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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF GOD CONSCIOUSNESS
IN THE LIFE OF RAMAKRISHNA PARAMAHAMSA**

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'Yet the beautiful lotus growing out of the mud and slime is the proper image for the ideal results of Tantric Sadhana...'

Neeval

'When the flower blooms, the bees come uninvited.'

Sri Ramakrishna

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INTRODUCTION

Pandit Rajmani Tigunait captures the essence and spirit of this research while engaged in a discourse on philosophy:

To understand the basic tenets of Indian philosophy, the Western reader must be willing to entertain a new definition of the term philosophy. The Sanskrit word for philosophy is *darsana*, which means 'direct vision'. This word highlights a major difference between modern Western philosophy, which predominantly relies on intellectual pursuit and Indian philosophy, which relies on the direct vision of truth and pure *Buddhi* (pure reasoning). But it is precisely this vision of truth that forms the foundation of all but the most materialistic schools of Indian philosophy.

This thesis attempts to demonstrate how philosophic consciousness manifests itself as Divine experience or God-Consciousness in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. Recasting the central question of this thesis, why is there a perpetual quest on the part of humankind to seek spiritual consciousness and the ultimate union with God?

Selectively suspending the usual discourse on the nature and philosophy of God with its various interpretations and theological explanations, my research focuses on the experiential nature of God-

realisation. Reflectively, the discourse centres on the concepts and the existential reality of what counts as religion and spirituality in the exercise of God-consciousness. In other words, Divine-consciousness becomes the primary focus of the arguments and how this phenomenon manifests itself in the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

The point of departure of this research is the vast reservoir of experiential and existential knowledge of mystics and saints who have lived since time immemorial and whose lives have been a veritable spiritual landscape to be inherited by later generations and civilisations. Significant too are the sacred teachings of the Upanishads, the Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, Koran, Bible, Torah and other writings of prophets, enlightened souls and mystics. These commentaries, together with learned work of selected scholars interrogating the purpose of spiritual life and the path to self-realisation, and how these function in the *experiences* of Ramakrishna Paramahansa become the benchmark of the thesis. Moreover, the secondary objective of this exercise is to examine and establish new ways of mediating and philosophising about the experiential nature of realising God.

The debate between intellectual *versus* realised truth remains pivotal as the argument gains ground in God-consciousness and realisation. What legitimacy has the holy scientific truth of experience as dialectically interrogating the rational truth of the dogmas; and, can 'Pure-

Bliss Consciousness' be achieved through the latter, as we are wont to believe in organised religions? The major argument here is rooted in the theoretical approach to objective realities (with its attendant forms) as the main proof for God's existence. This thesis focuses on the praxis-oriented existential reality sanctioned by other experiences of a similar kind as the ultimate and final proof. This is undertaken by a systematic and hermeneutic deconstructing of the life of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa together with the life experiences of other well-known saints and mystics. Support of scriptures will be invoked to substantiate the spiritual evolution of the *sadhakas*. Drawn into the experience dialectic is the important issue of the scientific (or human-as-matter, life as an end in 'itself') as opposed to the spiritual evolution of the soul to a pre-destined union with God as the ultimate goal of life. Both form the reality of experience, for no scholar of spiritual science will deny that the world is an extension of the Primal Energy; but, what becomes crucial in the dialectical debate of God realisation is what method(s) or process(es) will enable one to reach the objective of that consciousness. In other words, the realisation that God acts with the people as the primary architect of the universe and the dismantling of the taken-for-granted assumptions of the process all contribute to the intellectual debate.

As mentioned elsewhere, the philosophy of history or the history of philosophy centres on the unceasing questions of the meaning and the purpose of Life. Central to the debate is the very existence of God. The

hermeneutics and deconstruction of religion and modernity force the arguments to the roots of our existence, with the debates ranging from creationists on the one hand to evolutionists on the other extending the taken-for-granted assumptions of God.

Amidst the arguments and counter-arguments of this debate and modern secular hegemony in university halls and debating chambers, millions of ordinary people, steeped in their respective cultures, humbly enter the precincts of the temple, church, mosque and synagogue to experience the bliss of prayer and worship, establishing a collective consciousness of spirituality. The architectural structure of the physics of worship and prayer, incantation, meditation, ecstasy and silence all form part of the Dance of Shiva in the continuous worship of the eternal Spirit-God.

It is the dismantling and decoding of this culture of God in the life of Sri Ramakrishna that my thesis wishes to elucidate. How does the Master realise God and what advice does he offer his disciples, devotees and humanity at large to the path of God-Consciousness to be ultimately able to 'dissolve' into eternal bliss, the oneness with the Eternal One?

Ramakrishna Paramahansa's life can arbitrarily be divided into two aspects, the one being the Incarnated Soul which was evident from birth until his death, and the other being that of a *Guru* or Master. In both of

these roles, the master illustrated that the 'blissful state'—often referred to in the *Sastras* and that which is said to be the 'universal aim and highest necessity' because of the *Atman* nature of our being and that the 'expansion of our real selves'—is an endemic condition of human existence. Secondly, the Master's advice to the path of self-realisation enables the *Sadhaka* to progress on the road to salvation or spirituality, and as a consequence permitting the 'narrow individuality to fall away'. At this stage one begins to enter the state of *Samadhi* and the union with God becomes a reality.

This research intends to establish the mystical experience of the Supreme Being in the first place, and secondly explain how the Paramahansa set about convincing the latter day world of the 'realness' of God. In other words^s, the spirituality of the transcendental needs to be concretised so that the level of spiritual consciousness in the modern world becomes transparent. Like Moses on the Mount, or like Ramakrishna at the Kali Temple, God must be met 'face to face' so that Humanity redefines its humanity in light of this experience with God.

In summary then, can it be possible to see God? The answer to this question by saints, seers and yogis has been an emphatic yes. Yet, it takes a Ramakrishna Paramahansa to tell us how, to counsel what preparation and modes of procedure are necessary and to insist that this exercise be undertaken with the help of a Master.

CHAPTER 1

THE CONCEPT OF GOD-CONSCIOUSNESS

IN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Abstract

Religious traditions across the world exhibit one form of transcendental experience or another as their pinnacle of spiritual realisation. Ritual and scriptural differences may exist, but a degree of universality characterises the ultimate goal of God-consciousness. This chapter demonstrates such complementarity and focuses on the life of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa who embodied this totality in his religious ethic and demonstrated its centrality to Hindu philosophy in particular, and most other religious beliefs as well.

In the current age of scientific and materialistic modernity, metaphysical and intellectual discourse on the spiritual or mystical condition of human experience is rigorously challenged by Cartesian doubt, downright scepticism or dismissed with calculated indifference.

This difficulty of rational and systematic understanding of mystical discourse is compounded by two major factors (although there are many others). The belief systems of antiquity and the philosophy and practice of ancient societies are still viewed as lacking scientific rigour and therefore invalid as rational thought. The other, even more complex problem is that

the wide ranges of spirituality or 'divine emotions' extending across the spectrum of belief systems (to what Aurobindo refers to as 'supplemental thinking') enjoys limited legitimisation within the mainstream Western idea of theology. There is even less academic understanding and recognition of these phenomena.¹

While the eternal and sometimes acrimonious debate on God continues from the dawn of human history, new experiences and levels of consciousness on human cognition, meaning and understanding of the Divine direct the debate to the more existential, phenomenological and mystical dimensions.² Recognising the different levels of experience, this chapter specifically addresses the question of spiritual consciousness within the framework of metaphysical discourse in various religious belief systems (See Tracy, 1994).

Spiritual consciousness has historically been subjected to critical dialectical debate. The one-dimensional interpretation frames the comprehension of these phenomena in a specific way, primarily due to the inelastic nature of the 'modern technologised mind'. Apart from the periods of history such as the Vedic Age, much of the 'metaphysical' has been relegated to 'magic' of one form or other. Interpretation of the Life Force—the spirit or spiritual consciousness—has been often undertaken or grounded in rational or scientific systems of enquiry. Where metaphysical or theological enquiry prevailed, the phenomenon

investigated was reduced to the absurd. Discourse of the mind and cognition has variably been debated as the *tabula rasa* of John Locke, the intuitiveness of Hume while the 'appearance and reality' Russelian philosophical debate centred on the dominance of sense perception. The base of knowing and understanding seems almost endless, but is to a large extent still dominated by behaviourist psychology now challenged by psychic research with a rediscovery of ancient cultural literature of the East by German and American scholars in particular. Both Buddhism and Japanese Shintoism are beginning to reawaken developmental thinking on the subject.³

The ancient Mandukya Upanishad, for instance, has rendered the current intellectual perception of human cognition problematic. 'Knowledge', it states, 'must be understood beyond the limits of the modern naturalist – rationalist science.'⁴ The science of the Self (*Turiya*), according to this Upanishad, consists of various levels of consciousness and in particular, the stages of 'waking', 'dreaming' and 'deep sleep'. This systematic analysis of the 'flow' of consciousness as metaphysically grounded, intellectually remaining at only a descriptive level, forms the possibility of the 'ground' for God-consciousness. Patanjali's Yoga system, for instance, relates this *Turiya* state in such a way that the 'consciousness' of the 'Real' or God-consciousness can be made realisable; and, Cosmic-consciousness can therefore become a reality.⁵

This chapter meditates on the dynamics of spiritual consciousness in the various religious traditions and examines in some way the path taken by Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Ramakrishna explains to us in *The Gospel* that the phenomenon of 'God' is itself complicated. For instance, broadly speaking, God is represented by both 'form' and 'formlessness' and therefore God-Consciousness will depend on the belief one holds in the primary instance. Belief and faith thereafter transcend the 'form or formless debate' because in either case, it is the firm faith or belief that helps the seeker to reach the 'Oneness' with God (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:80).

But Ramakrishna goes on to state that once the centrality of the Oneness of God includes the 'plausibility' of forms and formlessness, then different forms of worship must include among other things, the universality of Consciousness and the many different forms of meta-consciousness that bring realisation to the fore. Very specifically, Ramakrishna expands the process of God Consciousness. The Master emphasises the repetition of God's name and singing of His glories as methods of electrifying the mind in the direction of spirituality. Closely resembling the spiritual environment of the Ancients, the company of holy men and women together with the meditation of God in sacred or holy places, creates an environment conducive to expanding consciousness. This path to God-Realisation is but a sure and slow way, for this method of God-Consciousness is for those who are earnest, but have not reached

higher levels in previous re-incarnations. The certain distraction, however, to this mode of consciousness, is the involvement in worldly and material things since this tends to distract one from the goals required for the spiritual evolution (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:83).

Ramakrishna enunciates various methods to attain oneness with the Divine Spirit. One method requires absolute peace and meditating in solitude: 'the mind acquires knowledge, dispassion and devotion. This method calls for intensive practical spiritual discipline.' But, underpinning all the above disciplines is the steadfast love and longing that faith requires so that in Ramakrishna's own words, 'you will certainly see Him' becomes the reality. He continues that should one show such devotion, then, 'God reveals himself to a devotee' (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:83).

This approach towards God-Consciousness in a systematic way is evident in the *Gita*. Krishna advises Arjuna that the outer forms of the world emerge from the primal flow. The origins, change and dissolution of forms become evident, but the undying spiritual principle remains constant and is difficult to discern. The method of discussing this inner principle however, is through 'the experience of the soul-spiritual element, but this is only possible through the awakening of the slumbering forces in your soul.' The Yogic process awakens his slumbering element and directs it towards 'the soul-spirit element of existence'.

Steiner (1947) reinforces this argument by stating that through this process of Yoga, 'the pupil rises from stage to stage until full realisation and consciousness takes place.' This 'devotional reference' towards the *spiritual element for the soul* moves across the changing forms to establish Unity of the Divine Being. Ultimate God-Consciousness is therefore attained during the concentration period of the Yoga 'through grace and illumination' (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:32).

The understanding of the God-Consciousness method therefore can be illuminated by the saint or mystic who advises the seeker of truth. Devotion and thoughtful contemplation are but the elements of the Yoga systems, which the Vedas describe as the 'outer' and the 'inner', and which ultimately enable the individual to reach God-Consciousness.

The mystery of God-Consciousness in Ramakrishna Paramahansa's life is an unfolding and developmental one, primarily because of the kaleidoscopic nature of the subject. The multi-dimensional experiences disclose to reveal the intricacies of this particular Divine nature; and, therefore it compels the reader to thoroughly investigate the personal growth of the Master, who in the various stages of 'realisations', displays a whole array of methods and techniques of becoming conscious of God.

It may be argued that the processes by which achievement occurs are consequences of external factors, but in fact, it is due to the ever-present metaphysical state of the individual. In other words, highly evolved souls who are incarnated in this world come endowed with latent potentialities, which unfold situationally in the process of consciousness and awareness.

To reiterate what this thesis sets out to investigate is the 'beyond' material science's explanation of God and how spiritual consciousness can be possible through the experiential science of human realisation. Jayadayai Goyandka (1945) raises the primal ontological question on the discursive nature of the subject. What is God? Or rather, who is God? Admittedly, this is an eternal question in the philosophy of God discourse. Since God is so central to the arguments raised throughout this research, some attempt must be made to answer the question. Goyandka argues that only God knows who S/He is. Therefore, the human condition and mind rely at best on speculative thought (Godyanka, 1945:72). Religious fundamentalism throughout the ages has, through its respective schools of thought, underscored this fundamental proposition resulting in the confusion that currently dominates and restricts a more lucid understanding of God. Philosophic certainty on the question remains in the realm of dialectical speculation, while the certainty of God-realised souls or the 'experienced ones' (through mystical or super-conscious stages of realisation) has provided a much more scientific legitimation of

God-understanding. Civilisations in history, however, continue to attempt to unravel this mystery of God, Life and the spiritual quest.

As the arguments of spiritual realisation proceed, various legitimations of spiritual experiences of God-realised souls substantiate the hypothesis of this research. To this experiential evidence of the existence of God, substantiation comes from the religious texts and various scriptures: the Vedas, Bible, Koran and the Torah, to name but a few. These scriptures support the experiential knowledge of saints, sages, seers and *yogis* whose knowledge of revelation is divinely grounded (Pagels, 1979).

Acknowledging the fact that this understanding of God is obtained through the scriptures and other literature and that it reveals only a part of 'Reality', the ultimate understanding of the Divine can thus be obtained, the Prophets tell us, by 'actual realisation'. This is the simple message of realised souls. Saints and incarnated souls—in particular Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Paramahansa Yogananda, Saint Chaitanya, Buddha, Christ and several other mystics and yogis—all agree that realisation is only possible through 'experience' (See Swami Vishnu Devananda, 1981:5 and Abertonson, 1970). Substantiating this basic premise is Paramahansa Yogananda (1972:6) who argues that the 'Oneness' of the religious belief systems adequately demonstrates this truth. Usually this 'realisation' cannot be explained or communicated, and therefore this

experience of 'Reality' remains the sacred knowledge of only a few realised souls. Mukerjee (1989) maintains that 'the Vedas are considered to be the focal point of all spiritual knowledge in India', which arise of the 'experiences' of *rishis* of the age. Other scholars of India have substantiated Mukerjee's assertion.⁶

Essentially it is an attempt to demonstrate the synthesis and the 'Oneness' of the underlying philosophy of 'Being and *Atman-ness*', Yogananda argues that this Oneness can only be realised experientially by the different religious belief systems. In other words, 'God-intoxication', in the language of Sri Ramakrishna, or 'realisation', both within and without a set of beliefs and customs, must approximate strictly speaking to 'one religion'. In a word, 'the religion of God', since there is but one God. That the customs and traditions of different cultural societies, geographically determined and culturally diverse, are just the many ways of demonstrating the psychological pluralities to one defining end—the total experience of consciousness—God-Consciousness (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1972:6).

Acknowledging the 'direct experience' of knowing God, Swami Abhananda (1935) suggests that intellectually at any rate, God can only be understood through 'linguistic arrangements' and logical pre-suppositions, all of which is 'sterile understanding' on an intellectual plane. Abhananda (1935:73) speaks of 'experience' as the 'highest goal of spiritual

enfoldment' - an action-oriented exercise of God consciousness. Mircea Eliade (1969) captures this idea in another way when he speaks of the 'Kingdom of God is within us', and the truth is to be meditated upon. Therefore, each system of religion has, over the centuries, tried and tested how best the human mind might realise its Divine Nature.

This realising of the Divine Nature has posed no singular problem for India in so far as Abhananda is concerned. India, he believes, has a unique spiritual history dating from the Vedic period, where 'universal God consciousness' has been eternally embedded in the natural psyche. What is even more remarkable, he asserts, is that during and since that period, the search for meaning, purpose and fulfilment of God-realisation has been equally the goal of beggars, kings and saints—the poor and rich alike. It is in this search for 'Truth' that forest dwellers, *rishis* and hermits sit in solitude with monarchs who sometime abandoning their kingdoms and retreating to the forests to meditate, reach the pinnacle of their spiritual quest, or *Samadhi*. Pre-eminent of the royal forest dwellers was Buddha. Steiner (1947) reinforces this argument when he states that 'environmental conditions sometimes are conducive to the awakening of the spirit'. Although witnessed the world over, this is especially the case of meditative monks; and India, from this point of view, holds a special place in the spiritual realm.

With the rise of material prosperity in 16th century, India had become undoubtedly one of the richest countries in the world. Middle class values, however, unlike many other civilisations of that time, held steadfastly to religious traditions and culture, so much so that the great masses of India's population frequented the many thousands of temples and shrines all over the country. That aside, each Indian home had a special prayer place where prayer was conducted daily to one of its chosen deity.

