



Sri Rama Krishna Paramahansa

"If you must be mad, be it not for the things of the world. Be mad with the love of God."

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (February 18, 1836 - August 16, 1886), was born as Gadadhar Chattopadhyay in the village of Kamarpukur, in the Hooghly district of West Bengal, into a very poor but pious, orthodox brahmin family. His parents were Khudiram Chattopâdhyâya and Chandramani Devi. According to traditional accounts, Ramakrishna's parents experienced supernatural incidents, visions before his birth. His father Khudiram had a dream in Gaya in which Lord Gadadhara (a form of god Vishnu), said that he would be born as his son. Chandramani Devi is said to have had a vision of light entering her womb from Shiva's temple.

Ramakrishna was a popular figure in the village, with a natural gift for fine arts. Though he attended a village school with some regularity for 12 years, he later rejected the traditional schooling saying that he was not interested in a "bread-winning education". Kamarpukur, being a transit-point in well-established pilgrimage routes to Puri, brought him into contact with renunciates and holy men. He became well-versed in the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Bhagavata Purana, hearing them from wandering monks and the Kathaks-a class of men in ancient India who preached and sang the Pura?as. He could read and write in Bengali.

Ramakrishna describes his first spiritual ecstasy at the age of six: while walking along the paddy fields, a flock of white cranes flying against a backdrop of dark thunder clouds caught his vision. He reportedly became so absorbed by this scene that he lost outward consciousness and experienced indescribable joy in that state. Ramakrishna reportedly had experiences of similar nature a few other times in his childhood-while worshipping the goddess Vishalakshi, and portraying god Shiva in a drama during Shivaratri festival. From his tenth or eleventh year on, the trances became common, and by the final years of his life, Ramakrishna's samadhi periods occurred almost daily.

Ramakrishna's father died in 1843, after which time family responsibilities fell on his elder brother Ramkumar. This loss drew him closer to his mother, and he spent his time in household activities and daily worship of the household deities and became more involved in contemplative activities such as reading the sacred epics. When Ramakrishna was in his teens, the family's financial position worsened. Ramkumar started a Sanskrit school in Calcutta and also served as a priest. Ramakrishna moved to Calcutta in 1852 with Ramkumar to assist in the priestly work.

Priest at Dakshineswar Kali Temple In 1855 Ramkumar was appointed as the priest of Dakshineswar Kali Temple, built by Rani Rashmoni-a rich woman of Calcutta who belonged to the kaivarta community. Ramakrishna, along with his nephew Hriday, became assistants to Ramkumar, with Ramakrishna given the task of decorating the deity. When Ramkumar died in 1856, Ramakrishna took his place as the priest of the Kali temple. The name Ramakrishna is said to have been given him by Mathur Babu, the son-in-law of Rani Rashmoni. After Ramkumar's death Ramakrishna became more contemplative. He began to look upon the image of the goddess Kali as his mother and the mother of the universe. He became seized by a desire to have a darshana (vision) of Kali-a direct realization of her reality-and believed the stone image to be living and breathing and taking food out of his hand.



Dakshineswar Kali Temple and Bhavatarini Kali, the deity that Ramakrishna worshipped

At times he would weep bitterly and cry out loudly while worshipping, and would not be comforted, because he could not see his mother Kali as perfectly as he wished. People became divided in their opinions-some held Ramakrishna to be mad, and some took him to be a great lover of God. One day, brought to the point of suicide by this longing, he had the experience of goddess Kali as the universal Mother, which he described as "... houses, doors, temples and everything else vanished altogether; as if there was nothing anywhere! And what I saw was an infinite shoreless sea of light; a sea that was consciousness. However, far and in whatever direction I looked, I saw shining waves, one after another, coming towards me."

Marriage

Rumors spread to Kamarpukur that Ramakrishna had become unstable as a result of his spiritual exercises at Dakshineswar. Ramakrishna's mother and his elder brother Rameshwar decided to get Ramakrishna married, thinking that marriage would be a good steadying influence upon him-by forcing him to accept responsibility and to keep his attention on normal affairs rather than being obsessed with his spiritual practices and visions. Far from objecting to the marriage, Ramakrishna mentioned that they could find the bride at the house of Ramchandra Mukherjee in Jayrambati, three miles to the north-west of Kamarpukur.

