankind.

**Keywords: Divine, Saints, Seers, Goddess, Vedanta, Spiritual**

The love for God, the yearning of the soul to reach Him, the timeless wisdom of the infinite and the sense of complete absorption in the Godhead can summarily be said to be in one person- the Spiritual Guru and mentor of Swami Vivekananda, Shri Ramakrishna Paramhansa.

Shri Ramakrishna, who was born in 1836 and passed away in 1886, represents the very core of the spiritual realisations of the seers and sages of India. His whole life was literally a contemplation of God. An account on Swami Vivekananda would not be considered complete without the mention of this man of God-fondly known as “Thakur” among his devotees and Ramakrishna Paramhansa, elsewhere.

Sri Ramakrishna, the God- man of modern India, was born at Kamarpukur village in Hooghly district of Bengal. His parents were simple, religious-minded people. In the year 1835, Ramakrishna’s father, made a pilgrimage to the holy city of Gaya. At this sacred place, he had a dream in which he saw Lord Vishnu, who promised to be born as his son. Khudiram’s wife, Chandra Devi too, had a vision in the Siva Temple, indicating the birth of a divine child. It was on February 18, 1836 that the child, who was later to be known as Ramakrishna, was born. He was named Gadadhar- the bearer of the mace- in memory of the dream at Gaya.

Gadadhar grew up to be a healthy and chirpy boy. He was fond of listening to stories of Hindu Mythology and the Epics. At the age of six or seven, Gadadhar had his first experience of cosmic consciousness. He was walking along some paddy fields, when he saw a beautiful, dark thunder-cloud in the sky. As it spread, some cranes passed in front of it. The beauty of the scene overwhelmed Gadadhar, who fell on the ground, unconscious. He later described the moments as an experience of infinite bliss. (Nikhilananda, 1942, p 3)

Gadadhar was seven years old, when he lost his father. This made the boy slip more often into solitude, enjoying his own company. He also became more helpful to his mother in the discharge of her household duties. He developed an interest in the wandering monks and pilgrims who made a brief halt at Kamarpukur, while on their way to Puri. These pious men would share with Gadadhar, stories from the Indian Epics.

At the age of nine, Gadadhar was baptised and invested with the sacred thread. This ceremony gave him a reason to be proud of his being born as a Brahmin- but instead of this, he shocked his relatives by accepting a meal cooked by his nurse- a sudra woman. (Nikhilananda, 1942).

Gadadhar, who was now permitted to worship his family deity- Raghuvir, did so with all his body, mind and soul. The stone image of Raghuvir appeared to him as the living

universal God. Gadadhar became the favourite of the women of the village in his youth. They would tease him, listen to him sing or recite from the holy books. They recognized the innate purity and piety of this boy. The elderly women treated him as 'Krishna' and 'Gopala.'

At the age of sixteen, Gadadhar was called to Calcutta by his elder brother Ramkumar, who wanted help in his duties as a priest there. Acting as a family priest to many families there, Gadadhar devoted his heart and soul to his duties. He spent hours decorating the images and singing hymns. At first Ramkumar did not oppose the ways of Gadadhar, but when his indifference to his studies started bothering him, Ramkumar decided to talk to Gadadhar about it. He reprimanded Gadadhar and asked him to pay more attention to his worldly duties and concentrate on the study of scriptures through which he would be able to earn his livelihood, but Gadadhar replied spiritedly, "Brother, what shall I do with a mere bread winning education? I would rather acquire that wisdom which will illumine my heart and give me satisfaction forever". (Nikhilananda, 1942, p 6)

Some days hence Sri Ramakrishna and his elder brother came to the temple of Goddess Kali, which was built by Rani Rasmani, a rich and devout widow. Ramkumar was appointed as the priest of this temple of Goddess Kali.

Sri Ramakrishna won the praise and reverence of everyone who came to the temple. His deep religiosity and piety moved many a people there. His brother, Ramkumar wanted him to undergo a special type of initiation to learn the minutest details of the worship of Goddess Kali. His lack of knowledge about the scriptures was compensated for by his sincerity and devotedness towards the Goddess. Hence, he was made the priest of the Kali temple, in due course of time. (Nikhilananda, 1942)

Ramkumar died in 1856. His death made Sri Ramakrishna realize the impermanency of life on Earth. He became more and more detached from worldly affairs and was eager to realize the Absolute-God- the fountain of immortality. Sri Ramakrishna could get nothing out of the motive to gain money from people. The worship in the temple made his self yearn for the living vision of the divine mother. He looked upon the statue of the Goddess Kali as having a living form- breathing and eating out of his hand. After the regular rituals of worship, he would spend hours, singing and talking in front of the idol- as a child does to his mother. Often, his child like form would cry out in despair to meet the Mother of the

Universe. He began to behave in an abnormal manner- leaving food and sleep for days altogether.