Therefore, the secular human values and social norms of the nation have been constantly underpinned by Indian spirituality in one form or another giving rise to a uniquely spiritual society. Steiner (1971) traces the development of this spiritual ethos and its metaphysical basis in humanity to a 'pre-Buddhist Age' and goes on to argue that such a spiritual environment produced the likes of seers, sages and saints of India unparalleled in any other part of the world.

The question of geographic *Karma*, mentioned by Steiner, and its link to spiritual evolution has been systematically reviewed by Motoyama (1994), a Japanese Shinto priest and physical scientist. Here, Moyatama explains that positive energy and forms of spirituality collectively as a nation enable the evolution of Being in a nation's quest for God consciousness. Therefore, the 'moral' action of nation-states is extremely important in the spiritual development of the individual. Iyengar Srinivasa

(1945:293), discussing this issue, comments that India possessed in Vedic Ages 'peaks of divine endeavour', which produced spiritual giants unparalleled in modern history such as the likes of Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa.

Undoubtedly, particular environments during certain periods of human history have contributed immeasurably to the flowering of the spiritual 'Golden Ages' in India and elsewhere in the world. While the Eastern nations seem to have captured and kept the positive *karmic* cosmic consciousness, the West appears to have tread a different path. Alan Watts (1975) attempts to analyse the geographical karma of the West in *Psychotherapy East and West*, where he argues that the modern age has pursued the quest for the ultimate scientific materialism to the exclusion of a spiritual goal. This has led to the alienation, *anomie* and the final individualism of the present society. Once imposed on humanity, this system devalues the spiritual foundation of modern civilisation. Thus, the resultant psychological autonomy has become the very antithesis of foundational God consciousness.

This condition of alienation and *anomie*, deconstructed within the Eastern experience, however, remains at surface level. Sankara (1981), who believes that every age of civilisation is bedevilled by the appearance of Godlessness, gives this assurance. Endemic within this state of being, he argues, exists the creative cosmic reality. In other words, divine

spirituality is firmly embedded *ad-infinitum* as the substrata of existence firmly under the control of the Supreme Reality.

The search for this divine consciousness and the development of the path of ultimate reality is the experiential existentialism of each soul, amidst the fluctuating conditions of cosmic essence, or the lack of it at the material level. The human quest, it is believed, is for the ultimate union with the spirit of God that has ebbed throughout the Ages. In other words, the transcendence of human spirit to escape bondage and seek unity with the sublime nature of God is very much part of the human condition. The seekers of metaphysical truths all agree that the process of God-awareness, religious complexities, psychological adjustments, rituals, literal truths and the path to salvation are perhaps as complex and elusive as the meaning of Life itself.

In reviewing divine consciousness historically, the 'pre-scientific' period has been conveniently explained away through conventional wisdom, as the little understood pagan tradition. It must not escape the critical scholar of history or theology that harmony prevailed there, with 'gods' representing various aspects of their lives as fire, water, air and the likes. Divinities abounded, which still remains a mystery to the Western mind. It is only later that scholars began to realise that this 'aspect of religion', through its interpretations and 'revelations' of God in the many forms, symbolised the different characteristics of the One God. Following

this, evolutionists such as Charles Darwin and the likes asserted that human forms emerged and developed from animal species and that morality and the meaning of life were subsequently structured and formed by human beings themselves. The secularised world, it seems, while exposing some form of evolution nonetheless exhibits symbols and signs attributed to God and creation. Values, morals, traditions all compliment God-consciousness rather than the converse. For instance, Creationists attempt to present a logical, albeit mythological, history of existence.

God-consciousness, one comes to realise, is dialectical in that, although the human condition is endowed with divinity, notions of earthly existence and finite nature prevail. While most individual souls' developmental stage remains at a primary level through various re-incarnations, some souls are born with an advanced stage of spiritual consciousness. Moral, ethical and spiritual advancement it seems requires endless material environment as a challenge; and, spiritual discipline helps to dialectically move to a higher level or levels of consciousness.

For the early developmental stages of human advancement to spiritual heights, the Yogi-masters suggest as a requirement a Guru or spiritual teacher. The basic practices and discipline needed require unmitigated systematic observation and personal guidance.

Swami Abhananda (1935:73), for instance, argues that God-consciousness is dialectical in that although the human condition is endowed with divinity, it must be attained through a whole process of self-realisation: as in the development of the individual from the 'animal nature' to ultimate divine spirituality. When the aspirant has reached a fairly advanced stage of 'realisation', referred to as *sadhana*, we are informed that: 'Truth must be gained by truth.' Discussing this condition of spiritual enfoldment, Abhananda makes a summary statement as follows, 'He shall not attain to spiritual perfection one who has not ceased to follow the wicked ways, who has not subdued his senses, who has not controlled his mind by concentration and who is not truthful and kind to all.' This basic treatise is a prerequisite for the journey of self-realisation. Therefore, it might be argued that the road to spiritual evolution reaches its peak when 'the soul communes with Divinity and is united with the Infinite source of love, wisdom and intelligence' (Swami Abhananda, 1935:73).

Abhananda (1935:86) concludes that these developmental stages of God realisation contain the 'seed' or spiritual ethics of all the major religions of the world. 'It is', he goes on to argue, 'the undeniable foundation of experiential God-consciousness.' To this foundational condition is added other *gestalt* experiences of control, concentration, truthfulness and dispassionate and disinterested love for all. These establish a firm basis for the quest of the ultimate state of *Samadhi*. It is during this process of spiritual evolution that the possibility of opening the

'third eye' takes place whereby the aspirant 'experiences the higher truths and establishes a personal relationship with God. The individual has now reached 'a state of perfect spiritual illumination', where the soul has merged with the Eternal Bliss and has reached 'the final state of God consciousness.' The complexity of the phenomenon of metaphysical reality demands an unending school of analysis and interpretation.

Underhill (1955), for instance, systematically deconstructs what is referred to as the 'inner process of the mystic experience', which is characterised by an active human action outside the normal experience of everyday life.⁷ This extraordinary 'inner' process follows a unique methodology governed by scriptural injunctions like that of the Tantra or the Kabbala which necessitates, among other things, the guidance of a Spiritual Master or Guru, so complicated is the path of unfoldment. This mystic way requires of the mind 'awakening, purification and the training of the self in its ascent to the Unitive Life.' Underhill (1955:74) introduces a mystic text quoting Coventry Patmore's *The Rod, the Root and the Flower*, where the argument put forward is: 'What the world, which truly knows nothing, calls "Mysticism" is the science of ultimates...the science of self-evident Reality, which cannot be reasoned about because it is an object of pure reason or perceptions.'

In response to academic scrutiny and objective reporting, Underhill, evaluating spiritual consciousness, concludes that it is not possible with

scientific and intellectual skills used in normal situations to yield satisfactory answers. Rather, 'we must rely for the greater part of our knowledge upon the *direct testimony* of the mystics, who alone can tell the character of that "more abundant life" which they enjoy.' Such experiences are often indescribable in the language and mode of expression common in everyday life.

In the process of transformation of consciousness, an essential part of the science of spirituality is referred to in this particular literature as remaking consciousness 'from those deep levels of life.' The 'I' of the 'self' is submerged within the 'I' of the 'Divine': the psychic states of contemplation and ecstasy merging with Transcendental Reality.

Historically, one of the earlier testimonies of the universality of God-consciousness, or self-realisation, and the methods to achieve such an objective comes from Plotinus, the neo-Platonist. He begins by emphasising the fact that existential experientialism is a way of 'knowing.' The Divine supersedes any form of rationality for the Infinite is beyond the human grasp of reality. Therefore, the taken for granted assumptions of intellectualism and ritualism remain suspended at the material level at this level of understanding. In further describing this process, Plotinus explains how the finite remains suspended while the 'divine essence' of the self expands with the consciousness of Being which, while at one and

the same time being part of the Divine, remains separated because of the 'play' of God.

Further explanation of deconstructing this phenomenon is undertaken by Porphyry, who alludes to this as 'super-conscious experience' which culminates finally in the 'mystic union with God.' Meister Eckhart, the great Christian mystic, describes this self-same experience as 'perfect stillness in the soul of God before God...the light of God can shine in the soul and transform the soul into God.' Describing this experience, he concludes by saying that, 'when the passions are stilled and all worldly desires silenced, then the word of God can be heard in the soul.' The language, expression and thoughts one finds in this exercise are so very different from the usual discourse of spiritual matters.

For that matter, due to the diverse nature of cultural differences, mystic experiences in different religious traditions ought to remain significantly different. Yet the mystics, saints and sages seem to speak in the same 'tongue'.⁸ William James (1958) attempts to address this question. He is of the opinion that this 'self same experience' undertaken ritualistically through a unitary method 'all different', but methodologically the same. In other words, the developmental process of spiritual exercises, discipline, single pointed mind and ritualistic practices sometimes as long as 'forty years', sets the same path to this 'self same' realisation.

James (1958) pursues the theme of God-consciousness and comments that recorded explanations of God-consciousness experienced throughout history enable us to realise that different religious traditions have, through the experiences of their respective mystics, spoken of God-consciousness, albeit by different names. The Hindus, for instance, prefer to use the Sanskrit term *Samadhi*, while the Buddhists refer to it as *Nirvana*, and the Christians as 'Communion with God.' Aurobindo, as well, prefers the term 'supra-mental consciousness.' This state of God-consciousness or super-conscious realisation seems to be the final state in all religious traditions. In the Christian tradition, one finds that Jesus reaches this state and becomes Christ. In other traditions, Sathya Muni becomes a Buddha and Ramakrishna is recognised as an Incarnation of God. Realised souls, mystics and saints, interpreting this finality, refer to it as 'the higher state of God-consciousness'.

This higher state enables the distinction between life and death to be suspended and the individual soul is said to have transcended the laws of nature. Unity between the soul and what Sri Ramakrishna calls 'the state of *Satchidananda* or Divine Selfhood' is reached in *Samadhi*, *Nirvana* or Communion with God. When the realised individual descends from this heightened state to ordinary consciousness, she or he, it is said, manifests Divinity in every action. Describing this phenomenon in *The Gospel*, Sri Ramakrishna observes that it is 'he alone who, after reaching *Nitya*, the

Absolute, can dwell in the *Lila*, the Relative, and again climb from the *Lila* to the *Nitya*, has ripe knowledge and devotion. Sages like Narada cherished love after attaining the knowledge of *Brahma*.'

While the phenomenon of God-consciousness and the philosophy and science of experiential existentialism may seem to be Oriental in nature, research indicates that this is not altogether true. The universal nature of this phenomenon becomes clear when one investigates the European mystics whose God-consciousness experiences approximate those of Eastern religions traditions. Ramakrishna Paramahansa himself confirms this when he sets out to 'experience' the highest bliss in what he terms the Mohammedian and Christian faiths and concludes that *Brahma* is One.⁹

Meditation, yoga and spiritual exercises, together with rituals, enable the aspirant to reach the goal of spirituality in each religious belief system. While every tradition has its own rituals, there is a consistent methodology in the practical application of these rituals, which though rational to a spiritual seeker, remains a problem for an 'outsider.' For instance, a highly sceptical fundamentalist scientific believer, schooled in the traditions of material testability, data empiricism and positivism, dominates the intellectual rationale as to what counts as 'scientific.' As a consequence, disbelief flourishes in academic circles on the question of Divine Consciousness and the methods to attain such a condition. The

very idea of the 'Oneness' of the Soul and Eternal Spirit is unthinkable even to worshippers who comprehend the Infinite as unknowable and incomprehensible. Moreover, achieving this 'Unity of Spirit' through an individual effort seems impossible. Then, there are those who firmly believe that the individual is born in sin and therefore, as sinners, are irredeemable, with God-consciousness an unattainable quantity. Yet others consider this state to be 'nothingness' or a state of complete unconsciousness.

The inelastic nature of rational thought and the elementary knowledge of belief and faith systems, let alone the complicated areas of human and divine consciousness, limit academic discourse in this area of investigation. What is evident, however, is the fact that the individual who has reached God-consciousness slowly develops an outward expression of a radiant face 'tinged with divinity', and the person is no longer seen as 'human' in the ordinary sense of the word, but 'divine.' Such a state is described in Sanskrit as *jivanmukta* (or *Jivan Mukti*), the highest state of God-consciousness.

It can be argued, therefore, that the various religious traditions are unanimous as to what the highest stage of realisation is, and that stage of human consciousness can only be attained through spiritual experience. Christ, Buddha, Krishna, Plotinus, Eckhart and Ramakrishna are in agreement that the one-pointed centredness to God-consciousness has

but a singular pattern or path. In spite of the vast array of spiritual teachings and traditions, certain specific directions are imperative for the followers and seekers of Truth.

External conditions and the surrounding environment may accelerate the individual's journey and the discipline required. For instance, according to Rudolf Steiner (1971:31), the cosmopolitan and spiritual atmosphere of the times 'flows' from the *Gita* and is described thus: 'A spiritual expression of primeval Indian thinking and perception, a beautiful, grand and unmeasurable view of spiritual knowledge so vast that modern man, not yet acquainted with spiritual science, cannot but doubt the grandeur of its dimensions, for he has no possibility of gaining a point of view regarding these depths of knowledge.' Ordinary modern methods of research do not have the instruments to capture the magnificent depths of this Life experience. At best, these methods do make it possible to look upon the *Gita* as a 'beautiful dream once dreamed of by mankind, and may inspire wonder and grandeur of the times.' 'There is a need to reformulate the spiritual history of our civilisation', according to Steiner (1971:32), 'with a distinctly new methodology, primarily for reasons that the futuristic spiritual knowledge and practice will resonate the pre-Buddhistic Spiritual Consciousness which existed primarily in accordance with the rules that remained in antiquity.' The method of discussing this inner principle is through 'the experience of soul-spiritual element', but this is only possible through the awakening of the 'slumbering forces in your

soul'. The Yoga process, for instance, awakens this slumbering element and directs it towards 'the soul-spirit element of existence'. What Steiner is attempting to establish here is the spiritual realisation process. While the individual quest for God-realisation requires a special discipline and ritual, as laid out by the Scriptures and teachings of enlightened souls, the social community, it is also argued, is of great importance in creating a spiritual-collective consciousness to accelerate the process. The traditional scriptural rules and laws are necessary prerequisites, but where such conditions exist, God-consciousness is accelerated through the cultural consciousness. In other words, what is equally important in the explanations of Steiner (1971:32) is that prevailing 'time' and 'location' can also help in the quest for realisation. The Astrological charts of nations and peoples of the world contribute significantly, as those of individuals in the process of attainment of spiritual consciousness. As such, social and political processes play an indirect role in establishing the 'Kingdom of Heaven' on earth.

Further analysing the science of spiritual consciousness and the methods established to attain the objectives of realisation, Steiner continues to make several observations. What was especially significant during that time, he asserts, was that the spiritual world was approached through special exercises in mediation and God-realisation within an atmosphere created by the remains of the 'old clairvoyance'. This, to a certain extent, enables the moderns to understand the ancient point of

view. However, the old clairvoyance has long since been eroded of its original power by the systematic devaluation of the higher states through the development of materialism, abandonment of human values and the seeking of non-spiritual goals.

Nonetheless, in the process of spiritual research and its applicability to modernity and post-modernity, Steiner informs us that the modern are schooled via the ancient processes. For instance, clairvoyant perception is decoded within our forms of reference of what spiritually minded people of our time can achieve with their effort, in spite of the limitation of our civilisation.

In other words, as suggested earlier, while seclusion cannot escape the influence of religion, neither can modernity—the 'sensate' aridity of behaviourist psychology, as Alan Watts points out—escape the accumulated God-consciousness in the forms of nature, spiritual psyche and ultimately the ever-present 'Energy of the Divine'. How then, it may be argued, can some people reach very lofty stages of realisation in such a short space of time? Swamis, masters, gurus and teachers of spiritual science, for instance, are all co-contributors to the achievement of the perfect state. Commenting on the *Avatars*, Aurobindo argues that God-consciousness is almost pre-ordained for the person because of the fact that God especially sends his 'emissaries' to 'spiritualise' the world.¹⁰ Aurobindo further declares that: 'The *Avatars* come as manifestations of

the Divine nature in the human form.' To Aurobindo, God-realisation is a continual process. Men and women are born with spiritual aspirations, which then fully expand to the ultimate Divine life. Although the individual's emotional and sensate faculties dominate in the first instance as 'animal and egoistic consciousness,' this slowly evolves into 'spiritual-consciousness or Divine life' in the quest for ultimate liberation.

A systematic examination of the various traditions indicates that each religious school has, over the millenniums, developed codes and rituals to guide aspirants to attain the goals of spiritual heights. In Buddhist discourses, for instance, the word *Samadhi* or the ultimate realisation is often referred to as *dhyana* which, literally translated, means higher states of God-consciousness. It is this, in its final stage of realisation, which is referred to as *Nirvana*. In the Muslim tradition, various practices lead to forms of Divine-consciousness, but it is the Sufis who have developed the most comprehensive knowledge systems of God-consciousness both in theory and practice. Al-Ghazzali, the Persian philosopher and theologian, best describes this aspect of the contemplative. 'The Science of the Sufis', says the author, 'aims at detaching the heart from all that is not God, and/or giving it for the sole occupation, the meditation of the Divine Being.' Realisation within this framework of reference is a process, a very arduous one at that, with the exercise culminating in what one calls 'enlightenment', the super-consciousness, the ultimate bliss or the Oneness with God.¹¹ These

realised souls express their 'inexpressible' in various ways, enabling the experience to be understood within their 'traditional' religious cultures.

