



Vedanta Society of Toronto

(Ramakrishna Mission)

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Newsletter June 2015

WORDS TO INSPIRE

“Those whose spiritual consciousness has been awakened never make a false step.

Fully awakened souls are beyond virtue and vice.”

-Sri Ramakrishna

The Gospel of Holy Mother

(RECORDED BY SWAMI SANTANANDA)

I asked the Holy Mother, "How shall I lead a spiritual life, Mother?" She said, "Spend your days as you are doing now. Pray to Him earnestly and remember Him always."

Disciple: Mother, the fact that even great men become degraded frightens me terribly.

Mother: When a person has enjoyable things all around him, their influence naturally affects him. My son, don't look at a woman, even if it be only a figure made of wood. Avoid the company of women.

Disciple: Men can't do anything on their own. It is He who is making them do all that they do.

Mother: True it is that He is causing men to do everything. But do they have that understanding? Being filled with egotism, they think they are the doers of everything and that they don't have to depend upon God. Those who rely on Him are protected by Him from all dangers. "A man's mind runs after bad things. If he wants to act virtuously, the mind fails to co-operate. In earlier days I used to leave my bed daily at three o'clock in the morning to meditate. One day I felt unwell and out of laziness dispensed with the meditation. Because of this my meditation was stopped for a few days. Therefore, if one wants to achieve something noble, he must be sincerely arduous and seized with a firm resolve. When I used to stay in the Nahabat, on moonlit nights I would look at the reflection of the moon in the still waters of the Ganges and, weeping, pray to God, 'There are stains even on the moon, but let my mind be absolutely stainless.' During my stay there the Master forbade even Ramlal to see me, although he was a nephew. Now-a-days I talk with all and come out in the presence of others. "You are a Calcutta boy. Had you so desired, you could have married and led a householder's life. Since you have renounced everything, why should you give your mind to it again? Should one again take in the spittle that has been once spat out?"

Disciple: Mother, why is it that my mind does not become steady? When I try to think of God. I find it drawn to various worldly objects.

Mother: It is harmful if the mind is drawn to worldly objects like money and members of one's family. Nonetheless, the mind naturally dwells on one's daily activities. If you don't succeed in meditation, practise Japa. Japa leads to perfection. One attains perfection through Japa. If a meditative mood sets in well and good. If not, don't force your mind to meditate.

Disciple: For practising spiritual disciplines in Varanasi, should one live in the monastery or in some lonely place?

Mother If you practise spiritual disciplines for some time in a solitary place like Hrishikesh, you will find that your mind has gained in strength, and then you can live in any place or in the company of anyone without being in the least affected by it. A sapling must be protected by a fence all around, but when it grows big not even cows and goats can injure it. Spiritual practice in a solitary place is essential. When worldly thoughts crop up in your mind, and they possess it, then you should go away from the company of others and pray to Him with tears in your eyes. He will remove all the dross of your mind, and will also give you understanding.

Disciple: I don't have enough strength for doing spiritual disciplines. I have surrendered myself to your holy feet; please do as you will.

With folded palms the Mother began praying to the Master, "May the Master protect you in your vows of Sannyasa. He is looking after you; what should you be afraid of? If the mind is kept engaged in some work, it doesn't indulge in silly thoughts. But if you sit idle, the mind is likely to indulge in various kinds of thoughts. "

Disciple: How and where should I perform spiritual disciplines?

Mother: Varanasi is the place for you. Spiritual discipline means holding the mind steadfast at His holy feet all the time and immersing the mind in thoughts of Him. Repeat His Name.

Sri Ramakrishna as a Human Being

(Based on a talk by Prof. V. Kumar Murty at Vedanta Society of Toronto on March 8, 2015)

In general, it is difficult to speak about Sri Ramakrishna. Even great souls like Swami Vivekananda were hesitant to speak about him. This is because with depth of understanding comes an awareness that words do not do justice to the topic. Nevertheless, it is worth the attempt because it might help clarify our understanding a little, or inspire someone to examine further.