One day, as Sri Ramakrishna was feeling his separation from the Divine mother very keenly, he thought of putting an end to his life, when all of a sudden, the Divine mother revealed herself, in all her pristine glory. He described the moment thus:

I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered with a great restlessness and a fear that it might not be my lot to realize her in this life. I could not bear the separation from her any longer. Life seemed to me not worth living. Suddenly, my glance fell on the sword that was kept in the mother's temple. I determined to put an end to my life. When I jumped up like a madman and seized it, suddenly, the blessed Mother revealed herself... I felt the presence of the Divine Mother. (Nikhilananda, 1942, Pg 13)

This vision of the Mother was only a prelude to whatever was about to come. Shri Ramakrishna's visions of the Mother became more frequent as days passed. Whenever he used to weep before her at being separated from her, he would find her standing, in front of him, "smiling, talking, consoling, bidding him be of good cheer and instructing him." (Nikhilananda, 1942, p 14)

As Sri Ramakrishna progressed in his spiritual practices, he began to worship God by assuming the attitude of a servant towards his master. He imitated the mood of Hanuman, the monkey chief of the Ramayana. When he meditated thus, his movements and his way of life began to resemble those of a monkey. He jumped from here to there living on fruits and roots. (Nikhilananda, 1942)

There came to Dakshineswar, around this time, a Brahmin woman who was adept in the Tantrik and the Vaishanva methods of worship. Sri Ramakrishna welcomed the Brahmani with great respect and told her of his experiences and visions and also that people thought him to be a madman. Having heard this, the Brahmani said, "My son, everyone in this world is mad. Some are mad for money, some for creature comforts, some for name and fame; and you are mad for God." (Nikhilananda, 1942, p 18)

A tender relationship developed between Sri Ramakrishna and the Brahmani. She observed his ecstasy during the *Kirtans*, his *Samadhi*, his yearning and came to the conclusion

that only an incarnation of God was capable of such spiritual progressions. She proclaimed openly that Sri Ramakrishna, like Sri Chaitanya, was an incarnation of God. (Nikhilananda, 1942)

The Brahmani initiated Sri Ramakrishna into the Tantra method of worship. The Tantra philosophy has for its goal the attainment of the Ultimate or the Absolute. In order to achieve this Divine union, of the devotee, with his deity, it takes into consideration the lower appetites and the natural weaknesses of human beings. It combines, “philosophy with rituals, meditation with ceremonies, and renunciation with enjoyment.” (Nikhilananda, 1942, p 20)

Thus it is entirely different from other forms of worship which emphasise on austere methods of renunciation and discrimination. (Nikhilananda, 1942). The tendency of humans is to enjoy all the worldly pleasures. Tantra lets the seeker enjoy these, but at the same time, find in them, a presence of God.

Sri Ramakrishna accepted the Brahmani as his Guru and practised various spiritual disciplines under her supervision. As a result of these, he started having even stranger visions and experiences. He heard the sound of “Om”. He acquired the eight supernatural powers of Yoga. He had the vision of the Divine “Maya” in the form of a woman of exquisite beauty. The most remarkable aspect of this time was the awakening of the “*Kundalini Sakti*”- the serpent power inside him. (Nikhilananda, 1942). After completing the *Tantric Sadhana*, Sri Ramakrishna followed the principles of Vaishnavism as enumerated by his Guru- the Brahmani.

When one moves forward on a Spiritual path, one discovers that all the assistance he needs is near at hand. Teachers come into our lives from nowhere. Sri Ramakrishna’s new Guru was a wandering monk, Totapuri- a total renunciant and a bearer of the non-dualistic philosophy of the *Vedanta*.