In the excellent publication *Mohammed*, Maxine Rodinson (1961:79-80) documents these mystical experiences as 'periodic states of ecstasy' which the practitioner encounters. During the experience, one is almost made to feel stripped of one's entire personality. In submitting passively to the invasion of a mysterious force, the nature of which he or she is in some 'ineffable, untranslatable and quite incommunicable fashion, aware, he/she experiences an inexpressible joy'. In this state, like many other mystics, one experiences the phenomena described above, 'experiencing bliss either inwardly or outwardly, in mind or imagination.' Rodinson continues: 'For the Christian mystic this is union with God...the Hindu mystic it is the 'experience of an ineffable, non-personal absolute...attained through the knowledge of the Self.'

In the Christian tradition, the discourse on the proof of the existence of God is well documented in the works of Augustine and Aquinas, according to Evans (1993). While these discussions centred on the existence of God, it was Meister Eckhart, however, who grappled with the 'mystical experience of a higher awareness which is fundamental to any knowledge of God.' God-consciousness within the ancient Christian Tradition is rationalised as the 'methodological elevation of the soul toward God-consciousness or basically aligned to the 'higher' levels of mystical

experiences. Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, for instance, sets out an entire methodology for how to achieve the state of God-consciousness. St John of the Cross preferred to refer to this state as the 'union of love' (Evans, 1993:59).

The developmental steps and the full realisation of spiritual awareness for Saint Theresa is when the 'soul is fully awake'. Once she 'returns' to 'reality', she is left with no doubt that the Divine has entered her soul and that she is now possessed of 'It'. The comment made by Saint Ignatius on that score is perhaps the most interesting, when during a confession at Manresa, he openly stated that a 'single hour of meditation' has taught him more about heavenly things 'than all the preaching of theologies.'

Applied religious belief systems, through their saints and Yogis, lay bare as it were the rich tapestry of divine or spiritual experiences. While the Jewish version of One God is fundamental to its theology, the *Tanakh* describes and relates to God in very personal ways, sometimes as the 'spirit', 'presence' or angel, much like Ramakrishna's 'form' and 'formless' aspects of the One God. The Jewish Tradition, it therefore seems, especially the Kabbalist notion of God, describes both the *ensot*, that is the 'absolute without limit', as well as the *sitirot*, where 'humans can experience the divine reality.' While much attention is paid to the transcendent nature of God, God is also imminent, ever present among

the people of Israel. Thus God's 'spirit' presence remains with 'the people in their wanderings' and with those who felt God dwelling in the midst of the Temple in Jerusalem. But basic to the philosophy God-consciousness within the Jewish faith is the 'whole "Life" of Torah.' By this is meant following the commandments, or *mitzvot*. There are approximately 613 laws to be closely followed so that God's designs can be achieved. As well, the attainment of holiness is achieved by meticulously following the rules laid down in the Jewish *Halakhah*, a set of laws governing the daily life of a Jew. The observance of *Halakhah* is linked to being able to 'relate to God in prayer and worship and live in the perpetual harmony' within society. In summary, therefore, the entire trajectory and path to the attainment of the state of realisation or God-consciousness, at both personal and traditional religious levels, requires a systematic set of ideals and goals accompanied by ritualistic practices that concretise these meta-actions in the pursuit of the ultimate goal of oneness with God.¹²

In Ramakrishna Paramahansa's life, the mystery of divine consciousness becomes radiantly clear. The sum total of the existential experientialism of countless mystics and saints becomes transparent in his 'experience' indicating that the threat of spiritual 'empiricism' or proof of transcendental scientific behaviour pattern has been eclipsed by the 'scientific experiential truth.'

The multi-level nature of transcendental experience discloses the complexity of divine nature. The reader, for this reason, is compelled to

understand with a 'new consciousness' because the Paramahansa displays an array of emotions and attitudes with various methods and techniques for reaching *Samadhi*. It may be argued that the processes by which achievement of this spiritual state occurs, while in some cases specifically as a consequence of external factors, the primary causation nonetheless lies in the ever-present metaphysical state of the individual. In other words, the 'highly evolved souls' who are incarnated in this world come with intuitive and powers of realisation.

The identity of God-consciousness reveals itself in a rather strange way in the case of Divine Incarnations, if not for any other reason but the fact that the phenomenon itself is almost paradoxical. In re-stating this seemingly contradictory position, one finds that in the case of the Divine Incarnation, such as a *sadhaka*, God 'resides' in the form of man or woman. Therefore, the very conception of phenomenon becomes problematic. For instance, Swami Saradananda (1978:87) points out that, apart from the lives of Buddha and Chaitanya, the notes of lives of other *sadhakas* are at best fragmentary.

The difficulties of the recognition of divinely incarnated souls in the community is that, unlike Yogis or swamis where the process of realisation unfolds with observable signs, in the case of incarnated souls, excessive devotion on the part of devotees precludes the outside understanding of this super-sensuous experience. The higher state of God-consciousness

becomes immediately clear when the mere touch of a master, while in a state of *Samadhi*, completely spiritualises the devotee he touches. Such incarnated masters also guide devotees not only in theoretical explanations of realisation, but also how to achieve the goal of the aspirants' objective in practise. Saradananda (1978:96), for instance, comments that the power of transmitting to others such divinity by a mere touch or by an act of will, the capacity to transform and transfer spiritual truths remains the prerogative of the divine Masters. But in spite of the divinity, God-consciousness is seen as an exercise which is required so that the devotees may follow the Master, and as a consequence the Yogi-master—should he desire perfection—must go through the 'personal effort, endeavour and austerity.' Sri Ramakrishna followed this school of practice.

To reach God-consciousness, even incarnated souls, like all other aspirants, must indicate that there is spiritual faith that needs to be followed in order to reach *Samadhi*. Like others seeking the divine, they too must make efforts to find a way out of spiritual 'darkness and ignorance'. The divine nature occasionally manifests itself, until with help of *sadhana*, there is a stream of God-consciousness. Explaining the Divine Incarnation and God-consciousness, Ramakrishna gives the following explanation: 'In order to bring spiritual knowledge, an Incarnation of God lives in the world in the company of devotees cherishing an attitude of love for God! The difference, of course, between a mystic who attains

Samadhi and the Divine Incarnate is that while a *jiva* achieves *Samadhi*, it is only the *Ishvara* who could, more, or less, ascend and descend at will' Swami Saradananda, 1978:21).

God-consciousness, we therefore conclude, is both real and metaphysical, grounded in the existential spiritual experiences of the various religious traditions described above. The continuous experience is not random, but rather a carefully chosen path by those who wish to realise God in the real world. Although the practice is extremely difficult, the various different paths or *yogas* make it readily accessible to any serious individual who wishes to actualise God-realisation. Of particular interest, however, has been to critically examine the realisation process of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Understanding the methodological process of the Master's achievement of the highest stage of realisation might induce 21st century aspirants to not only reach a higher state of consciousness, but to collectively raise the level of spirituality in the coming era.

¹ For an interesting and penetrating analysis of the ancient belief discourse, see Stewart (1990).

² In discussing the ultimate reality, Sankara's (1981:54) 'monastic view' is that by identifying the *Atman* with the ultimate reality (*Brahman*), he thereby dissolves the ontological status of the world, as well as of God. 'In other words, the individual through God Consciousness ultimately merges with Brahmanness (*Samadhi*)'.

³ Ludwig (1994) raises some interesting questions of religion; for further discussion of Reincarnation and Karma, see Cerminara (1967).

⁴ For a penetrating analysis of the qualitative difference between Eastern and Western thought, see Watts (1971:156).

⁵ On Patanjali Yoga Aphorism, see Swami Prabhavananda and Isherwood, C. (1953).

⁶ While it is argued that religion is not scientific, Radhakrishnan (1989:98) tries to establish is that science is ill-equipped, according to the *Gita*, to explain the totality of material matter: 'The beginning is unmanifest, the end is unmanifest. All that we know is just a fragment of this Reality.'

⁷ Evelyn Underhill's (1955) magnum opus *A Study of the Nature and Development in Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, examines the process of women's mystical development throughout the ages.

⁸ D'Costa (1990) addresses the broader issues of the 'universality' of religious belief systems and argues that while there are fundamental and unique differences to the approach of God Consciousness, these differences ultimately reconcile to the wholeness.

⁹ Abertonson (1970:59) comments on Sri Ramakrishna's 'Universality of Spiritual' thesis: 'When having attained *Samadhi* through Hindu practices, [Ramakrishna] devoted himself to Islam, Christianity, and various Hindu sects, placing himself under a qualified *guru* in each of these religions. He demonstrated to the world that Oneness with God could be achieved through many paths.'

¹⁰ Aurobindo raised this issue and other matters in his publication *Arya*, which was an influential journal in India during the early part of the 20th century.

¹¹ Sufism is perhaps the most eclectic of the Islamic sub-sects focussing on the process of 'spiritual conscientisation'.

¹² See Ludwig (1994:102); and Winkler (1982) for a psychological and philosophical study of the Jewish perspective on the odyssey of the human soul before dying.

CHAPTER 2

RAMAKRISHNA'S VIEW OF THE SCIENCE OF SPIRITUALITY **AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE SPIRITUAL SCIENTIFIC QUEST:** **THE SCIENCE OF EXPERIENTIAL EXISTENTIALISM**

Abstract

The debate on the validity of 'experience' has been a recurring theme in social science critique. This chapter discusses the objectivity of 'subjective' experiences of the Master. The 'objectivity' of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences is demonstrated by a legitimising frame of reference of peer-related empirical 'belief' systems. Mystics evaluate mystics through the science of experiential existentialism, the science of spirituality. In other words, it is this mode of experiential existentialism that demonstrates hermeneutically the spiritual experience of Sri Ramakrishna and establishes its certainty in the spiritual quest of God-consciousness.

Scientific materialistic methodology, with its rationalist mode of deconstruction, is alarmingly inadequate for the kinds of explanations that emerge in attempting to find the meaning of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's spiritual and devotional life. A whole new mode of enquiry comes into play with its analytical perceptions and scientific

understandings of how to 'measure' experiencing God, as opposed to knowing or finding proof of the existence of God. Objective, sensual and rational 'proofs' seem totally inappropriate or inadequate in determining the 'truth' of this experience, and the knowledge required thereof to understand the purpose and meaning of Life. As Sivaramakrishna (1991:1) aptly points out, 'the usual lenses of analysis are therefore inadequate, if not inoperative, and Ramakrishna slips through the sieves of mere biography, of mere exegesis.'¹

One reason in attempting to search for a new *modus vivendi* for analysis and deconstruction is the implicit belief that current biographical writing, the historical and factual renderings in non-mystical literature, remains at a one dimensional surface level. While multiple level analysis will no doubt reveal at best the characteristic traits of the individual discussed to a greater degree, one might argue, however, that this would still remain inadequate in the case of yogis, saints and seers. A critical understanding of their lives requires a whole new dimension of viewing and different approach, a new method which would probe the mysteries of the metaphysical and beyond, and which would at the same time provide a greater insight into cosmic intuitiveness and spirituality. This form of real analysis, as a consequence, must either be redesigned or reformulated from existing paradigms; and, where this remains unsatisfactory, it must alternatively structure a new reality check outside the normal framework of Western critical or analytical discourse (See Sivaramakrishna, 1991:2).

In spite of the above assertion, it might be argued, why should a new science of mystical discourse be sought at the outset? Even to a casual observer, the Hindu belief system in particular, and other complex religions and faiths in general, 'the ordinary is experienced as extraordinarily complex' (Schuon, 1984). The symbolism, meanings, metaphors, rituals, and 'feelings' of ancient cultures do not lend themselves to easy scrutiny and analyses within the existing paradigms of the social sciences. Anthropologists, scientists, archaeologists and the likes are beginning to accept the fact that cultures are not 'reducible' to indices, functioning only at a materially quantifiable level. Quantum physics has established beyond any reasonable doubt that underlying the material conception of the world is an entire 'force of energy' that ritualistically alters the reality of being and cultures. In other words, human existence is in a constant state of flux. This raises serious problems and new questions for students and scholars of spiritual enquiry. How is it possible to establish, beyond any reasonable doubt, that experiential existentialism, with its intuitive knowledge and *karmic* inheritance, is not only a fact, but also a legitimate source of enquiry! If it can, then humanity will be endowed with another transparent dimension of understanding of human behaviour, to which a science can direct those who aspire to spiritual consciousness. Sivaramakrishna (1992: 78) alludes to this when he comments that Ramakrishna's behaviour even in 'the simplest incident' reflects 'deeper levels of spiritual consciousness.'

What in fact this eminent scholar suggests is that the taken for granted assumptions of human behaviour, especially those of behaviourist science schools, ground their understanding of human actions through a conditioned reflex mode of action. Rationality becomes a reified action. Human behaviour and action of the mind, however, exhibit a more complicated relational and fundamentally complex source of such behaviour. Saints and other 'divine beings', such as the likes of Paramahansa Ramakrishna, by virtue of their 'closeness' or linkage with God, exhibit a complicated form of behaviour incomprehensible by the human mind which has not yet developed to a higher state of consciousness.

Scientifically, therefore, by what method does one decode or interpret these 'levels of consciousness' so that a transparent meaning could be elicited from them? One method suggested by Sivaramakrishna (1992: 78-9) is that of 'Upanishadic intuition.' What this, in fact, means is that the 'God-realised souls' will know 'that' by 'which everything else is known'! There are many known interpreters of this statement, notably Alan Watts, but Sivaramakrishna quotes William Irwin Thompson who translates the above as 'a contemplative culture based upon consciousness and ecological symbiosis' and describes their experience as 'an initiation experience for the entire human race.' What this means is that individuals who have reached the highest level of God-consciousness 'know' not only

the present, but also the past and future. Intuitively, it is possible to see a vision of humanity in all its dimensions in one single moment. In so doing, one 'understands' God's purpose of life and participates in that process. It is these 'enlightened ones' who in fact steer the course of spiritual destiny of human creation and act as 'silent guides' to humanity.

Nor can it be argued that certain patterns of 'facts' within the empirical mode of science are completely absent in one form or the other in the spiritual science mentioned above. In fact, they appear in a 'new mode' with a similar pattern, but not in the same form. What is unique in the new methodology of spiritual sciences is that 'scientific certainty', within the discourse of 'empirical enquiry of spirituality', is being directly 'hinged' to the intuitive nature of the mind. This scientific enquiry takes place all within the realm of the 'spiritual cosmos' and therefore the 'intuitiveness' is central to the process of spiritual enquiry. Put in another way, the intuition and experience is 'one' and other spiritual aspirants who have been initiated into this 'out of the normal experience' share this 'oneness'. This 'super-normal experience' remains outside the common experience of most human beings. The important factor entering the analysis in this case, and in this equation is that primacy is accorded to the intuiting nature of the phenomena over the material 'factual' or reification principle. There is, moreover, a school of thought that empirical science, as we understand it, in spite of its predictability and exactness, fails to measure human experience with complete success. Sivaramakrishna argues that a critical

examination of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* reveals how the Master's intuitive knowledge approximates 'Western scientific categorisations' for want of any comparisons. In fact it goes beyond the vast range of human experience and emotions at the level of materiality and spirituality. Moreover, it is logically and systematically organised. Analysis of each 'happening' in the life of the Master, for instance, reveals a pattern similar to that of empirical science.

Sivaramakrishna further points out that Bateson emphasises that scientific explanation 'makes comparisons between descriptions and explanation through tautology.' However, Sri Ramakrishna does not completely follow this paradigmatic thought, since he believes that the 'truth of God' cannot be analysed or measured by science. In other words, the experience of God is beyond mere intellectualism or measuring natural sciences. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna, in laying the foundation for a *scientific* method of experiential existentialism, argues that the *normal* scientific paradigm of Western social and natural sciences does form an essential part of the spiritual paradigm. Spiritual sciences go far beyond into the realm of metaphysics. Ramakrishna's contribution to the spiritual sciences is in his systematic analysis, approximating that of the material sciences, but this is only a small part of the more significant aspect emerging from what Sivaramakrishna calls the 'Ground', the 'root of the universe'. The process of spiritual sciences is developmental, going through various gradations, beginning firstly with the stage of the '*maya* of ignorance', and

proceeding through to the '*maya* of knowledge' and finally reaching the knowledge of Brahman. In the paradigm of spiritual sciences, Ramakrishna Paramahansa's 'mystical ground' realises the limitation of '*maya* of ignorance' and interprets this within the modern Western scientific paradigm as 'limited by its materialistic properties.' The '*maya* of ignorance' results as a consequence of the 'real' not connecting in part with the 'physical' properties, and secondly with behavioural psyche emanating out of its relationship to the human. This becomes clear when Sivaramakrishna quotes Ramakrishna as saying that '*maya* is nothing' but 'egotism of the embodied soul', with egotism covering the 'real' self or spirituality. Therefore, the science of materialism can through its methodology only reach the surface level. In other words, this surface level or veil is where 'scientific' analysis begins. Since truth can only be perceived from the Centre or *Sakti*, the analysis of spiritual science, it might then be argued, radically differs from the science of materialism. The latter, therefore, is inadequate to decipher the mystical essence of life (Sivaramakrishna, 1992: 83).