In this case, the task has been simplified a little bit by restricting it to his aspect as a human being. You may say, especially if you are new to this tradition, what else was he but a human being? Looking at the Christian or Buddhist traditions from the 'outside', I might say Jesus was a human being and Gautama was a human being. Those belonging to the corresponding tradition will not deny that, but they have in mind that there is an aspect of these personalities that goes beyond the human and into the spiritual realm. They say that these personalities are either directly manifestations of a greater spiritual reality or have some intimate connection with such a reality that sets them apart as 'more than human'. Christ is described as 'the son of God' and Mohammed as 'the last Prophet'. And all of these personalities have the characteristic that they can help us to connect ourselves from our human situation to this higher spiritual reality.

In the Indian tradition, there is the concept of avatar or descent. What descends? An aspect of universal spirit. It descends from some abstract state to a physical embodiment and that embodiment is called the avatar. According to Swami Vivekananda, the avatar is the highest reading of spirit through the manifested form. In Hindu thought, especially Vaishnavism, a number of great personalities of the past are listed as being an avatar. This has been described in the Bhagavatam and also immortalized in the Sanskrit musical composition of Jayadeva.

From this point of view, Buddha and Christ are also seen as being an avatar. And some of us feel Sri Ramakrishna is an avatar as well. In fact, no less an intellect than Swami Vivekananda called him the *avatara varishtha*, the greatest among avatars.

But let us leave this aspect because it takes us more into the philosophical and theological realms and tends to be speculative. The label of avatar anyway is something that is given after the fact. Mahatma Gandhi, in his commentary on the Gita, says that it is a label we give when we see a human being who is so great that they seem to transcend even their humanity. Swami Vivekananda says it is like a tidal wave.

After the fact, we mark how high the water reached and remember that as extraordinary.

Mahatma Gandhi's point of view is very interesting and worth studying because he does not really identify himself with any tradition. But about Sri Ramakrishna, he said that 'his life shows us the meaning of religion in practice and enables us to see God face to face'.

So let us look at Sri Ramakrishna's life and what he was, as a human being without worrying too much about theological issues. In the human aspect, he lived for 50 years 1836-1886. We can consider his childhood, youth and adult life; we can consider his student and teacher roles; we can consider his householder and monastic roles; and we can consider the theme of his entire human existence: is God real and if so, how can we experience that reality?

I will not be able to do justice to all these aspects, so I would like to suggest that what we discuss this morning is only a beginning. All of us should continue to think about this and I think it is both a large task, but also a very fulfilling one. By recounting aspects of his life and teachings, one is flooding one's mind with holy thoughts and thereby purifying the mind. And sharing these insights with each other, we can derive great joy and inspiration. As the Gita says: *kathayantas-ca mam nityam, tusyanti ca ramanti ca*. As a child, he was full of fun but was especially attracted to dramas and plays that depicted religious themes. Watching such a performance, he could remember verbatim the script and would re-enact the entire drama with his friends. His amazing memory stayed with him throughout his life. Much later in life, hearing his conversation about difficult philosophical and spiritual topics, someone remarked that he must have read a lot of books. To this, another person who was present said that no, he (meaning Sri Ramakrishna) does not read books. It is not that Sri Ramakrishna was illiterate. He knew how to read and write. We know that once, he was trying to teach Latu (one of his disciples) the alphabet. We also have a record of his handwriting. But he was not known to read books. Even the maid Brinde knew this – that is how common this knowledge was. On his first visit to Sri Ramakrishna, M asked her 'does he read many books?' She said, 'goodness no, they are all on his tongue'. In this instance also, someone said that he doesn't read books. But hearing this, Sri Ramakrishna said 'ah, but how many I have heard'. It is not magic that he had as much knowledge as he did: he heard, thought about it and

assimilated it. He used to say ‘some have heard of milk, some drink it, and some having drunk it, are able to digest and assimilate it. It is only the last kind that benefit from the milk.’ So it is with all the philosophical and spiritual discussions that used to take place in his room. He listened, reflected and assimilated it. That is how he could tell us such things as ‘the essence of the Gita is renunciation’. This is not a play on words but the result of deep reflection based on knowledge.