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The five-year-old bride, Saradamani Mukhopadhyaya was found and the marriage was duly solemnised in 1859. Ramakrishna was 23 at this point, but the age difference was typical for 19th century rural Bengal. They later spent three months together in Kamarpukur. Sarada Devi was fourteen while Ramakrishna was thirty-two. Ramakrishna became a very influential figure in Sarada's life, and she became a strong follower of his teachings. Their marriage is now seen in India, to be one of the most spiritual and perfect unions between a man and a woman. After the marriage, Sarada stayed at Jayrambati and joined Ramakrishna in Dakshineswar at the age of 18.

Religious practices and teachers

Many of his religious views were based on traditional Hindu thought and practice. Ramakrishna's personal and religious views focused on living a traditional life, with Hindu gods at the center. It was very much a philosophy of godly worship and dependence. He believed that everything in life—caste, wealth, family, and personal achievement—was already determined by the gods. He believed that every religion was welcome, and that worshiping a god in any way was better than not worshiping one at all. He became very known for his views on religious tolerance and was seen as a saintly figure to many because of them. His views of tolerance were also passed on through the Ramakrishna Mission and his followers.

Bhairavi Brahmani and Tantra

In 1861, Bhairavi Brahmani, an orange-robed, middle-aged female ascetic, appeared at Dakshineswar. She carried with her the Raghuvir Shila, a stone icon representing Ram and all Vaishnava deities. She was thoroughly conversant with the texts of Gaudiya Vaishnavism and practiced Tantra. According to the Bhairavi, Ramakrishna was experiencing phenomena that accompany mahabhava—the supreme attitude of loving devotion towards the divine and quoting from the bhakti shastras, she said that other religious figures like Radha and Chaitanya had similar experiences. The Bhairavi initiated Ramakrishna into Tantra. Under her guidance, he went through a full course of sixty-four major tantric sadhanas which were completed in 1863. Ramakrishna took the attitude of a son towards the Bhairavi. The Bhairavi on the other hand looked upon Ramakrishna as an avatara, or incarnation of the divine, and was the first person to openly declare that Ramakrishna was an avatara. The Bhairavi also taught Ramakrishna the kumari-puja, a form of ritual in which the Virgin Goddess is worshiped symbolically in the form of a young girl. Under the tutelage of the Bhairavi, Ramakrishna also became an adept at Kundalini Yoga.

Vaishnava Bhakti

The Vaishnava Bhakti traditions speak of five different moods, referred to as bhavas—different attitudes that a devotee can take up to express his love for God. They are: *santa*, the serene attitude; *dasya*, the attitude of a servant; *sakhya*, the attitude of a friend; *vatsalya*, the attitude of a mother toward her child; and *madhura*, the attitude of a woman towards her lover. At some point in the period between his vision of Kali and his marriage, Ramakrishna practiced *dasya bhava*. He started worshiping Rama in the attitude of Hanuman, the monkey-god, who is considered to be the ideal devotee and servant of Rama. According to Ramakrishna, towards the end of this sadhana, he had a vision of Sita, the consort of Rama, merging into his body.

In 1864, Ramakrishna practiced *vatsalya bhava* under a Vaishnava guru **Jatadhari**. During this period, he worshipped a metal image of Ramlala (Rama as a child) in the attitude of a mother. According to Ramakrishna, he could feel the presence of child Rama as a living God in the metal image. Ramakrishna later engaged in the practice of *madhura bhava*—the attitude of the Gopis and Radha towards Krishna. According to Ramakrishna, towards the end of this sadhana, he attained *savikalpa samadhi*—vision and union with Krishna. Ramakrishna visited Nadia, the home of Chaitanya and Nityananda, the 15th-century founders of Bengali Gaudiya Vaishnava bhakti. According to Ramakrishna, he had an intense vision of two young boys merging into his body. Earlier, after his vision of Kali, he is said to have cultivated the *Santa bhava*—the passive "peaceful" attitude—towards Kali.

In 1865, Ramakrishna was initiated into *sanyasa* by **Tota Puri**, an itinerant monk who trained Ramakrishna in Advaita Vedanta, the Hindu philosophy which emphasizes non-dualism. Totapuri first guided Ramakrishna through the rites of *sanyasa*—renunciation of all ties to the world. Then he instructed him in the teaching of *advaita*—that "Brahman alone is real, and the world is illusory; I have no separate existence; I am that Brahman alone." Under the guidance of Totapuri, Ramakrishna reportedly experienced *nirvikalpa samadhi*, which is considered to be the highest state in spiritual realisation.