Drawing upon his own experience and that of others, who have followed a similar path, Ramakrishna is forced to conclude that, 'a man cannot comprehend spiritual things with his ordinary intelligence.' This remains a key to the discourse on the metaphysics of Life and its interpretations. It also interrogates the Truth of the academics and intellectuals who claim special knowledge through religion on the issues of

spirituality and divinity. Ramakrishna's daily discourses undoubtedly reveal an 'uninterrupted continuum of divine consciousness, systematically tempered with the reality of temporal universe', in such a way that there is an 'unending dance between the science of materialism and the science of spiritualism.' In Western scientific explanations, this relationship can best be described as one between atoms and the cosmos, demonstrating the linkages between parts to the whole. Using this metaphor, Ramakrishna refers to *Lila* as the parts and *Nitya* as the whole, with their inter-relatedness and interconnectedness as the 'divine whole'. For the intuitiveness to be fully functional, however, 'obstructions' must be removed; and, in this case the 'mind' is the obstruction and therefore becomes the problematic issue. Ramakrishna systematically deconstructs this phenomenon to his disciples. Control of the senses, chief of which is the mind, is fundamentally important so that in the final analysis, full functioning of the spiritual essence of being is made possible (Sivaramakrishna, 1991:83).

The discourse of the Mind and the philosophy of mind significantly impinge on the search for truth and the direction of consciousness. Ramakrishna deals with the question of the mind distinctively in order to differentiate between the 'mind' and the contents of the mind, or consciousness. Through the aegis of a metaphor, the Master attempts to emphasise this distinction when he states that, 'the mind will take the colour you dye it with.' This distinction is not too unfamiliar for scientists or

specialist psychologists, especially when examining the effects of the brain on the mind. Sivaramakrishna (1992:86-7) refers to comments made by Dr. Wilder Penfield, the eminent neurologist and neurosurgeon, who among other propositions offers the argument that the 'mind is a programmer' and 'the brain the computer' which approximates 'the mind as the cloth'. The mind, we are informed, has a 'separate existence' and 'it' is the witness to all levels of consciousness. In other words, the 'experience of the exterior is always mediated by particular sense organs and neural pathways.' To that extent, 'the objects of my creation and the experiences of them is subjective, not objective.'

The immeasurable and unquantifiable conception of 'faith' and the power of the mere utterance God's name *Shiva* shift the 'reality'. This is the 'scientific experience' that Ramakrishna alludes to when he talks of 'experience' of that consciousness as the 'glorious Life truth'. Since faith remains one of the pillars of religious belief systems and functions within the realms of human behaviour, it is often the barometer of the 'height of consciousness' of the individual's spiritual growth from which point the devotee attempts to move to a 'higher ground'.

What Ramakrishna attempts to do, however, is to deconstruct and analyse experience and the existential plane of reference, and, at one and the same time, subject it to internal criticism. In employing this method, Ramakrishna hopes to establish the clear distinction between what counts

as experience *per se*, and what is in fact an illusion of that experience. This distinction is crucial in establishing what is 'real' *versus* what might seem to be 'real', or *maya*. He therefore emphasises his earlier argument in that all 'sensual and neural data' are 'mind created.' Having established this argument, he goes on to 'test or prove' it by experiencing this distinction as a 'glorious live truth'. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* has several passages that set out to demonstrate the experiential aspects of the Master's life and the 'testability' of the scientific 'truths' through experience (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986: 117).

Illustrations are perhaps the best demonstrations of this area of metaphysics. One such case was that of the Master being subjected to the incredible pain of throat cancer, while the devotees were helpless and greatly distressed to witness the Master in such a state. Ramakrishna, however, in accordance with his teachings of the mind that 'bondage and liberation are in the mind alone', remained unaffected throughout this pain, with his face 'beaming', suggesting that he was capable of withdrawing 'his consciousness'. He was able to do this to such a degree that the scientific nature of spirituality rarely demonstrated in literature and human action became transparent as 'real' in Life. Sivaramkrishna reminds us also that neurologists like Penfield and Landau all have independently established the fact that the mind has a 'separate' existence. That notwithstanding, Sri Ramakrishna remains pre-eminent among the modern saints who has bequeathed to humanity a lengthy treatise of experiential existentialism by

means of his 'talks with his disciples'. Every visit to the *puja* centres around Calcutta was another 'experience' with God. After these experiences, he gave lengthy discourses on various spiritual issues allied to the 'experience' thus laying down an entire *corpus* of knowledge about the metaphysics of spiritual reality. Illustrating his belief in faith as a realisable fact, he comments: 'What tremendous faith Krishna Kishore had!' He then narrates an episode when Kishore was once in Vrindavan, he felt thirsty and went to a well where he noticed a rather dishevelled man standing. On being asked to draw water for him, the man replied, 'I belong to a low caste, sir. You are a *Brahmin*. How can I draw water for you?' Kishore is recorded as having said, 'Take the name of *Shiva*. By repeating His holy name, you will make yourself pure.' The low-caste man did as he was told, and Krishna Kishore, orthodox *Brahmin* that he was, drank the water: 'What tremendous faith!'

This, and other episodes of this kind, illustrate a non-reified fact and the certainties of the event and the experiential nature of the event can only be comprehended in all its dimensions by the sociology of 'experiences' of a special order. It is this 'state' that Ramakrishna refers to as the 'beyond knowledge and ignorance,' and which forms the basis for spiritual science of experiential existentialism. The beyond 'mind' becomes complicated for the rational Westernised thinker as Sivaramakrishna so aptly demonstrates that it is neither 'the fallibility of mind as an instrument of perception' nor the 'feelings' which can be adjusted to the position of

behavioural science model. It seems that the 'strait-jacket' nature of our behavioural and natural sciences remain limited in comprehending and understanding the totality of human existence.²

Experience, therefore, within the Hindu tradition as the central quest for God-consciousness and realisation has been very much the Upanishadic tradition. Forest hermits and sages have long established the spiritual sciences labelling it a method of 'truth finding', which has been legitimated by age long traditions in India. Sivaramakrishna (1992) interprets this form of truth finding in experience by adding: 'Ramakrishna's *forte* is not conceptual, but experiential and therein lies the uniqueness of the relation between Ramakrishna and science. Perception of this uniqueness, however tangential, is our tangible gain.'

We find Swami Prabhavananda (1969:49), a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, taking up the arguments of the Master and insisting on the supremacy of experience in Divine Realisation. God-consciousness, he points out, is 'action orientated rather than intellectual, rational or philosophical.' These, no doubt, he continues, assist in the process of God realisation, but the ultimate in the words of that great seer-philosopher Shankara is the fact that 'scriptures' are *not* the only authority for the acceptance of truths of the Self, but one must have 'one's own personal experience.'

While it is true that little progress in the spiritual path can be made without the guidance and authority of the scriptures, Sri Ramakrishna often alludes to the ultimate goal in reaching the realisation of *Brahman*, which, he insists, 'is to experience Him in one's own soul.' The *Mahabharata* is quoted by Prabhavananda (1969:49): 'He who has no personal knowledge, but has heard many things cannot understand the scriptures, even as a spoon has no idea of the taste of the soup.' The *Katha Upanishad*, we are informed, lays down a clear path to realisation, focusing on meditation, as a prerequisite (Swami Prabhavananda, 1969:51):

When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest and when the intellect wavers not—that, say the wise, is the highest state. This calming of the senses and the mind has been defined as *yoga*. He who attains it is freed from delusion. With mind illumined by the power of meditation, the wise knows Him as the blissful, the immortal.

The path to God-realisation, therefore, argue the Masters of the many traditions is not only the 'immaculate', but constitutes social, political and economic behaviour as well. In other words, the ethical and moral behaviour in every human activity is a pre-requisite to begin the path of human perfection both within spirituality and without. Often this pre-requisite to a spiritual quest is referred to as 'purity of heart'. This is not only the declaration of the *Upanishads*, but also the reminder by Christ: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' Prabhavananda

goes on to argue that, '*purity* is the bedrock upon which the whole of the spiritual life rests!' Ramanuja, the great Indian saint, elaborates and confirms that this purity is exactly the 'grounding' required for the attainment of that truth. While the average individual is said to have the capacity of realising God-consciousness in his or her lifetime, in order to do so, one must follow the path of 'truthfulness, sincerity and doing good to others without any gain to one's own self...not injuring others by words, thoughts or deeds and not coveting others' goods.' Ramakrishna, in advising his disciples and devotees, emphasises the need for meticulous personal living, exercising the virtues expounded by the scriptures as a basis to the awakening of the 'spirit'. In other words, the science of spiritual realisation involves every 'action' of the being, both at the physical and metaphysical levels of existence (Swami Prabhavananda, 1969:52).

Various discourses by saints and mystics referring to that path of God consciousness centre on the fundamental understanding of the true nature of *Atman*. This is a pre-requisite to begin the journey. In other words, how does one realise the Self? That the knowledge of the Self is essential is no longer in doubt, but the question of enabling one to know, is the question of realisation. The knowledge that this realisation will ultimately enable the *Atman* to become one with *Brahman* is the goal of such an exercise. Thus, the long and arduous journey of the human condition to Divinity requires each stage to discover its pre-requisites multi-

dimensionally and synchronise the development towards the goal of oneness with *Brahman*.

Reviewing the sayings of the great Masters unequivocally reiterates that the scriptures are proof beyond doubt of the existence of God, but they concede too that they are not the only proof of God, but rather that one's personal experience must in the end, 'serve as the real proof.' Each of the four Vedas has a common 'sacred dictum', which illuminates the 'ultimate truth' and summarises the central argument: 'Thou are That'; 'This *Atman* is *Brahman*'; 'Pure Consciousness is *Brahman*'; and, 'I am *Brahman*!' What becomes evident is that the identity of *Atman* and *Brahman* is experiential and not intellectual. This demonstrates the action-oriented nature of 'knowing' again which is antithetical to material knowledge exponents (Swami Prabhavananda, 1969:44).

Prabhavananda sets out to explain how the self becomes conscious of the *Brahman* and ultimately forges the unity. The *Atman* is encased by what is known as 'sheets or covering' of the Self. Hindu psychology mentions five such coverings: the first of which is the physical body, then the vital covering, next the mind, then covering of the intellect, and finally covering of the Bliss. Furthermore, a two-fold process is involved whereby the *Atman* proceeds beyond the five coverings, and then beyond the three states of consciousness (waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep) and ultimately reaches what is called *Turiya* or *Samadhi*.

The above arguments demonstrate therefore that the existence of God and the realisation thereof is related to the knowledge of the existence and realisation of the Self. In other words, the consciousness of the Self is a pre-requisite for God-consciousness of God's Self. This 'Truth' is subject to the same tests in other religious belief systems as it is in Hinduism. The *Sufis* for instance use the term *Trial Hak*, which means 'I am He!' Meister Eckhart, the Christian mystic, declares 'God and I are one.' Prabhavananda quotes Erwin Schrodinger, the famous physicist and biologist, talking of consciousness as 'One' and that Science has dematerialised matter to 'energy' or 'light' and this 'light' is decoded as 'divine'. Huxley refers us to Sri Ramakrishna's 'mind' and goes on to state that God consciousness is possible only 'by the right use of that mind'. Avinashilingam (1975) articulates a slightly different approach to the methods employed to realisations. His arguments emphasise the fact that an integral part of the science of experiential existentialism is the science of 'Mental Development'. This psychological explanation is grounded in the 'scientific explorations of the inner world' both ancient and recent. He cites as examples of this tradition the sages of the Upanishads, together with Krishna, Buddha, Sankara and several others, and of the more recent times, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda who Avinashilingam considers to be 'explorers, experimenters and compassionate teachers.'

Of significance here, one notes in determining the parameters and construction of the science of experiential existentialism is that *language*

signifies the action-oriented interpretation of the significance and that all 'seekers of truth' emphasise the 'Action Nature' of God-consciousness in the world. In other words, unlike natural science or Western science which emphasise science as reified, quantified material as the 'ideal', the philosophy of experiential-existentialism sees that 'ideal' as but the stepping stone to a more demanding praxis-oriented experience as the genuine ideal to be achieved. Avinashilingam further demonstrates the suitability of methodology of both the natural and the spiritual scientist in stating that systematic as the natural scientist is with 'the discipline of science', 'discipline in truth' as detachment objectively explained in the Vedanta, requires a much more exact discipline than that of natural or social sciences. The need for a re-examination of spiritual sciences by non-practitioners of the discipline and the inability of these in 'decoding those experiences', let alone the scriptural writing of religious motifs, is well argued by Aurobindo. He demonstrates this method by attempting to find 'esoteric sense' in the hymns when 'he reads his own experiences and convictions in the text.' Kees (1965) comments on Aurobindo's critique of Dayananda and concludes, 'Aurobindo could not but admire Dayananda for his remarkable attempt to re-establish the Veda as a living religious scripture.'

Aurobindo continuously challenges the 'abstract nature' of realisation and consciousness. For him, 'the truth of the Veda could not but be dynamic and infinitely more than a storehouse of texts which can be

used and interpreted, in an external way, whether "scientifically" western or 'supernaturally' Indian. 'The Veda', he says, 'is primarily intended to serve for Spiritual enlightenment and self-culture' in the real world. For Aurobindo, experiential existentialism remains at the centre of human action and meaning. Therefore, one approximates Tantrism, which Sri Ramakrishna so consciously expounds as the pinnacle of spirituality. In other words, Life is translated into concrete realisation, ritualisation in the world, urging for an ever-higher transcendence. Put another way, Aurobindo's philosophy of spiritual attainment is very much like that of Sri Ramakrishna's in that experience plays a central role in Divine realisation.

The science of experientialism forever demands the rigorous testing of its hypothesis in its approximating of truth-values. Ramakrishna systematically undertakes to establish this, when after his first intense 'uninterrupted vision of God in the form of the Divine Mother', he decides to experience God in different ways. 'To test and verify values of the spiritual world', is what Claude Stark (1974) interprets this to be. Spiritual sciences require by definition that the recurring factor in all spiritual experiences must be verifiable; and, as such, Ramakrishna proves, 'what is subjectively true' in the one experience has to be also true 'in another subjective experience', given the variables remaining constant. The deep and existing nature of God and God-consciousness had to be demonstrated through the science of experiential spiritualism. Stark also critically directs his remarks to the Master's 'direct experience' as the only criterion which

Sri Ramakrishna uses to verify the existence of God in any form. Stark (1974: 39), in his description of the phenomenon, mentions Akhilananda's reference to Super-conscious experience in the ways which divinity is realised.

Radical and revolutionary spiritual options introduced by the Master which have become the touchstone of the modern view of realisation is the imperative of experiencing God. Ramakrishna's strong belief that God exists when and only if, God 'can be experienced or perceived directly.' He goes on to state that, 'it follows that any *spiritual practice* would be validated as methodology if it leads to the experience of God when sincerely and systematically pursued.' Ramakrishna's experimentation in structuring experientialism as existentialism in the reaching of spiritual realisation is unique. The material science precondition to any theory formation is a well-calculated rational hypothesis. The Master's basic harmony, we realise, 'exists' among diverse *sadhanas*. This, however, arises spontaneously from the heart of a true *Bhakta* or a love of God! In other words, Ramakrishna follows the 'search for truth' as natural scientists do, but is not satisfied with each new discovery. Rather, as Stark (1974) points out, he belongs to that group of 'scientists'—individuals like Eddington, Schrodinger, Stromberg, Shaquely and Einstein, who searched relentlessly after knowledge in the objective world and yet were not satisfied with their ultimate findings. Their exacting search can be compared with the systematic and repetitive 'experiences' that Sri

Ramakrishna, wanting to 'know' God consciously in as many different religions and the diverse pantheon of Hindu deities.

One of his many experiments in his 'specialised science' was to experience *Rama*, that form of God Himself. The best 'scientific' method to achieve this Oneness would be to 'adopt' the position of *Hanuman*, one of servant to master. His vision and experience of *Rama* was so extraordinary that he later, describing the incident to his devotees, concluded with, 'I totally forgot my identity'.

Consciousness remains the key to spiritual dialectics. Ramakrishna's scientific paradigm was the hermeneutics of consciousness—wherein his experiments were conducted. Consciousness and the consciousness of that experience were mediated in this world's reality. It was this reality that was to provide the Saint with the 'ground' for his experiential experiments. Central to God-consciousness as a phenomenon which so characterises the spirituality of Ramakrishna Paramahansa is mystical consciousness. Boreham in fact discusses the nature of this consciousness in his treatise on mysticism in the Indian Tradition, when he declares that 'the awareness of the undifferentiated unity of all' remains the central point of this thesis. Expressed differently, this is 'the experience of not perceiving any boundaries or divisions ultimately existing between anything.' In his attempt to demonstrate the experience of this mystical consciousness, Boreham clearly distinguishes two states—'mystical consciousness' on the one hand, as opposed to what

he terms a 'normal state of consciousness' on the other. Expanding his argument, he continues that normal consciousness is ego-centred. In other words, it is rational, intellectual and mind-structured. It is also sensory consciousness and remains at the level of ideas functioning best at surface level. The basis of normal consciousness, he goes on to state, is 'ideas and emotions arising from our sense-based cognitive consciousness.'

In contrast with this form of consciousness is the mystical nature of the conscious phenomenon. Boreham recognises the difficulty in describing this phenomenon. He refers to it as the 'deeper consciousness' and states that 'the undifferentiated unity' spoken of by Meister Eckhart, the German Christian mystic of the 13th century, in fact could not be distinguished from the state of *Nirvana* of the Buddhists, or the 'realisation of *Brahma* in the Upanishads or from the 'unity of Being' of the *Sufis*.