Sometimes, we find people repeating this in a light way. We shouldn’t forget that it is the outcome of study and reflection. The Gita itself is the product of a mind of the highest order. Swami Vivekananda said of Sri Krishna ‘there are no cobwebs in that brain’. So it is to be studied and reflected on. And then, as Sri Ramakrishna did, we have to extract the essence for us. Many people have done this for themselves, but in our time, Mahatma Gandhi is an exemplar. Having studied the Gita he gave it the subtitle ‘*anasaktiyoga*’ – the yoga of detachment. Now it is left for us to reflect on the relationship between ‘tyaga’ and ‘anasakti’ – renunciation and detachment. In fact, the Gita itself discussed this.

Going back to Sri Ramakrishna’s memory, listening to the description of his memory, we may find ourselves wishing that we had such a memory. The same Sri Ramakrishna, who remembered everything he heard, asked M to explain to him how tides occur. When M started to draw some diagrams and explain the movement of the oceans, Sri Ramakrishna asked him to stop, as he was getting dizzy. There were some things that Sri Ramakrishna was not interested in. He didn’t care much for formal education. In this he is not alone: most original people have the same view. This is because formal education is a system and systems are meant to modulate the least common denominator. Systems rarely, if ever, are able to help the extraordinary. Sri Ramakrishna was interested in learning. But for what purpose? Not to get a job and earn a living. He didn’t want a ‘bread winning education’. Again, this is something we are liable to repeat without thinking through the meaning. What would we do without a bread winning education? Many of us see education as a means to get a job. Without a job, we cannot support ourselves, or others who depend on us. So what is wrong with a ‘bread winning education’? Sri Ramakrishna’s comment is only relevant if you are not satisfied with getting a job and earning a living as the highest aim of life. Yes these are necessary, but what next? Many of us do ask this kind of question, but usually much later in life and after we have had a ton of experience. It is a process and what we take most of our lifetime to do, Sri Ramakrishna did right at the outset and had the boldness to follow through: getting a job is not the highest aim of life. ‘There is something higher and I

must go after that.’ Some of us have that idealism, but we give up when we face the blows of life. We are brought back down to earth and we have to rethink our approach. Perhaps there are people depending on us. Sri Ramakrishna’s idealism was rooted in something deeper that was able to help him withstand those kind of obstacles. It is not that he was not aware of them. As a child, he experienced death in the family. His father passed away when Sri Ramakrishna was quite young. Though he might not have been able to express it himself, he surely understood what happened and could see its painful effect on his mother and his elder brother and other siblings. He tried his best to cheer up his mother and tried to help his brother maintain the family. But his higher idealism – the need to find God – was stronger.

Sometimes when we find a person who has a sharp focus on an ideal, we may think that they are very selfish or uncaring. Certainly in Sri Ramakrishna’s case this is not true. He understood very well the pain of death, and the many troubles that people have to deal with in everyday life. He himself wept at the death of his nephew Akshay, and his mother. His heart was very tender in this respect, but he had also an abiding feeling that beyond human efforts, God will take care of us all. We come here to the first major revelation that we get from Sri Ramakrishna as a human being: the harmony between human effort and Divine grace. You must do your responsibility, but as the Gita says, the outcome may not be what you expect. This is because you and your actions are only one factor in a very complex causal relationship. There are other factors that are in play, and we may not even know many of them. If we say that we have no social or family responsibility because everything is the grace of God, then there is no need to make any effort to live a spiritual life either. They stand or fall by the same logic. As long as we are conscious of our human individuality, as long as we are conscious of our membership in a human community, we have responsibility and we have to make effort. We have to make effort to discharge our human responsibility and we have to make effort to realize our spiritual goal. Anyone who tries to put this into practice will be faced with many difficult situations and as Mahatma Gandhi would say, one has to ‘burn the midnight oil’ trying to figure out the right thing to do. In Sri Ramakrishna’s life, both by example and by explicit teaching, we find the attempt to harmonize these. So Sri Ramakrishna as a human being shows us the harmony between human effort and Divine grace. And this grace is constantly available: ‘the breeze of divine grace is constantly blowing; unfurl the sail of your mind to benefit by it’. There is never a time or a situation where the grace of God is not with us. But it is we who shut our eyes to the light and cry that it is dark.