The Vedanta philosophy nullifies aspects of a person’s dualistic behaviour. The ordinary human being, subject to the illusions created by Maya, experiences extreme polarities in his lifetime. He experiences trials and tribulations on the one hand and ineffable bliss on the other. This happens because humans live in duality- where they perceive God as something outside of themselves and thus spend their lives in trying to attain Him through various means. (Nikhilananda, 1942). Humans can overcome this worldly illusion by piercing

this dual form- created by the cosmic illusion and realising Brahman within himself. Knowing himself to be one with the universal spirit – gives a person immeasurable peace. He is freed from the cycles of birth & death & thus becomes immortal. This is the goal of all religions- “to dehypnotize the soul now hypnotized by its own ignorance.” (Nikhilananda, 1942 p 26)

When the field is all ploughed- with all the weeds and stones already scraped out- then the farmer has no difficulty in sowing the seeds. Totapuri had no difficulties in initiating Sri Ramakrishna –who was like a well ploughed and weeded field- into the disciplines of the *Advaita Vedanta*, wherein a person is required giving up his last vestiges of attachment to the world. Sri Ramakrishna achieved the greatest form of union with the Absolute- the *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* – and remained in it for three days. This made his Guru Totapuri exclaim in astonishment, “Is it possible that he has attained in a single day what it took me forty years of strenuous practice to achieve? It is nothing short of a miracle.” (Nikhilananda, 1942, p 29)

Towards the end of 1866, Sri Ramakrishna began to practise the disciplines of Islam. His prayers took the form of Islamic devotions. He forgot the Hindu Gods and Goddesses and even stopped visiting the temples. After three days, he beheld a radiant figure approaching him and finally merging within him. At once Sri Ramakrishna went into Samadhi. Thus, he realized the Muslim God, but then, he came to the conclusion that the mighty river of Islam also led him back to the vast ocean of the Absolute – the Brahman. (Nikhilananda, 1942, p 34)

Around Nov., 1874, Sri Ramakrishna had an urge to learn the truth of the Christian religion. He became fascinated with the teachings of Jesus. One day, when he was seated in a garden house, he saw a painting of the Madonna and the child. Looking intently at it, he became overwhelmed with divine emotion. He entered into a new realm – a new plane – of bliss, of ecstasy. He beheld the figure of Christ who merged in Sri Ramakrishna and thus Sri Ramakrishna became one with the Christian God.

Without being formally initiated into various religions and disciplines, Sri Ramakrishna practised them all. All barriers were removed because of his overwhelming Love for God. “I have practised 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.” (Nikhilananda, 1942, p 35)

Sri Ramakrishna also said, “When the rose is blown and sheds its fragrance all around, the bees come of themselves. The bees seek the full-blown rose and not the rose the bees.”

This saying has been verified time and again in the Holy Life of Sri Ramakrishna. Thousands of spiritual seekers started coming to him to receive instructions and to quench their spiritual thirst. Day and night were spent in teaching and ministering to this spiritually starved crowd of men and women. People, considered to be in possession of various wonderful Yogic Powers, came up to him seeking to learn from this ‘illiterate Paramhansa of Dakshineswar.’ His nights were spent in talking to his earnest devotees about *Bhakti* (devotion) and *Jnana* (Knowledge).

Narendranath Dutta, later Swami Vivekananda, often recounted Sri Ramakrishna’s wonderful way of teaching his disciples, not by mere preaching but by the silent examples of his own life. The atmosphere of Dakshineswar was divine and more so at the feet of the Master. The Master would often sit under the trees in joyful and intimate talks with the Master talking to all his disciples, motivating them and making them aware of the pitfalls in the way to realise the Truth, the Absolute. Narendra described his method of teaching thus,

Realizing that the *Atman* (soul), the source of infinite strength exists in every individual, pigmy though he might be, he was able to see the potential giant in all. He could clearly discern the latent spiritual power which would in the fullness of time manifest itself. Holding up that bright picture to view, he would speak highly of us and encourage us. (Life of Swami Vivekananda, 2015, p 132).

Sri Ramakrishna’s emphasis on “Realization” was the one thing that had a deep impact on Narendra.

In the beginning of 1885, he suffered from the “clergyman’s throat” which slowly developed into cancer. He was advised strict voice rest by the physicians, but the advice went in vain; for wherever Sri Ramakrishna went, he was followed by crowds of men and women waiting to listen to a single blessing or single word from him. Sri Ramakrishna had a childlike simplicity, a wonderful purity, the perfect unselfishness in him.

Sri Ramakrishna went into Samadhi on August 16, 1886 at 10 o’clock in the night. In his own words, he was a *Nitya- Mukta-* one who had come to Earth for the good of others. (Abhedananda & Fitzgerald, 2013).

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