The dialectics and hermeneutics of consciousness are at best a bedevilling experience for philosophers to grasp. It seems that the discourse is, in Aurobindo's words, supra mental and therefore understood, experienced and lived at the metaphysical level. At best one can, at ground level, speak of the mystical level of consciousness. The mystical state of consciousness, it is argued, is a state of 'undifferentiated unity', contrary to the state of duality of ordinary consciousness. It is certainly not conscious of consciousness, or what is meant by it in psychology.

Although in the higher stages of realisation, the existence of individuality disappears altogether; and, in its place there is nothing but 'pure consciousness'.

Boreham explains the phenomenon through the experiences of Eckhart and Griffiths. The former exclaims, 'Thou shall know him without image, without semblance'; and, Griffiths comments on the resurrection of Christ as the mystical experience, when 'he passed beyond time and space, beyond the limits of our present mode of consciousness.' In so doing, he 'realised' this world as a 'totality'.

God-consciousness thus remains outside the boundary of 'sensory-intellectual consciousness'. It only becomes a possibility within the realms of intuition, gained by 'direct experience of God.' What is noteworthy here is that in the 'Oneness of all', the mystic reinforces his/her experience with Reality compelling Eckhart to categorically state that, 'the knower and the known are one.'

This concept of consciousness and Being is approached within a scientific school of thought by Akihananda, who believes that Ramakrishna Paramahansa's science of spirituality is the finest of its tradition. In fact, the harmony which integrates religion and science, is demonstrated by the fact that the true *bhakta* and the true scientists are both ultimately seeking the science of Truth. Whereas the *bhakta* like Ramakrishna begins with

religion, so the scientist does with science. The key to explaining the scientific spiritual tradition is that the laboratory of experimentation is the mind as the instrument. In other words, with basic integrity, sincerity and a complete correspondence of belief, thought and action—all are functioning within a concrete reality. The uniqueness of the mystical experience remains at the level of 'correspondence between thought and action.' Ramakrishna's earlier *sadhana* enabled him to experience the vision of Mother Kali, in 'the belief that the correspondence was to seek indelible patterns of faith, devotion and realisation.' Ramakrishna reiterates that this experience with various incarnations of God had to be tested in various situations, just as 'rational' scientific experiences are tested repeatedly.

Ramdas (1940) interprets mystical consciousness and the vision of the Divine. He comments, 'God-vision is nothing but to realise and feel His presence within yourself and everywhere about you, because God is an all pervading spirit, permeating the entire universe.' When, in conversation with Ramcharandas, who demands that 'I want to behold Him as *saguna*', Ramdas replies (1940:245), 'The true *saguna* or body of the Lord is the universe itself, in which He is immanent and by His power He is causing, in this manifestation, birth, growth and dissolution of all beings and things. He is also transcendent as 'pure spirit'.

Finally, to grasp the transcendental nature of God-consciousness and the 'spirit' of both God and God's devotees in union is beyond the

ability of the average mind to conceptualise. Natural science interpretations of the phenomenon of 'Life' remain severely limited by the structure of the disciplines. Experiential existentialism, we note, as a science of spirituality, pushes the horizons of the 'experience' of a *sadhaka*. This experience is mediated and legitimated by other 'experiences' of *sadhakas* to establish the scientific nature of God-consciousness.

Sri Ramakrishna has made a unique contribution to the paths of God realisation. Most yogis or sages followed a single path to salvation according to the precepts of a particular religion, linearly instructing their disciples in accordance with that one method. The Master, on the other hand, advocated the principle: 'As many faiths, so many paths.' His deep respect for other religions and his own 'experience' of them, particularly when he chose to experience God as a Muslim or a Christian, following their distinctive path and also attaining *Samadhi*, presented the world with an unprecedented multi-faith vision unique in the 20th century. This enlightened view may yet lay the foundation for a universal religion in the coming millenniums.

¹ For a clear and precise discussion of Western dialectics and the issue of existentialism, see Greene (1948).

² For a more comprehensive analysis, see Watts (1947).

CHAPTER 3

THE META-VISIONARY EXPERIENCES OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA: VISIONARY EXPERIENCES AS NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

Abstract

This chapter examines the 'chemistry' of spiritual consciousness with special emphasis on the visions and visionary experiences of Sri Ramakrishna. In deconstructing these phenomena, this thesis establishes how endemic visionary experiences are within the development and evolution of spirituality, especially where the individual quest for the ultimate realisation of God becomes the enduring goal.

Human understanding in the present reality is, for the greater part, sense-related. In other words, the sensate includes the mind, with sense understanding decoded within the rational and scientific frames of reference. Alternatively, the metaphysical, intuitive or reincarnationist world-views are mostly interpreted as non-scientific, and therefore suspect in the 'sense' frame of reference. Apart from few scholars, such as Huxley, Watts and Isherwood, who after having experienced Eastern psychology recognise visionary experiences as a valid form of interpretation of the world, most others in the 'scientific' community remain unschooled,

inexperienced and sometimes unconvinced of new understandings in this current area of scholarly research.¹

Swami Saradananda (1978), being familiar with meta-visionary experiences, calls them 'extra-ordinary visions' and refers to the Master's *sadhanas* as 'condensed consciousness to the deepest *Samadhi*'. Visionary consciousness is examined here to establish new contours of human existence and experience within the spiritual sciences. Super-sensory visions, or transcendental experiences, is for Marie Louis Burke the 'beyond of ordinary perceptions and often of understanding' (Swami Yogeshananda, 1989:3). The problems of perception and understanding are especially acute in theological and philosophical debates and demand at least a minimum conception of how enlightened souls negotiate existential experiences.

In *The Visions of Sri Ramakrishna*, the author (Swami Yogeshananda, 1989) records instances of 'inferences' in visionary 'culture'. Instances exist where some of the content of super-conscious revelation can be inferred. For example, in the state called *bhava-samadhi*, Ramakrishna foretells how long he would live at Dakshineswar; and, when Mathur Babu protested, the Master promised to extend that time. When a priest accidentally broke a statue of Krishna, Sri Ramakrishna, in a state of ecstasy, prescribed the remedy. M.² and other disciples have recorded many instances where the Master was heard to

have open discussions with God. These are in Sri Ramakrishna's own words, and we can infer that he 'was in communion' with God at those times. As we are concerned primarily with the 'divine dialogue', with what comes (or seems to come) directly from beyond the conscious level, most such incidents have not been included (Banks, 1962).

'Ordinary perceptions' of modern psychology are legitimated by the social sciences as the most exact of behavioural explanations. Burke admits that it is only recently that a few scientists are beginning to recognise and legitimate the 'layers of super-sensual reality' challenging the dogma of social science legitimations (Swami Yogeshananda, 1989:4). Edouard Schure supports this position of the 'spirit' as a transformative process which needs to be initiated into the human sciences dialogue so that human society begins to understand the transcendental nature of its 'self'. It is this process that will try to establish a culture of understanding of super-sensuous existence. Quoting at length (as quoted in Swami Yogeshananda, 1989:6) , Schure writes:

Then how come that, rising above the Church which is too small to contain him in his entirety, above politics which deny him, and above science which only half understands him, that Christ is fuller of life than ever? It is because his sublime morality is a corollary of a science even more sublime. Behind him we perceive, contemporary with and beyond the time of Moses, the whole ancient theosophy of

Indian, Egyptian and Grecian initiates, of whom he forms a striking confirmation. We are beginning to understand that Jesus, at the very height of his consciousness, the transfigured Christ, is opening his loving arms to his brothers, the other Messiahs who preceded him, beams of the Living Word as he was, that he is opening them wide to Science in its entirety, Art in its divinity and Life in its completeness. But his promise cannot be fulfilled without the help of all the living forces of humanity. Two main things are necessary nowadays for the continuation of the mighty work: on the one hand, the progressive unfolding of experiential science, and intuitive philosophy to facts of psychic order, intellectual principles and spiritual proofs; on the other, the expansion of Christian dogma in the direction of tradition and esoteric science, and subsequently a reorganisation of the Church according to a graduated initiation; this by a free and irresistible movement of all Christian Churches, which are also equally daughters of the Christ. Science must become religious and religions scientific. This double evolution, already in preparation, would finally and forcibly bring about a reconciliation of Science and Religion on esoteric grounds. The work will not progress without considerable difficulty at first, but the future of European society depends on it. The transformation of Christianity in its esoteric sense would bring with it that of Judaism and Islam, as well as a regeneration of Brahminism and Buddhism in the same fashion; it would accordingly furnish a religious basis for the

reconciliation of Asia and Europe. This is the spiritual temple to be constructed, the crowning of the Word intuitively conceived and desired by Jesus. Can this message of Love form the magnetic chain of Science and Art, of religions and peoples, and thus become the universal word?³

Schure sets the ground rules for the kind of developmental science the next millennium needs to conceive to attain a greater understanding of the religious, social and political dynamics of the human society. Not only does it seem that in order to achieve a society with a higher level of consciousness and moral ethos, this may indeed prepare a springboard for the kind of community we wish to develop.

Such linking of the super-sensuous and spiritual world with the guiding principle for right action has been the mainstay of Paramahansa's life. This centrality of the meta-visionary experience of Sri Ramakrishna prompts Burke (see Raghunathan:79) to comment that 'his mind seemed to have been always immersed in an ocean of transcendental reality'. Visionary experiences in quality, quantity and variety, though infrequent are not uncommon, depending to a great extent on the level of divine consciousness of the practitioner. Commentators on Sri Ramakrishna's life, however, are unanimous that he remains unique in the immense variety and richness of his experienced visions. Swami Saradananda mentions that while as a close disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, he was amazed

at the frequency of 'extraordinary visions and experiences' of the Master. One is ultimately left with an impression that visions as a divine reality were a recurring occurrence in the Master's life, and as such, became a way of life.

The Paramahansa communicated this rich experience of divine human reality to his disciples and devotees almost daily. He expressed in detail the various contours of visionary experiences of a mystical nature. The atmosphere at the Temple was extraordinarily dissimilar to the normal world outside, in that environmental conditions act as a stimulus for higher consciousness. This prompted Swami Vivekananda (as quoted in Swami Yogeshananda, 1989:1) to comment:

In all organised religions...their founders, prophets and messengers are declared to have gone into states of mind that were neither waking nor sleeping, in which they came face to face with a new series of acts relating to what is called the spiritual kingdom. They realised these things much more intensely there than what we realise as facts around us in our waking state...

Raghunathan mentions that while no human experience was alien to Sri Ramakrishna, 'the Master mystic' who experienced all the stages of spiritual growth known to mystics East and West—inclusive of meditation, contemplation, symbolic rituals and devotion—it was the 'illumination stage' of his life where 'the Consciousness of *Saguna Brahman*' became felt

reality, where realisation reached its peak. What this means is in this state Sri Ramakrishna was constantly in 'direct visionary union with God' and because of this condition he could only speak in 'images' since 'Truth presented itself to him in that way.' Sri Ramakrishna believed that it was at this stage of Being where the 'intensity of imaginative sympathy' made it possible for him to completely identify with 'historic and legendary personages—the 'God-men', making it possible for him to 'experience' the different religious 'truths' of Christianity and Islam in particular.

Yogeshananda (1989) also comments on the lives of these legendary personages of whom Ramakrishna speaks, emphasising the significance of the visionary experiences as they contribute to the holistic understanding of the experiential nature of divine realisation. He then goes to explain what he means in detail in order that this super-sensate experience becomes clearer in its importance to humanity at large:

The visions of a great saint can be of incalculable value to us because of what they reveal of a realm which is beyond ordinary experience and yet attainable at least in part, if we ourselves become extraordinary. If this be true of the visions of a saint, what shall we say of the visions of a Divine Incarnation? Two views, at least, might be taken. One could presume that the spiritual experiences of an Incarnation of God are so vastly superior to those of an ordinary saint, and of such a different order, that to understand or aspire to such is utterly beyond the hopes of spiritual seekers: Or

one might suppose that such experiences differ from those of saints and seers, if at all, only in degree and not in kind; that while the Incarnation's visions may be of greater intensity or frequency, or profundity, still they are not essentially of a different order from those of others; that they are suitable for the application of reason and helpful to the aspirant's understanding.

Not all visionary experiences are positive. Negative metaphysics, albeit of a different order, plays a significant role in the dialectic of good and evil forces in the world. In the lives of Buddha and Christ, we are informed that during their intense meditations they were often visited by 'visions' of temptations by *Mara* –the negative force. Satan, it has been said, visited Jesus, in the wilderness. Such 'visions' promised both prophets incredible powers; although, we are also informed that Buddha and Christ were at the same time duly protected by 'angels'.

Visions, visionary powers and spiritual experiences of this kind have always fascinated scholars, intellectuals, philosophers and scientists. Intellectual rationalisation and philosophical deconstruction of the social 'reality' have yielded limited 'truths' and some understanding of the mystery of present Life. Western scholarship has particularly depended on the scriptures of various religious belief systems to reveal the 'ultimate truth', but with little success.

Learned pundits from the East, on the other hand, are renowned for the transcendental. For centuries, Indian scholars have ventured into this field of this study. In particular, those who visited the Master acknowledged 'an unprecedented, brilliant and far-spreading light...flooding out through the visions of Sri Ramakrishna' and described 'vivid and abundant revelations of transcendental facts'. Such learned pundits said to him, 'Your experiences...go far beyond anything found in the Puranas, the Vedas or the Vedanta.'

Visionary experiences are therefore underpinned by deep and intuitive psychological and physical conditions. When under the influence of certain environmental conditions the truth-seeking individual experiences the kind of visionary experience familiar to the world of Sri Ramakrishna. Literature cites instances of attitudes toward the environment that influences visionary experiences. Yasoda, for instance, adopted a 'mother's attitude' towards Krishna and is blessed with 'His vision', while Radha adopted a 'woman to man' attitude with Krishna and is thus blessed with 'His vision'. Literature also records that *rishis* have adopted a 'serene attitude' toward God and 'enjoyed' visions within this paradigm. The psychology of these 'attitudes' is instrumental in constructing the 'visions' which is the nature of the ultimate reality. This, of course, is the formal aim of any devotee. In other words, Sri Ramakrishna systematically elaborates an entire psychological framework that is fundamentally essential for the pursuit of God-consciousness. Realisation

occurs for the *Sadhaka* when he or she undertakes the ultimate 'experience' in order to reach *Samadhi* (See Neeval, 1976:53-97).

In clarifying the understanding of this complex exercise, M. enquires from Sri Ramakrishna as to whether one, having reached the state of realisation, 'sees' God as one understands the notion in daily discourse. M. recounts how Sri Ramakrishna, in his usual tradition, meticulously explained to him the long process of *sadhana* (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:115):

What he would dictate to his mind, the mind would obey from its very depths. At this period when he sat for meditation, having told the mind with firmness to meditate, he would hear a clicking sound in the joints of his body, starting in the legs and going up to the head. It was as if an unseen power were turning the keys of locks, to fix him in his posture. Only when he felt that unlocking again in the reverse order, could he move from his position and leave his seat. Now the experiences described in the texts on yoga began to show themselves. Sometimes he saw the universe filled with sparks of fire, like fireflies. Sometimes all the quarters glittered with light as if the world were a lake of mercury, or a lake of liquid silver. Again he would see the world lit up as if with the light of Roman candles. 'It was revealed to me further', he said, 'that God Himself has become the universe and all its living beings and the twenty-four cosmic principles. It is like the process of evolution and

involution. I saw these things sometimes with my eyes shut and sometimes open. I did not understand what I saw nor did I know whether it was good or bad to have such visions. I therefore prayed to Mother with a troubled heart, "I don't understand, Mother, what is happening to me. Mother, if You do not teach me, who else will? I have no other refuge!" Oh, what a state God kept me in at that time. One experience would hardly be over before another overcame me. It was like the movement of the husking machine: no sooner is one end down than the other goes up. I would see God in meditation, in the state of *Samadhi*, and I would see the same God when my mind came back to the outer world. When looking at this side of the mirror I would see Him alone, and when looking on the reverse side I saw the same God.'

This extraordinary experience arises out of a particular discipline and control of both the senses and the mind. The consequences and results of this experience remain unique to few individuals in history.

Having experienced realisation, one develops what the Master has termed a 'love body'—a being that is subject to 'new feelings' and is a vehicle of a 'new consciousness'. Hence the 'visions' of realised souls, yogis and saints operate on a totally different plane than those of an experience that is 'normal'. The Master also insists that the 'soul' now dwells in two planes and can move from one to the other. Sri Ramakrishna and other emancipated souls continuously manifest the two planes of

existence. While the normal plane might be decoded with some difficulty, the other is almost impenetrable and only understood by other 'enlightened souls'. Again, this state of existence, we are reminded, is only possible by 'God, in his or her Grace'. The 'immense variety and richness' of the visions experienced by the Master is at the same time the insatiable desire of the aspirant to 'know' God, although this is impossible without that Grace of reciprocal love from God.

Walter Neeval (1976) examines closely the influence and effects of visionary experiences on Sri Ramakrishna. What is significant in his description of the Master's behaviour is that it hardly approximates that of an average human. Neeval emphasises that the 'experience' or 'experiences' form a special category of human action and behaviour that is not only unique but also extraordinary. Describing one such experience of Sri Ramakrishna, he makes the following observation:

Ramakrishna returned to Dakshineswar in 1860 and the outcome of his vacation was a renewed energy in his *bhakti* towards the Divine Mother. His spiritual 'madness' and 'austerities' again exacted a tremendous toll upon his physical health. His biographers called this a state of 'divine inebriation'. Visions of the type of appearance of Sita came to him constantly, and at the slightest stimulation. Ramakrishna claimed that during this period his mind was so involved with those visions that he was not able to shut his eyes or to sleep for six years. So great was the wear upon his body that he

would at times pray to the Mother to relieve the intensity of his devotion, only to be swept away by her again!