Islam and Christianity

In 1866, Govinda Roy, a Hindu guru who practiced Sufism, initiated Ramakrishna into Islam. Ramakrishna said that he "devoutly repeated the name of Allah, wore a cloth like the Arab Moslems, said their prayer five times daily, and felt disinclined even to see images of the Hindu gods and goddesses, much less worship them—for the Hindu way of thinking had disappeared altogether from my mind." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramakrishna> - cite_note-66 According to Ramakrishna, after three days of practice he had a vision of a "radiant personage with grave countenance and white beard resembling the Prophet and merging with his body".

At the end of 1873 he started the practice of Christianity, when his devotee Shambu Charan Mallik read the Bible to him. Ramakrishna said that for several days he was filled with Christian thoughts and no longer thought of going to the Kali temple. According to Ramakrishna, one day when he saw the picture of Madonna and Child Jesus, he felt that the figures became alive and had a vision in which Jesus merged with his body.

Arrival of followers

In 1875, Ramakrishna met the influential Brahmo Samaj leader Keshab Chandra Sen. Keshab had accepted Christianity, and had separated from the Adi Brahmo Samaj. Formerly, Keshab had rejected idolatry, but under the influence of Ramakrishna he accepted Hindu polytheism and established the "New Dispensation" (*Nava Vidhan*) religious movement, based on Ramakrishna's principles—"Worship of God as Mother", "All religions as true" and "Assimilation of Hindu polytheism into Brahmoism". Keshab also publicized Ramakrishna's teachings in the journals of New Dispensation over a period of several years, which was instrumental in bringing Ramakrishna to the attention of a wider audience, especially the

Following Keshab, other Brahmos such as Vijaykrishna Goswami started to admire Ramakrishna, propagate his ideals and reorient their socio-religious outlook. Many prominent people of Calcutta-Pratap Chandra Mazumdar, Shivanath Shastri and Trailokyanath Sanyal-began visiting him during this time (1871-1885). Mazumdar wrote the first English biography of Ramakrishna, entitled *The Hindu Saint in the Theistic Quarterly Review* (1879), which played a vital role in introducing Ramakrishna to Westerners like the German indologist Max Müller. Newspapers reported that Ramakrishna was spreading "Love" and "Devotion" among the educated classes of Calcutta and that he had succeeded in reforming the character of some youths whose morals had been corrupt. Ramakrishna also had interactions with Debendranath Tagore, the father of Rabindranath Tagore, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a renowned social worker. He had also met Swami Dayananda. Ramakrishna is considered as one of the main contributors to the Bengali Renaissance.

Among the Europeans who were influenced by Ramakrishna was Principal Dr. W.W. Hastie of the Scottish Church College, Calcutta. In the course of explaining the word *trance* in the poem *The Excursion* by William Wordsworth, Hastie told his students that if they wanted to know its "real meaning", they should go to "Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar." This prompted some of his students, including Narendranath Dutta (later Swami Vivekananda), to visit Ramakrishna.

Devotees and disciples

Most of Ramakrishna's prominent disciples came between 1879-1885, and were influenced by his style of preaching and instructing.

His chief disciples consisted of:

- Grihastas or The householders-Mahendranath Gupta, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Akshay Kumar Sen and others.
- Monastic disciples who renounced their family and became the earliest monks of the Ramakrishna order-Narendranath Dutta (Swami Vivekananda), Rakhai Chandra Ghosh (Swami Brahmananda), Kaliprasad Chandra (Swami Abhedananda), Taraknath Ghoshal (Swami Shivananda), Sashibhushan Chakravarty (Swami Ramakrishnananda), Saratchandra Chakravarty (Swami Saradananda) and others.
- A small group of women disciples including Gauri Ma and Yogin Ma. A few of them were initiated into sanyasa through mantra deeksha. Among the women, Ramakrishna emphasized service to other women rather than tapasya (practice of austerities). Gauri-ma founded the Saradesvari Ashrama at Barrackpur, which was dedicated to the education and uplift of women.

As his name spread, an ever-shifting crowd of all classes and castes visited Ramakrishna.