Another aspect of his human manifestation was his attitude towards learning and teaching. We do not know if there was a causal relationship, but his intense longing brought to him some extraordinary teachers. He was an eternal student "As long as I live, so long do I learn". The Chandogya Upanishad says *swadhyaya -pravacanabhyama pramadah* – do not stop learning and teaching. This humble willingness to learn from anyone actually attracted great teachers to him. From his example, we see what the attitude of the ideal student should be. The Gita says that by humble inquiry, we can learn from great people: *sraddhavan labhate jnanam*.

Swami Vivekananda said that if you want to know a great man, see his ordinary, everyday actions: in this instance, how he arranged his physical surroundings, how he treated Sri Sarada Devi, and others.

And he did not use just words. Singing and music was part of his everyday life and this is something that all

human beings relate to. "even snakes are subdued by the power of music". People recount his never to be forgotten singing absorbed in the thought of God. And that bhavam was infectious. Many would be caught in the spiritual mood and feel themselves uplifted.

Let me conclude by quoting two people who were in a position to best understand Sri Ramakrishna, namely Swami Vivekananda and Sri Sarada Devi.

Swami Vivekananda, as the young Naren, was asked how would you describe Sri Ramakrishna. He said 'he is the embodiment of love'. Though he would not accept Sri Ramakrishna's words, he said he came to Dakshineswar because of that loving relationship.

Sri Sarada Devi said that she never saw him sad. He was always full of bliss. Moreover, she said that by his life and teachings, "now it will be possible for all to realize God".

Ramakrishna Mission's Earthquake Relief 2015

A Summary of the Headquarters' Report issued by the General Secretary on May 16, 2015

In the wake of the recent devastating earthquake which affected a major portion of Nepal and some parts of India, the Ramakrishna Mission is conducting primary relief among affected families in the devastated areas.

Our **KATHMANDU** Centre started relief within just a few days of the earthquake and is now serving the victims of Nuwakot, Kavre, Kathmandu, Makbanpur, Gorkha and Sindhupalchok districts

Our **LUCKNOW** centre has started primary relief work in the worst affected Gorkha district of Nepal. Nearly 308 patients have already been treated, among whom 14 were very serious cases. We are receiving assistance from the local people as well as the Army in our relief services.

Our **DARJEELING** centre has distributed 3500 relief packets containing food and other essential items among 3500 affected families in Gowaltar, Ramtar, Kapalikot, Khangsang, Kamalamai and Kanapa areas in Sindhuli district of Nepal.

Our **PATNA** centre along with our **MUZAFFARPUR** Centre has started a camp at Raxaul in Bihar and is catering to the earthquake victims in Kavre district of Nepal.

The relief work is running in full swing and will be further expanded depending upon the situation.

While thanking all who contributed for this noble cause, we request others to come forward and donate liberally.

For full Report please visit: <http://www.belurmath.org/news_archives/2015/05/03/earthquake-relief-2015/>

ANNUAL SUMMER RETREAT

Annual Summer Retreat will be held on Saturday June 20 and Sunday June 21 from 9 am to 4 pm. The theme of the Retreat is: '*Sri Ramakrishna as a human being*'. Venue of the Retreat will be Bharat Sevashram Sangha, 2107 Codlin Crescent, Etobicoke ON M9W 5K7.

This year SWAMI SHANTARUPANANDA, head of the Vedanta society of Portland, Oregon, USA will be the guest speaker.