What becomes evident from the passage above is that the intense emotions and psychology of being in a state of God-realisation surpass human understanding and are beyond the experiences of ordinary people. Thus, the experiences of this particular sociological group must be examined on their own merits and terms of reference when learned scholars are unable to make the 'leap' as it were and understand the phenomenon fully. In other words, the usual norms and value judgements applied by social scientists to sociological and psychological behaviours must *ipso facto* be inapplicable to these groups of *Bhaktas* or realised souls. God-realisation calls for different rules of behaviour, i.e. those grounded in the enquiry begin from the point of being 'inside' the 'mystical experience.

Meta-visionary experiences therefore fulfil two significant criteria. Firstly, these are spiritual experiences which cannot be 'rationalised' in the ordinary sense; and, secondly their transcendental nature leads to a whole new exploration of Life. Their complexity is compounded in that in Sri Ramakrishna's case, these visions represent new areas of knowledge consciousness which function with no defined human parameters so that the 'behaviour' cannot be 'controlled' for material ends.

Essentially, therefore, Sri Ramakrishna's range of trances, visions and states of transcendence enables one to recognise the capacity of the human potential to reach a fullness of being, enabling the *sadhaka* to realise the fulfilment of the spiritual quest through the sheer joy that the path entails. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna informs us that his visionary experience enabled him to 'see' the devotees before they arrived at his Temple. One case in point (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:24) was when he saw the vision of Gauranga (the Saint Sri Chaitanya), he informed his devotees of this Master who was now being re-incarnated and was due to become his devotee. Depending on the intensity of the trance, he either saw Sri Chaitanya's party singing and dancing in the *Panchavati* in a trance but also with his 'naked eye' so to speak.

Visionary consciousness, in the last analysis, becomes a combination of the consciousness with a 'super-consciousness' sense of perceptual powers. In other words, the merging of the 'divine' and 'human' at the highest stage of spiritual evolution experientially designed and achieved is perhaps one of the major contributions of this saint and yogi to the modern world. Visions and visionary experiences since the time of Sri Ramakrishna have enhanced our understanding in the area of the 'knowledge of consciousness'.

¹ Visions and visionary experiences in this context must be understood in a wider framework of imagery, which is not only visual, but also transcendental and sensory. See Swami Yogeshananda (1989:3).

² M. is the pseudonym of Mahendranath Gupta who as a disciple of the Master wrote the original Bengali version of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in five volumes, the first of which was published in 1897.

³ From Edouard Schure (trans. F. Rothwell) *The Great Initiates: Sketches of the Secret History of Religions*.

CHAPTER 4

LITERARY DECONSTRUCTION AND SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATIONS OF DIVINE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE LIFE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

Abstract

Symbols, sounds, emotions and *mantras* have a super-sensuous life of their own. Literary deconstruction, meaning recognition and interpretation enjoy a special place within literature and literary critique. This chapter examines how the tensions between concepts, spiritual language and emotions interface with spiritual experience to establish a whole genre of literary expression denoting its special role in God-consciousness.

Sivaramakrishna (1992) attempts to decode the complex nature of Ramakrishna's communications with disciples and devotees who regularly visited the Temple at Dakshineswar. This attempt to deconstruct the metaphysical through the medium of parables and tales, all of which, he argues, constitutes in effect, a cluster of root metaphors with varied significance. The process reveals several profound insights into the ethical, psychological and spiritual subtleties contained in the metaphors. What Sivaramakrishna illustrates is that the parables, tales and dramatisations are all used as a means to signal the spiritual in what at

face value seems to be simply material. Sivaramakrishna believes that 'the literary texts and the religious truths [they] enshrine blend in an intricate intertextuality', each empowering consciousness in a strange way.

In discussing the use of parables, Sivaramakrishna (1992:43) refers to Mark 4:10-11 which states: 'And when He was alone with the twelve, they asked him concerning the parables. And He said to them: "to you have been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything is in parables."' In a like manner, Ramakrishna in the innumerable intimate discussions with his devotees, painstakingly points them towards realisation, whereas his 'message' to the world is in riddles and parables.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa remained incisive and clinically precise in his instructions with regards the conditions that were essential prerequisites, fundamentally necessary for entry into the state of God-consciousness. His discourses reveal that while it may be true that certain devotees require very little assistance to reach the peak of spirituality, the great majority of seekers need to overcome even simple obstacles that hinder the path to realisation. Using a metaphor, he explained that prior to the successful growing of plants, there is a need for critical preparation of the soil. The process to growth, moreover, is punctuated by a series of rituals, all allied to the success of growing plants of any kind. The diversity of methods used by the Master is reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Where discussing the play, reference is made to the word and the action, the action to the word. In other words, Ramakrishna intuitively was able to 'know' how at any point in time what method of communication was possible to convey his message to his disciples and other audience.

Parables are interpretative explanations through story-telling where symbolism plays a very important and significant role.¹ Parables, fables, allegories and other narrative forms all lend themselves in the most artistic tradition to illuminating metaphysical spiritual truths. These then clarify the aspirant's capacity to understand his or her spiritual quest, including the way to get there and how to avoid the pitfalls in attaining that goal. The parables of Sri Ramakrishna usually convey in concrete terms the mystical nature of God or God's attributes in such a way that the most unschooled of devotees or listeners would be able to grasp the truth. This form of explanation and understanding seems both psychologically and epistemologically, an excellent method of communication. The known to the unknown limited as the comprehension may be. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* registers several examples of the use of parables by the Saint. In particular, it was used to illustrate various situations and contexts of religious and spiritual experiences through which he communicated with his disciples and devotees.²

The Master was fully aware of the extremely difficult course of the disciples together with the discipline required to attain spiritual

consciousness. He realised too that his 'students' were subject to many obstacles and each case was somehow different and difficult. The Master again with deep intuition and psychological consciousness was able to both understand and de-contextualise each case and suggest solutions to their disharmonies.

The Paramahansa's knowledge and wisdom enabled him to simplify his devotees' problems and offer suitable and ready solutions which lessened their burdens.³ His problem-resolution abilities are presented in a case study, whereby a holy man living in a nearby forest literally accepts that God 'resides' in all beings and things (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:84-5). Accepting this thesis unreflectively can be problematic as seen in the following narration. An elephant runs wild through the forest and its master screams for people to scatter. The holy man ignores the instruction, believing in the theory...all is God and therefore no harm would come to him. It was too late. The elephant picked him up and hurled him in the bushes. On enquiring as to why he did not take the advice of the *Mahut*, the holy man replied that he believed that animals too were 'divine'. The Master argued that if that was his belief, he ought to have then heeded the words of the *Mahut*, who was also 'divine'.

One other such parable quoted by the Master was that of the divinity of water. Water, as part of nature, is possessed of divinity; but, some water is more pure, other less, and yet still some extremely dirty.

Discrimination is therefore required in making judgement. In other words, parables need a decoding mechanism and the revelation is directly related to the level of spirituality or consciousness of the individual. In spite of the divinity or pureness of soul, if the circumstances surrounding the 'core' are corrupted to varying degrees, then to make judgements will depend on introspective perception. Thus, the function of parables as a teaching tool is perhaps one of the best in this tradition.

When Ramakrishna is immersed in a cosmic view of reality, he fully recognises that the average devotee or individual is incapable of comprehending that reality. While it is argued that he is in this world but not of it, his grasp of human psychology, behaviour and decoding 'this' reality is exceptional. This perhaps is the reason why he used all the demonstrative skills possible to illustrate the truth; and, the methods he employed to instruct his devotees and people at large were diverse. Part of the argument for this method of teaching is that such a method is better suited to deal with metaphysical phenomena. Given that human souls are at various stages in their reincarnation and evolutionary processes, what is suitable for one devotee will certainly fail in the case of the other. Levels of consciousness, he argued, are at different stages. Therefore, parables and moral tales lend themselves to multi-dimensional interpretations and understanding.

Given the complex nature of spiritual discourse and metaphysical understanding, the Master often used well-known and familiar parables or stories, which included conceptions, objects or artefacts with which the devotees were accustomed. Complex ethical and moral issues as a matter of course were an essential part of the spiritual discourse of Sri Ramakrishna. On one occasion when the Master, Narendranath and the disciples were discussing how moral rules are applied in social situations, Ramakrishna reminded them that while universal rules guide human behaviour, there is that assumption that human beings are 'good'. This taken-for-granted assumption, however, must be applied with reservation. Discrimination is the password in human action. To illustrate this, Sri Ramakrishna used the case of the holy man and the elephant mentioned earlier. The norm being that while both man and beast are creatures of God and indeed need to be loved, Ramakrishna warns his disciples that 'hugging' a tiger—although a creature of God—would be disastrous. Put succinctly, literal interpretations can be problematic in the explanation of metaphysical realities.

This complex and often paradoxical nature of reality and unreality, weaving inter-textually through Ramakrishna's life, was perhaps the only way of interrogating and revealing the 'truth'. More accurately, God or God-consciousness and the experience thereof is an exciting if not different mode of expression especially to the understanding of ordinary beings. Sivaramakrishna (1992:41) illustrates this condition of the Master's

intentionality when he explains how Ramakrishna, transcending the purely intellectual ground from the existential and ontological, desires to experience Mother as 'live consciousness', a *chinmaya shakti*, not as the average individual would approach her as *mrinmaya murti*, an inert icon.

Re-stating the above, Ramakrishna attempts to 'spiritualise' the everyday experience of his devotees and attempts to communicate ways and means by which Divine-consciousness can be achieved. Realising as he does, and well documented by his devotees, he has given diametrically opposed advice to two of his devotees who happen to have committed the 'same sin'. A. is confronted with 'abuse' of the Master while travelling in a boat on the Ganges. He refuses to be drawn into the debate and remains silent. B. experiences the same situation, but responds violently against the perpetrator. While the Master chastises A. for his inaction, he criticises B for his overreaction. Responding to questions about his contradictory advice, he explains that each individual, given the make up of his or her psychology and temperament, must be guided individually so as to counteract the negatives and thus reach the spiritual heights of which they are capable. Such stories go a long way in helping and guiding the devotee on the right path of devotion and, ultimately, realisation.⁴

Parables, allegories, stories and dramatisations are but some of the methods through which the paradox of appearance and reality are mediated. The difficulty in approximating what counts as 'Truth' is thus

problematised. Spiritual experience and 'truth' are extremely difficult to communicate; and hence, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, in Sivaramakrishna's terms, attempts to dramatise these paradoxes rather than resolve them, since creativity is rooted in tension, and interpreting these modes is inexhaustible in every dimension. In other words, tales and parables disorient a context, usually secular, only to reorient it to the nature of and the quest for the sacred. In essence, the tale becomes available for a re-description of the human potentialities for the life of the 'spirit'.

In our attempt to decipher or decode mystical utterances, writing and meanings, it has to 'go through', so to speak, mystical transformations by the ritualistic nature of *yogic* practice at both the experiencing or the emotional level and the language at a literary level, creating an atmosphere of its own. Sivaramakrishna (1992:42) here quotes Herbert Fingarette who writes, 'We interpret the known events, reinterpret them not intellectually and as an observer, but existentially as experiencing subject and responsible agent.' Sivaramakrishna concludes that parables, in this case, 'cease to be mere aesthetic realignment of selected incidents from reality...they become psychological modes to unite with, to contemplate in an in-depth way.'

Sivaramakrishna also demonstrates that parables possess the capacity of masking the obvious. The average untutored mind can only reach the surface meaning, whereas those who have reached a high state

of divine consciousness do, and are often capable of 'activating their consciousness to realise deep meaning structures and emotions indispensable for the religious quest.' In this process, mystics and saints enable their disciples and devotees to experience higher states of consciousness, an exercise essential in the science of spirituality.

The purpose and meaning of life is well illustrated in each episodic event either in Ramakrishna Paramahansa's own life or the lives of his devotees, or at the frequent philosophical interpretations during his discussions with pundits or devotees. Each of these episodes is well documented by M., all of which illustrate that the worship of the Mother and the supremacy of *Brahma* are central to the search. What is of utmost significance here, however, is the centrality of what Sivaramakrishna calls 'subtexts'.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa's life is chronicled in literary subtexts as expressions of the 'divine in the world'. In other words, the *Gospel* sets out to graphically illustrate how Ramakrishna's *asanas* and *samadhis* are all illustrative of the 'other worldliness' of the *Sadhaka* who really exists in this 'real' world. The literature represents the 'living embodiment of God on this world' demonstrated by Ramakrishna, whereas the subtexts illustrate the central nature of Ramakrishna's Divinity.

It has been possible through this literary method to capture the 'sublimity' of the Masters life. This has been substantiated by what Sivaramakrishna calls 'citations from epics', the *Puranas* or scriptures, together with a vast repository of 'engrossing tales, parables and the enchanting songs which he himself sang enthrallingly and made his disciples sing.' Sivaramakrishna (1992:38) continues that 'since these subtexts functioned in the presence of the Master, their truths were validated as experiential contours.' He further argues that if a song, for instance by Ramprasad, arose originally from his own experience and then later took the structures of a verbal text, the Master's own life in which it figures rescued it from its 'purely language level' by enacting its truths.

The sensuous atmosphere of 'geographical consciousness' remains in the background as Ramakrishna's *Lila* is played out, often reminding the reader of Nataraja's play in the universe. The artistry of M., describing in minute detail the Ganges overflowing, the spirituality and the holiness of the Ganga is only reinforced by the *Ghats* and the exquisite temples, particularly the Kali Matha Temple belonging to Rani Rasmani. The Temple garden... 'the smell and beauty is only embellished by the burning incense sticks...all of which prepares the reader for the unbelievable', quoting M. in Sivaramakrishna's critique (1992:38). 'In the southern temple is the beautiful image of the Divine Mother. She is apparelled in a gorgeous Benares *sari* and Her person is decorated with jewels of many kinds. On her lotus feet are, among others, the tinkling anklets called

nuphur and scarlet *jaba* with fresh leaves of the *bael* tree fragrant with *sandal* paste. One of these anklets is the *panjab* used by upcountry women...' The *Gospel's* literary subtexts here extend to both the symbolic and visual arts, which crafted into the 'atmosphere', prepare the reader for the transcendental. The seeker is transported into another world.

The structure performs another task as well. Not only does it substantiate the spirituality of Ramakrishna, but also when *Krishna* and Lord Gauranga Deva (Chaitanya) are drawn in, what in fact M. does is to establish the continuum of the 'universal divine bliss that roots spiritual consciousness'. More to the point, it establishes the nature of the 'divine spirit' that *avatars* experience and provides legitimacy to the authenticity of that unique experience. At best, individuals like M. catch glimpses so that aspirants and devotees may be drawn to the 'truths' of the experience of the Divine.

It becomes increasingly clear in reading *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* that the Master's foremost message to humanity was 'the omnipotence and the existence of God' as the primary force or energy governing the earth. He was utterly dissatisfied that the existence of God remained at a speculative level of intellectual discourse and, as a consequence, set out to demonstrate this Existence through his method of existential experimentation.

To suggest that his was a 'method', however, might not be exact, because essentially he was a God-man and as such lived in this saintly condition. He belonged to that category of humans who enjoyed both earthly and heavenly conditions, a position difficult to describe within a 'material-scientific' vocabulary. In the first instance, it is difficult to understand the phenomenon of God-intoxication. Therefore, it is no surprise that only 'enlightened souls' recognise the quality of God-consciousness in Ramakrishna, while others describe his conditions as being that of a madman or a charlatan.⁵

It seems there was an intuitive understanding by the Paramahansa himself which 'demonstrates' this phenomenon. Given the 'psychological personality' of the Master, he by all accounts from the *Gospel*, refrained from any 'direct' demonstration of his divinity. Doing so would contradict his systematic condemnation of 'Ego' or 'show'. The teacher and the 'worldly mission' imposed on him by his *karma* seems that the Master intuitively worked out a strategy of revealing the 'God-realisation methodology'.

It is this role of the 'prism-sided' character of the Master that critical commentators have been able to recognise and legitimate so that justice might be done to the Master's message. More accurately, why do saints, sages and mystics enter the human arena on earth? And why do they speak in this 'strange tongue' or behave in the most extraordinary manner?

We are told that their presence on earth fulfils a mystic function, such as bringing intuitive knowledge of creation and its purpose as the major philosophy of Life. It is only through such mediation that one can have a cursory explanation of the role of prophets and *sadhus*. The lives of Christ, Buddha and Muhammad are a testimony to that fact. They not only appeared in this world to clarify and illuminate the Divinity and purpose of human existence, but also illustrated how the world and its morality had deteriorated, thus causing 'imbalance' in the harmony of creation.

What becomes significant in the comprehension of this knowledge of Divine consciousness is that the present taken-for-granted assumptions can no longer apply. While on the one hand, human understanding is pushed to a limit, a corresponding demand is made on the part of the *yogi*, saint or mystic to reveal the 'modes of cognition' in understanding God. It is this that Ramakrishna Paramahansa painstakingly assumes. Applying many levels of demonstration, the literature illustrates this through its parables. While there is little doubt that the Master is a 'God-man', even in some quarters this has to be 'proved'. This he demonstrates plainly and with great humility. What is even more problematic is to convince the general public as to the reality of the 'other existence'. What methods must be used to demonstrate convincingly that God, God-consciousness and the unity of this spirit with the Divine ought to be the ultimate goal of life? This is indeed a formidable task, still at a very elementary level, which even the Master as illustrated sometimes found difficult. Given that

'individuals' are at different levels of spiritual understanding, then the question becomes how does one demonstrate or educate individuals, or for that matter enlighten them, on the issues relating to God? The *Gospel* takes up this challenge to show how the Master ascertained the truth of God's existence, together with the means to attain God-consciousness.