Sarada Devi



Sarada Devi (1853-1920)

At the age of eighteen Sarada Devi joined Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. By the time his bride joined him, Ramakrishna had already embraced the monastic life of a sanyasin; as a result, the marriage was never consummated. As a priest Ramakrishna performed the ritual ceremony-the Shodashi Puja-where Sarada Devi was made to sit in the seat of goddess Kali, and worshiped as the Divine mother. Ramakrishna regarded Sarada as the Divine Mother in person, addressing her as the Holy Mother, and it was by this name that she was known to Ramakrishna's disciples. Sarada Devi outlived Ramakrishna by 34 years and played an important role in the nascent religious movement.

Last days

In the beginning of 1885 Ramakrishna suffered from clergyman's throat, which gradually developed into throat cancer. He was moved to Shyampukur near Calcutta, where some of the best physicians of the time, including Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar, were engaged. When his condition aggravated he was relocated to a large garden house at Cossipore on December 11, 1885. Ramakrishna asked Vivekananda to look after the welfare of the disciples, saying, "keep my boys together" and asked him to "teach them". Ramakrishna also asked other monastic disciples to look upon Vivekananda as their leader. Ramakrishna's condition gradually worsened and he expired in the early morning hours of August 16, 1886 at the Cossipore garden house. According to his disciples, this was mahasamadhi. After the death of their master, the monastic disciples lead by Vivekananda formed a fellowship at a half-ruined house at Baranagar near the river Ganga, with the financial assistance of the householder disciples. This became the first Math or monastery of the disciples who constituted the first Ramakrishna Order.

Teachings

Ramakrishna's teachings were imparted in rustic Bengali, using stories and parables. These teachings made

a powerful impact on Calcutta's intellectuals, despite the fact that his preachings were far removed from issues of modernism or national independence. His spiritual movement indirectly aided nationalism, as it rejected caste distinctions and religious prejudices.

Ramakrishna looked upon the world as Maya and he explained that avidya maya represents dark forces of creation (e.g. sensual desire, evil passions, greed, lust and cruelty), which keep people on lower planes of consciousness. These forces are responsible for human entrapment in the cycle of birth and death, and they must be fought and vanquished. Vidya maya, on the other hand, represents higher forces of creation (e.g. spiritual virtues, enlightening qualities, kindness, purity, love, and devotion), which elevate human beings to the higher planes of consciousness.

Ramakrishna practised several religions, including Islam and Christianity, and recognized that in spite of the differences, all religions are valid and true and they lead to the same ultimate goal-God. Ramakrishna's proclaimed that jatra jiv tatra Shiv (wherever there is a living being, there is Shiva) which stemmed from his Advaitic perception of Reality. His teaching, "Jive daya noy, Shiv gyane jiv seba" (not kindness to living beings, but serving the living being as Shiva Himself) is considered as the inspiration for the philanthropic work carried out by his chief disciple Vivekananda.

Impact

Several organizations have been established in the name of Ramakrishna. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission is one of the main organizations founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897. The Mission conducts extensive work in health care, disaster relief, rural management, tribal welfare, elementary and higher education. The movement is considered as one of the revitalization movements of India. Other organizations include the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society founded by Swami Abhedananda in 1923, the Ramakrishna Vivekananda Mission formed by Swami Nityananda in 1976, and the Sri Sarada Math and Ramakrishna Sarada Mission founded in 1959 as a sister organization by the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Ramakrishna was born during a period of social upheaval in Bengal in particular and India in general. During Ramakrishna's time, Hinduism faced a significant intellectual challenge from Westerners and Indians alike. The Hindu practice of Idol worship came under attack especially in Bengal, and many had denounced Hinduism and embraced Christianity or atheism. Ramakrishna and his movement, the Ramakrishna Mission, played a leading role in the modern revival of Hinduism in India, and on modern Indian history. His life and teachings were an important part of the renaissance that Bengal, and later India, experienced in the 19th century. Many great thinkers including Max Müller, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sri Aurobindo, and Leo Tolstoy have acknowledged Ramakrishna's contribution to humanity. Ramakrishna's influence is also seen in the works of artists such as Franz Dvorak (1862-1927) and Philip Glass.



"His life is a searchlight of infinite power thrown upon the whole mass of Indian religious thought. He was the living commentary to the Vedas and to their aim. He had lived in one life the whole cycle of the national religious existence in India."

-- Swami Vivekananda



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