Registration Fee for each day is \$40 and for both days it is \$75.

OTHER IMPORTANT EVENTS OF THE MONTH

INTERNATIONAL YOGA DAY will be celebrated on June 14, 2015 at 10:30 am.

REGULAR PROGRAMMES

SCRIPTURE CLASS: Every Friday at 7:30 pm, following the regular evening prayer at 6:00 pm.

Devotional singing and meditation is held in the evenings from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm.

VIGIL: A vigil consisting of japa and meditation is observed from 6:00am to 6:00pm. For the date of this month's vigil, please see the 'Calendar of Events' on the next page. *To participate, please call the Centre.*

DAILY BREAD FOOD BANK: Many less fortunate families are dependent on the food bank for their daily nutrition. Please help us by contributing non-perishable food items that we may pass along to the Daily Bread Food Bank.

RAM NAM: For the date and time of the monthly Ramnam, please see the 'Calendar of Events' on the next page.

SOUP KITCHEN: The Soup is cooked at the Vedanta Society and offered serving meals at Syme Woolner Neighbourhood & Family Centre, 2468 Eglinton Ave W, Unit 3, Toronto, ON, M6M 5E2. Please contact the Centre, if you are interested in participating. *Donations for the Soup Kitchen will be highly appreciated*

INTERVIEWS/INSTRUCTION:

Swami Kripamayanda will be happy to give interviews to those interested in knowing more about Vedanta and meditation. Individual interviews are also given for spiritual instruction. Appointments for interviews should be made in advance with the Swami at 416-240-7262.

BOOK STORE: The Book Store is open after Sunday Services and special programmes, and arrangements can be made by phone for weekday and Saturday visits. We carry selected titles from the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, as well as other Vedantic materials.

DAILY MEDITATION: Meditation is observed at the Centre every morning from 6:00 am to 7:00 am.

Update on the Building Project

The Architect has submitted the documents to the Committee of Adjustment, after which the City permit will be applied for.

Considering the unforeseen delays that may occur during this important phase, it has been decided that the project will be undertaken in 2 phases. Part of the project will be completed in August 2015 and rest will be undertaken in the spring of 2016.

We look forward to your support and will keep you updated of development.

Vedanta Society of Toronto

Minister and Teacher - Swami Kripamayanda, Ramakrishna Order of India

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

June 2015

Sunday	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thurs	Friday	Saturday
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u> 7:30pm Scripture class: 'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'	<u>6</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen
<u>7</u> 11am Lecture: 'The Ramakrishna Order- Its Genesis and Growth'	<u>8</u>	<u>9</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>10</u>	<u>11</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>12</u> 7:30pm Scripture class: 'Vivekachudamani'	<u>13</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen 6am-6pm VIGIL
<u>14</u> 10:30 am Celebrating International Yoga Day 5pm <i>Ram Nam</i>	<u>15</u>	<u>16</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>17</u>	<u>18</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>19</u> 7:30pm Scripture class: 'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna'	<u>20</u> 9 am ANNUAL SUMMER RETREAT DAY-1
<u>21</u> 9am ANNUAL SUMMER RETREAT DAY-2	<u>22</u> SUMMER RECESS BEGINS	<u>23</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen	<u>24</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>27</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen
<u>28</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>30</u> 9:30am Soup Kitchen				

2015 SUMMER RECESS

The Vedanta Society of Toronto will observe its regular summer recess this year from June 22 to September 11, 2015. Regular services will resume from September 13. The Annual Seminar will be held on September 12, 2015. Please note that Guru Purnima will be celebrated during the Recess on Friday, July 31 at 6:30 pm at Tagore Centre, 140 Millwick Drive, North York, Toronto M9L 1Y6. Sri Krishna Janmashtami will be celebrated on Saturday, September 5 at 6:30pm. Morning and evening prayers and meditation as well as the Soup Kitchen activities at the Centre will continue throughout the summer. The Newsletter will not be published in July and August.

The Vedanta Society of Toronto wishes everyone a happy and safe summer!