¹ See Sivaramakrishna's (1992:41-50) discussion on parables in the chapter 'Sacred through the Profane'.

² The *Gospel* cites some seventy or so parables used by the Master to illustrate 'truths' to his disciples and devotees.

³ Swami Nikhilananda (1948) discusses how the Master used these parables in his teaching. Chapter 5 examines the Master's particular teaching method which employs parables.

⁴ Sri Ramakrishna understood that spiritual development was an individual process dictated by 'previous life' histories and therefore he had to psychologically evaluate each devotee to deliver precise instructions.

⁵ The literature on Sri Ramakrishna is replete with examples of individuals labelling the master as 'mad' due to their own inexperience of the Master's spirituality or misjudgements. These critiques are further analysed in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 5

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: THE GURU – TEACHER EXTRAORDINAIRE **SACRED KNOWLEDGE AS CONSCIOUSNESS**

Abstract

This chapter deals with sacred knowledge as consciousness and explores how Sri Ramakrishna communicated this' knowledge 'of God to both devotees and humanity at large. While it is extremely difficult to engage constructively and intellectually on matters relating to the Supreme Spirit and religion in normal circumstances, the communication of metaphysics, transcendental and spiritual experiences is indeed a phenomenal task. This chapter examines Sri Ramakrishna's methodology of teaching and learning during his lifetime.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa has the reputation of being one of the greatest teachers or *Gurus* of the 20th century. Scholars, however, are still locked in serious debate as to exactly how the Master 'taught' his disciples. The entire epistemological, ontological and psycho-religious discourse of his teachings is made problematic for two main reasons. One is that the phenomenon of God-consciousness in the experience of Sri Ramakrishna is beyond the realm of current scholarship, and secondly, his method of transmitting this 'knowledge' is also a matter of intense debate

and scrutiny. Modern methods of teaching assume a formal structure of learning—one-dimensional at best—but in the case of the Master, his instructions have been tailored to various and differing circumstances. Sri Ramakrishna considered himself to be a willing instrument of God and any idea comparing him with any other unnerved him immensely. Therefore, the idea of a *Guru*, let alone master or teacher would have seemed alien to him. To communicate transcendental knowledge, deconstruct sacred literature and interpret texts to the amazement of scholars and pundits, let alone convince them of his authentic ideal required not the skills of a teacher, but the sincerity of one. Even more remarkable was that his ideals remained spiritual, transparent and sincere, which in itself managed to influence and enlighten his devotees and disciples. His perception of issues and the ability to follow the inner reserves of his disciples' minds prepared him to address each one of them in their 'own language'.

Religious discipline and rules in themselves could be rather difficult. The discipline required was greater than that required by the ordinary person, and yet Sri Ramakrishna had such an impact on his 'students' that they were inebriated with pure joy in his company. His very presence conveyed great teaching, and his experiences, 'visions' and 'utterances' all contributed significantly to the teaching and learning process.

What teacher by a mere touch 'opens up the transcendental world of divine bliss'? His silence taught; his merriment and frivolity taught; his

simplicity taught; and, his *Samadhi* taught...with a deep passion for the Maker. Each learning event was an experience communicated sometimes silently and other times with great pomp and ceremony. He mapped out the capacity of his 'students' and took each disciple step by step. Integrity was the key word to his 'students' and a sincerity of purpose all within the larger paradigm of 'love for God' (Swami Nikhilananda, 1948:39-40).

Ramakrishna's method of instruction has been complex and varied, as indeed was his audience. His teaching was based on the varied experiences of his close disciples and devotees, some having reached a high level of religious and spiritual consciousness, others new novices with little or no experience, but nonetheless all with a singular motivation of reaching the pinnacle of God-consciousness. Others indeed showed the inclination to spirituality, but lacked the discipline it required and therefore remained at the preliminary stage of realisation. They therefore 'needed' a particular psychology, both to keep their interest alive and to enable them to cross the shadow line, and limitation, as it were. Yet others had the status of 'householders' and apart from their desire to achieve realisation, were prevented from doing so because of personal and domestic circumstances. Then there were academics, scholars, intellectuals and members of crypto-religious groups, all 'holding a position', which the Master has to 'cut through'. More accurately, to illuminate their limited understanding and knowledge, the Paramahansa had before him a daunting task to communicate his experiences with God 'to a vast

audience'. Sri Ramakrishna, perfectionist that he was, attempted to work out a 'perfect system of instruction'. Divinely endowed, this seemed no stumbling block for the Master, which otherwise would have been a Herculean task for an ordinary individual. We examine his various methodologies of communicating his experiences of the God-realisation process, mindful of the fact that this is indeed a difficult exercise.

Sivaramakrishna (1992) raises a curious, but nevertheless interesting, argument regarding the 'nature' of narratives, which presents another dimension to Ramakrishna's God-consciousness thesis. The debate of the finite and infinite nature of God, and the human capacity to 'know' God as opposed to 'experiencing' God, is extended in the discourse of the nature and power of narratives. Not completely outside the thinking of language or words, they perform that function and much more. The 'more' is decoded as language or words and terms that appropriate certain 'powers', and these can be said to be divinely linked, or invoke powers that help one to transcend 'to the transcendent'. This is particularly noticeable when people want to 'enter' the trance or spiritual dimension of language or words to find meaning in Sivaramakrishna's analysis.¹ Mystical experience forces upon society, art, literature and other new dimensions, what Sivaramakrishna calls 'a generic transfiguration rich in its mystical significance', and adds that 'narrativising metaphysical and ethical perceptions' was a remarkable feature of the classical Indian mind.

Further clarifying the significance of the extraordinary nature of 'spiritual writing' and the power and transcendent nature of transient words, Sivaramakrishna (1992) comments:

Moksa sastra, transcending its abstract, axiomatic, simplicity, got transfigured into enthralling fables, extended allegories and long cycles of stories as well as, above all, intricately structured, highly wrought epics. Blending prose and verse prose for narrative text and verse for ethical/metaphysical sub-texts...these stories are extraordinary in their setting and background, range of characters and complexity of themes.²

Central to the rationalising of this phenomenon is that underlying events surrounding the life of the Paramahansa, both in the real and abstract, is the 'metaphysical nature of reality'. Hence the narratives recorded either by M., or Ramakrishna's own episodic rendition of some incident, or explanation of the phenomenon *via* a parable reveals multi-level significance, if not the one significant truth grounded in the metaphysical reality. This sets Ramakrishna Paramahansa apart, both as an Incarnation of God and at the same time a human being in space and time.³

It is Ramakrishna Paramahansa who makes *The Gospel* an extraordinary text, but what is fascinating is that M. records the Master's life with such 'exactitude and precision' that the narratives comes 'alive'.

Sivaramakrishna refers to the narrative of Sri Ramakrishna as Kathamrita arguing that the reasons for it are 'to suggest the generic category to which the book belongs.' The category which distils 'nectar, *amrita*, from the churning of a narrative is *katha*'. Again, he points out that as the narrative unfolds, the life and message is the embodiment of the continuum of cosmic consciousness which transcends history. Thus this process could not but have had deep and serious impacts on his devotees' psyche.⁴

M.'s rendition of the mystical life of Ramakrishna in the *Gospel* reveals, in the first instance, the 'intellectual understanding' of the *yogi* into a semi-plural text. In other words, without this skill and intuition, it would have rendered the text problematic. As Sivaramakrishna states, the literary text and the religious truth it enshrines blends in 'an intricate inter-textuality'.

Baird (1981) emphasises that the significance and importance of experience in spiritual consciousness is in part due to the way that Sri Ramakrishna interprets Life. In this case, the *Vedantic* philosophy becomes the central truth. In other words, for Ramakrishna, 'truth is One'. Unity of life, of mankind, of religion, of the self, of God, is of an unequivocal one. This has been the cardinal instruction of his teaching. Baird further emphasises that the mystical experience of the Master is a consequence of his devotional experience of *Sakti*. Ramakrishna realised that impersonal absolute and personal God were the same in a manner of speaking. In

other words, *Janas* and *Bhakti* experiences could lead to the same goal—or rather, they were different ways of expressing the 'same truth'. His disciples and devotees were trained to know and experience this form of understanding. Thus, both learning and teaching for Paramahansa are one. Both are a continuous process arching towards knowing the Truth. Ramakrishna taught that he could know this because he was an *Isvarakoti*, one who could merge into the Absolute and return. By implication, he taught that he was an *avatar* for he was no different than Krishna or Rama.

Ramakrishna in his own right was a 'teacher' of excellence whose expertise in the field of spiritual instruction through experience remains unparalleled even in post-modern times. Sri Ramakrishna's 'depth' of understanding, moreover, realised limitations in other methodologies. For instance, when two experts from different fields of spiritual exercises arrived at the Temple Gardens, his eagerness to learn further about God knew no bounds. Although Bhairavi Brahmani⁵ had instructed him in *Tantric Sadhana*, a wandering monk by the name of Totapuri arrived at Dakshineswar in about 1864 and was embraced by Ramakrishna with enthusiasm. Conversations between these 'two men of God' convinced them both that they had each reached great heights of realisation, but there remained 'gaps' in their learning. Totapuri recognised that Ramakrishna was ready for the *advaita* path of realisation. With the permission of Mother Kali, Ramakrishna was eager to be instructed by Totapuri. Neeval (1976) describes the instructional procedures and their

relevance to world understanding of spiritual discipline and paths of realisation. Neeval recounts:

Selecting an auspicious day for beginning, Totapuri first guided Ramakrishna through the rites of *sannyasa*, or renunciation of all ties to the world; and 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.' He then told Ramakrishna to discriminate between the real and unreal, to withdraw his mind from all that has name and form and to plunge within himself to experience the *Atman* which is *Brahman*. At first Ramakrishna had difficulty doing as asked because his mind was always fixed upon the intimately familiar form of the universal Mother. Finally, late on the first day and at the special urging of his *guru*, Ramakrishna cut through even his name and form with the sword of discrimination and plunged into *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* in which he stayed for three days before Totapuri could bring him back to the normal plane of consciousness. Totapuri was so amazed at the speed with which Ramakrishna achieved this realisation that he broke one of the rules of *sannyasa* and stayed with Ramakrishna for eleven months to instruct him further in the teachings of *advaita* and to be instructed by Ramakrishna in the importance and reality of the Divine Mother on the level of normal consciousness.

Ramakrishna remained in this transcendental state of *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* for over six months; sometimes being brought back to this plane by a *Sadhu* who fed him. Scriptures and other peer-*sadhakas* argued that, at maximum, a person could only remain at that stage of absorption for about twenty-one days, after which he or she does not return to the normal place of consciousness. At the end of six months, Ramakrishna is commanded by Mother to remain in the state of *bhavamukha*, that is being conscious and aware in both worlds and realising both the difference and unity.

With this experience, Ramakrishna had reached the utmost pinnacle of spiritual realisation through direct engagement—the experiential existentialism of Life’s goal. He could now direct his disciples, devotees and humanity itself as how to set about reaching what might be the most difficult task for a human individual. Undoubtedly, few in the world could claim to have this direct sacred knowledge which would guide humanity to its spiritual goal. Ramakrishna, however, concedes that it was the Divine Mother—Kali—who was his teacher and helped him to reach the ‘higher planes of consciousness’.

An illustration of Ramakrishna’s communication skills at this level of spirituality is well demonstrated by Vivekananda. Realising that Ramakrishna’s teaching takes place not at the level of ordinary people,

and that his language is that of parables and metaphors, Vivekananda notes:

It was given to me to live with a man who was as ardent a dualist, as ardent an *Advaitist*, as ardent a *Bhakta*, as a *Jnani*. And living with this man first put into my head to understand the Upanishads and the texts of the scriptures from an independent and better basis than by blindly following the commentators...But one fact that I found is that all [of] the Upanishads, they begin with dualistic ideas, with worship and all that, and end with a grand flourish of *Advaita* ideas. Therefore, I now find in the light of this man's life that the dualist and the *Advaitist* need not fight each other. Each has a place and a great place in the national life. One cannot exist without the other. One is the building, the other is the top, the one the root, the other the fruit, and so on.

Matchett believes that Vivekananda's metaphors resemble those of the Master's especially those of the 'roof and stairs' and 'bel-fruits'.⁶ Invariably, they describe the ascendance to higher states of consciousness.

There is no doubt that the world has witnessed a teacher of great merit. Ramakrishna would not preach nor teach what he himself had not practised. Thus, his methods could be described as being rooted in praxis-oriented experience. Integrity is the watchword of his teaching philosophy.

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¹ Sivaramakrishna deconstructs the Master's teaching, especially the symbolic and metaphor structures and argues that Divinity could be best understood through such forms.

² Sivaramakrishna, interpreting of the 'spirituality' of meanings, explores a new area in literary discourse.

³ His description of the person who has realised *Brahma* and then becomes 'silent' when he has no power to describe *Brahma* is explained in terms of a 'salt doll' who decides to measure the ocean.

⁴ Here Sivaramakrishna illustrates how the text and 'experience of the Master' synchronise and it is left to the ability of the literary artist to portray this.

⁵ Bhairavi Brahmani was the Master's first guru, teaching him the Vaishnava and Tantric mode of worship. Totapuri was trained in the Advaita Vedanta, where dualistic worship was an anathema. Totapuri initiated the Master into monastic life.

⁶ The development of Vivekananda's spiritual vocabulary is similar to that of Sri Ramakrishna, which seems to be a natural approximation of spirituality and speech: 'Dark Mother! Always gliding near with soft feet. Have I not chanted for Thee a chant of the fullest welcome?', quoted in Sister Nivedita (1989:22).

CHAPTER 6

THE SOCIAL EXPERIENCE OF KARMA YOGA RAMAKRISHNA'S VISION OF SOCIAL SERVICE AS SADHANA

Abstract

Religious and theological discourse has often been associated with Prayer and worship ritualistically as a celebration of the Divine. This chapter focuses on the aspect of *Karma Yoga* as the 'key' to spiritual consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna is emphatic that social service must be interpreted as *sadhana* and is perhaps one of the highest goals in the search for God-realisation. This, however, must be undertaken within a spiritual frame of reference for it to be meaningful as praxis-oriented prayer and at the same time approximate scriptural teachings.

The Master's preoccupation with *Bhakti Yoga* and his absolute commitment to realising God might create the impression that he was averse to other forms of God-thinking. More importantly, when the question has been raised about social work and services, or indeed political work, the Master, with no uncertainty, dismissed this as the enterprise of the Ego and often derided his disciples who mentioned the topic as a matter of social conversation. However, this was not without a 'rider'.¹ The Master's response to Vijay S. Goswami, a teacher with the Brahma Samaj, clearly spelled out those pre-requisites that were necessary to undertake any form of social responsibility. This advice he

later offered to the many who came to the Temple Garden to hold discourses with him (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:186).

Master (to Vijay): One cannot teach men without direct command from God. People will not listen to you if you teach without authority. Such teaching has no force behind it. One must just attain God through spiritual discipline or some other means. Thus armed with authority from God, one can deliver lectures.

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna abounds with the Master's experience with human poverty, social conditions and the degeneration of India, both materially and spiritually. While much of the literature on the Master focuses on the spiritual quest and guidance that he provided in that sphere, this chapter focuses on his vision for humanity on the social plane.

One is familiar with Ramakrishna's pilgrimage to Benares with Mathurbaba and his complete empathy with the poor on the journey. He exhorts Mathur to buy each a piece of cloth and ensure their comfort. Ramakrishna's own domestic arrangements were such that the barest minimum of social comforts was necessary. The experience at an existential level, spiritually satisfactory, must nonetheless give him a first-hand experience of the poor. It might be argued that the riches of Rani Rasmani or Mathur were his for the asking, but here was a man of true renunciation, having the knowledge of poverty and hardships of the people of India. His comments on 'gold' are yet another indication that while he was fully aware of the social conditions prevailing in India at that time, he

nevertheless expounded his philosophy on non-materialism, which set the basis for a new economic order in the country.²

How does the man of God approach the issue? One might even argue as to why Sri Ramakrishna even moves into this area of discourse. Ramakrishna's spirituality is one where the entire human condition exists in perfect harmony. He sees a great contradiction between God-consciousness, spirituality and honesty with 'just' living on the one hand, and the poor material conditions and 'disorder' of unjust living on the other. It was obvious, however, that Sri Ramakrishna could not undertake the task of eliminating poverty and injustice, but it might be argued that Mother was well aware of the circumstances, and it was by no chance that Narendranath entered into the life of the Master.³ Sri Ramakrishna immediately recognised this acquaintance from a previous life, and thereafter poured his affections on the young man. Reluctant at first, Narendra soon recognised the immense spirituality of the Master and became his disciple and devotee.⁴ On a surface level, the personalities of Sri Ramakrishna and Narendranath, who later became known as Vivekananda, seemed to be very unlike both in temperament and in their respective social histories. One answer to such a question might be simply 'fate'; but, there may be another. As one follows the path of these two individuals, one becomes aware of an extraordinary fusion between spirituality on the one hand, and social work with a broad definition on the other. In other words, one sees that both *Bhakti Yoga* and *Karma Yoga*

unite in a most beautiful harmony which sets a unique crystallisation of the Bible's directive, to 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.' It seems that Ramakrishna and Vivekananda are unique in the annals of history to demonstrate this philosophy in concrete reality.⁵

The character of Vivekananda is a penetratingly perceptive one: a rational thinker who relies on the logical structure of arguments and uses this as a law student to fuel his deep passion for social reformation of Indian society. Ever questioning the social realities, especially the poverty-stricken conditions of his fellow beings, and having an unbounded love for his motherland, he arrives at the Temple at Dakshineswar in a state of great conflict. His meeting with Sri Ramakrishna and the spiritual discourses enable him to feel at one with the as yet unrevealed spiritual consciousness lying dormant within him. By no means a totally secular individual, since he came from an Indian family that maintained a religious tradition, the depths that Sri Ramakrishna's compassion awakens in Vivekananda a strange and absorbing feeling of Unity with the Master. It must be remembered however, that Vivekananda has an incredible mind of his own, so that, while 'absorbed' by the Master's teachings he maintains his critical stance that is much appreciated by Sri Ramakrishna. While the Master had a passion to influence his devotees on the 'correct path', Ramakrishna encouraged his devotees to develop at all times, a critical mind (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:56-60).

The perennial debate continues as to whether God-consciousness is a psychological experience outside the existential reality of the human condition or more reflective of the intuitive nature of the individual as a continuous stream of consciousness both at levels of material and spiritual existence. In fact, the dichotomy between *Bhakti Yoga* and *Karma Yoga* as separate human goal-oriented activities in the objective of God-realisation is systematically examined in the Life of Sri Ramakrishna. The debate continually draws in Vivekananda. This pushes the dialectics further into arguments as to whether there was a distinct break between the Master and his disciple. Whether in fact Ramakrishna's worldview focused on the *Bhakti* nature of God-consciousness and realisation or the 'householders' Karma Yoga was a much more realistic form of reaching the Truth.⁶

This debate is addressed by Breckerlegge (1986) who puts the question as follows: Does or does not the centre of this controversy attempt to put Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as the 'complementary blending of opposites' or that Swami Vivekananda was but a 'loyal disciple' of Ramakrishna who nonetheless is recognised for his original contribution to Hinduism'? While Sri Ramakrishna's aspirations to reach spiritual heights and realise God was within his grasp, a goal he pursued with single-mindedness, his deep passion and concern for humanity remained unfulfilled. In other words, the major maxims of the scriptures—Love God *and* Love thy neighbour as thyself—had to be

followed through. It was therefore as if Destiny itself had made sure that Sri Ramakrishna be assisted by some Divine force. Vivekananda's arrival therefore, was not altogether a surprise for Ramakrishna who informed him that he was expected. Strangely, Vivekananda himself was frustrated that he was unable to undertake the social reforms he desired or translate 'into action his noble ideas'.

Vivekananda, as time progressed in the company of the Master, began to realise that his burden was being released, but could not fathom how and why this was being done. During one of the several occasions when the Master addressed his devotees, Swami Saradananda informs us that Sri Ramakrishna was emphasising the need for continuous love of God and kindness to all beings. No sooner had he uttered the need for compassion to all beings than he entered into the state of ecstasy, a state in which he was often. Regaining partial awareness, he addressed his devotees, 'Talk of compassion for beings? Insignificant creatures that you are, who are you to bestow such compassion?' 'No', he continued, it is not compassion, but 'service to them as Shiva.'⁷

While this gathering might have seemed like any other that were a usual feature of the Temple Gardens and the vast majority of the devotees and guests listened with rapt attention and accepted the message on its face value. 'Vivekananda felt a certain "consciousness" as if all was directed toward him. As soon as he left Sri Ramakrishna's room he

thought what a wonderful light I got today from the Master's words! What a new and attractive gospel we received today through those words of his, wherein a synthesis had been effected of sweet devotion to the Lord with Vedantic knowledge which is generally regarded as dry, austere and lacking in sympathy with the suffering of others.'

Vivekananda was not able to stop the flow of wonderful thoughts and feelings of how it might be possible to use the Vedanta, its teaching and spirit to revitalise India which was now in the throes of degeneration and despair. He could see that the moral basis of human action could fulfil the Karma Yoga Philosophy and spur it to change the burning landscape. His mind raced in many directions exploring hope, justice, peace and above all love and harmony of a rejuvenated society. He then calmly exclaimed, 'If the Divine God ever grants me an opportunity I will proclaim everywhere this wonderful truth to the learned and to the ignorant, to the rich and the poor, to the Brahmin and the Chandala.' We learn from Saradananda that Narendranath was only twenty-one at that time, but he was able to grasp Sri Ramakrishna's message. It might be argued that this was fated; but, whatever the reason, this incident eclipses all other arguments maintaining that Sri Ramakrishna lacked the dimension of humanitarian concern and that the Master was a *Bhakta* from beginning to the end.⁸

It almost seems that destiny was at work here, because the Master's deep concern for humanity, as indeed his passion for God-realisation, had to be realised. Vivekananda as pointed out earlier, in spite of the deep concern for humanity, was unable to translate into action his noble ideals. But once he became a disciple of the Master, he began to feel that part of this problem of irresolution was being addressed. Exactly how, he could not fathom. There is a report by Swami Saradananda that around 1894 the Master was to hold spiritual discourse with his devotees. Narendranath was also present. The Master concluded with the doctrine that one should always be careful to observe three things: namely, a taste of God's name, kindness to all beings and service to Humanity.

While most of Ramakrishna's devotees pursued the *Bhakti* aspect of his Teachings, Narendra was to play a major role in the social aspect of the Master's teachings. Of primary significance, however, was the notion that 'experience' in the stream of human consciousness is the root and basis of all transformation. While the previous chapter lay testimony of this at the *Bhakti* level, Narendra's future role in the development of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy of spirituality was to enable humankind to note the twin relationship between spiritual and material welfare. Narendra was thus trained to actualise this philosophy to its fullest. Sri Ramakrishna is said to have recognised very early the 'distinctiveness' of Narendra's personality and commented, 'When Narendra sees the suffering of the people, his Ego would evaporate.' Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy became

the basis of Vivekananda's social and spiritual thinking. Fundamentally, the message of Ramakrishna for this disciple was that one should set aside the thought of personal salvation for the sake of alleviating the suffering of others and that living creatures should be served with the same attitude as that of serving God.⁹

The extremely difficult dialectics of work here are not easy to decode. Although Sri Ramakrishna had promised to 'touch' his disciple at the right time, which he in fact did, Ramakrishna insisted that social, political or even religious work had to be undertaken only when one had reached a sufficiently high degree of spirituality. One interprets this as the 'permission' from God to undertake this important task. We see this clearly in the life of his famous disciple Vivekananda. It seems that this was almost pre-determined in some way, although all the events as they take place give it its own 'reality'. Ramakrishna, it must be remembered, intuitively realised that spirituality or God-consciousness responds very positively toward the suffering of others because the 'heart' is awakened by compassion. Vivekananda realised that he had often been at the sight of poverty stirred by compassion, but had never equated it either to his own spirituality or that of others. The dialectical relationship between spirituality and genuine social concerns had been absent in the materialist interpretations of Charity. In other words, the spiritual, social, ethical and psychological chemistry unique in constructing social action, strange in the Western world, is nonetheless the 'social' composition of *Karma Yoga*.

Important in the chemistry of action is the experiential nature of the phenomenon which one witnesses in the person of Sri Ramakrishna during his visit to Kashi. Ramakrishna wanted an immediate response to the conditions around by telling Mathur to obtain and supply material to the poor. When Mathur, the businessman, showed hesitancy, one finds here the incredible responses of this revolutionary Saint. Stirred by compassion, Mathur realises the depth of social consciousness of the Saint when Ramakrishna insisted, 'If you do not listen to me, I would stay with these people here only and not go with you to Kashi; I would not leave these people in their misery' (Swami Nikhilananda, 1948:30). Sri Ramakrishna's commitment to truth and 'truth speaking' is so patently evident throughout his life, that one is certain that he would keep his promise and not leave the place if his request was not met. It is evident that this and other episodes would have been meticulously reported to Vivekananda whose life was moulded to set in motion the whole philosophy of serving the people selflessly in accordance with the principles of *Karma Yoga*.

The roots to the entire Ramakrishna Movement, one might argue, were beginning to form during the Master's lifetime, and Vivekananda was the individual to lead this aspect of the divine work. Significantly, Sri Ramakrishna's contribution to social, political and educational work—and indeed his vision for the future of humanity—was grounded in the

existential experience of God-consciousness, with God at the centre. It is this experience that supersedes all others experiences and which generate the social action of human society. Careful reflection renders this spirit and attitude not foreign to the *Bhagavad Gita*, thus setting the parameters for all social action within the Hindu philosophy (Radhakrishnan, 1989).

¹ Sri Ramakrishna firmly believed that all action must be morally and ethically grounded, which was possible only through attaining God-consciousness in the first instance. This would guarantee that social work was exercised in the most selfless manner and ensure that the kind of civilisation developed was in keeping with the intent of the Scriptures.

² Note the Master's commentary, 'Money is a great *upadhi*' in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Swami Nikhilananda, 1948:169).

³ Narendra(nath), a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, would later become world famous as Swami Vivekananda.

⁴ This exhibits the Master's deep sense of justice that is spiritually grounded (Swami Nikhilananda, 1948:44).

⁵ It is interesting to note that when Narendranath first came to Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna called him aside and addressed him as 'Narayana', or 'God born on earth to remove the misery of humanity'. This establishes beyond doubt that Sri Ramakrishna's plea to Mother to find an 'instrument' to carry out *Sadhana* was answered.

⁶ While Sil (1993), Sharma (1988) and other scholars argue that the Master and his favourite disciple held differing points of view, many others seem to support the idea that the *Bhakti* and *Karma Yoga* philosophies of Master and devotee synchronise.

⁷ See Swami Saradananda (1978) whose arguments reinforce the notion that the Master, though a *Bhakti*, was seeped in selfless and sacrificial work.

⁸ In spite of detailed arguments about the Master's position on service to humanity, which is the bedrock of the Master's social philosophy, there has been a school of thought challenging that position, discussed later in Chapter 8.

⁹ For a full understanding of Swami Vivekananda's development and spiritual philosophy, see Swami Vivekananda (1980).

CHAPTER 7

THE FINAL VISIONS

The Ultimate Experience as the Crowning Glory of an Extraordinary Vision of Life

Abstract

Having briefly mentioned the spiritual peak as the ultimate goal of all 'truth-seekers' in the introduction, this chapter focuses on the ultimate experience, *Samadhi*, of Sri Ramakrishna. While the examination is primarily descriptive, the writer applies an analytical approach to indicate the implications of such an experience. While the experience is best described as extraordinary, it is by no means unique since spiritual masters of various religious traditions have also undergone similar ultimate experiences.

The Master systematically elaborates the steps that are required in the process of the ultimate realisation. These instructional functions are an integral part of the philosophy of Life as set out in the scriptures and *sastras* of Hindu religion and thought. The preconditions to attain the state of Divine intoxication are well illustrated in the Vedas. Sri Ramakrishna, invited by the Brahmo Samaj, used the occasion to expound the theory and practice of *Samadhi* illustrated by his own existential experiences. What is of paramount importance in expounding the theory and practice of *Samadhi* is the fact that the highest state of God-consciousness is not

intellectual, theoretical or rational, but rather a state of Being—an experience—the ultimate experience. Sri Ramakrishna then goes on to explain the several planes, or 'states of mind of the *Brahmajnani*' as expounded in the Vedas. Those who are still 'locked' in the pursuit of pleasure and remain in the nature of 'worldliness', 'dwell' in the three lower level planes generally referred to as 'the navel, the organ of generation and the organ of evacuation.' At this level, the mind is obsessed with the crass world and it is only at the fourth level, i.e. at the heart, does the individual 'get the first glimpse of spiritual consciousness'. The mind is only free of ignorance and illusion when the mind is at the throat level and then the mind reaches the sixth plane, where the aspirant 'sees God night and day.' It is at the seventh stage, on the top of the head, that the aspirant goes into *Samadhi*. 'Then the *Brahmajnani* directly perceives *Brahman*.'¹

This last stage of God consciousness is characterised by the near total elimination of the Ego and a great degree of 'unconsciousness of the outer world.' Sri Ramakrishna describes the condition of *Samadhi* to one Shivanath Shastri. The preparatory stages necessary to reach the pinnacle of realisation are the following: meditation, *japa*, *mantras*, *yoga*, worship and prayer. Once *Samadhi* is reached, all of the above mentioned cease to exist as prerequisites to reaching this 'pinnacle of realisation'. He then recounted to Shivanath a particular incident:

After attaining *Samadhi*, I once went to the Ganges to perform *tarpan*. But as I took water in the palm of my hand, it trickled down through my fingers. Weeping, I said to Haladhari, 'Cousin, what is this?' Haladhari replied, 'It is called *galitahasta* in the holy books!' After the vision of God, such duties as the performance of *tarpan* drift away.²

Sri Ramakrishna explains that after attaining *Samadhi*, the 'body' does not last long. In other words, *Maha-samadhi* rapidly follows, as the death-like state in which one can remain for some time. Although at this stage one is 'certified dead', the body remains unaffected by the Death. However, not all who reach the state of *Samadhi* 'die', although this is the usual outcome (Swami Nikhilananda, 1948:161). There are those sages as Narada, who because of the 'Divine plan,' continued to live to serve and guide humanity towards spiritual consciousness. There are others as well who fall into this category, like the Saint Chaitanya who, being a divine incarnation, will continue to live in order to 'serve humanity'. Sri Ramakrishna comments, 'The great souls who retain their bodies after *Samadhi* feel compassion for the suffering of others and as a consequence help the clairvoyance nature of the Cosmic world to be constantly rekindled...by their presence' (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:151-2).

Samadhi is said to have taken place when the mind 'reaches' the seventh plane. What then is the question of the mind? In other words, can that 'bliss' of the seventh stage, realisable though it is, be described? It is said that as the aspirant reaches the knowledge of *Brahman*, the 'mind is annihilated'. As well, the 'feeling' that Sri Ramakrishna refers to is the experiential existentialism of the state, that 'scene' which Western tradition cannot reach. Yet, on another occasion the Master responds to the enquiry of the *Samadhi*. He is in the company of Vijay, Balaram and M. in his room as the usual spiritual discourses ensue. Vijay's refers to *Samadhi*, especially the role of 'I' in the attainment of God-consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna explains this by the example of taking a stride across the water. Although there is temporary separation, the waters are one. The 'I' represents the Ego between the *Jive* and *Atman*.

The Master responds to Vijay that the total annihilation of the 'I' or Ego is extremely difficult, although history has witnessed a few examples. For the attainment of *Samadhi*, it is completely 'describable' that the 'I' be destroyed, but that being difficult, the Master advises that the 'I' be brought under control and rendered as the 'servant' to the service of God.³

The Master then advises. The servant 'I', that is, the feeling: 'I am the servant of God—I am the devotee of God', does not injure one. On the contrary, it helps one to realise God. The 'I' consciousness, even after the realisation of *Samadhi*, helps to completely eradicate the Ego to reach

God. This, according to the Master is what is referred to as *Bhakti Yoga*. Trailanga Swami once said, 'that because a man reasons, he is conscious of multiplicity of variety... [After] attaining *Samadhi* this disappears, causing one to attain the state of *Maha-samadhi* and leaving the body after twenty-one days.'⁴

Once this stage of *Samadhi* is reached, certain characteristics become evident. The aspirant loses the 'arrogance of individuality' and becomes child-like in the best tradition. The 'feeling' of God-consciousness literally compels the individual to realise that it's God's will that is fulfilled at this stage and not of the 'I' or 'mine'. There is the thought that 'God alone is the Doer and all others are His instruments.' In other words, all now happens by the 'will of Rama.'⁵

The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986) records innumerable instances of the Master attaining *Samadhi*. The external conditions that trigger this stage might be just a 'song' deeply reflecting the love for God, or simply 'birds flying', creating certain natural harmony. The almost cosmic environment tinged with the spiritual symbolism creates a situation for the Master to go into *Samadhi*. Once he was at the temple of Radhakrishnan during a festival near Calcutta (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:255). Thousands of devotees had assembled, and the chanting, playing of the symbols and drums all contributed to the Master entering *Samadhi*, into 'various modes of ecstasy'. One noticed that when

in *Samadhi*, Ramakrishna usually stood still, with 'his face radiating a divine glow.'⁶ While he danced 'in a mood of intoxication', he stopped and then 'his body stood transfixed in deep *Samadhi*.' The shouting of the name of God had been taken up by the thousands, even by those travelling on the boats on the Ganges. At the conclusion of the festival, Sri Ramakrishna held the usual discourse with both his hosts and devotees. Exhorted to talk about God-consciousness, the Master began to talk about the states of consciousness throughout the discourse and the 'experience' of this experience to the exclusion of theory, intellectualism, science or rationalisation as interpreted within the material frame of reference. The Master commented, '*Bhakti* nature becomes *bhava*, next is *maha-bhava*, then *prema* and last of all is the attainment of God. Gauranga experienced the states of *maha-bhava* and *prema*. When *prema* is awakened, a devotee completely forgets the world. He also forgets the body, which is so dear to man. Gauranga experienced *prema*. The ordinary adherent does not experience *maha-bhava* or *prema*. He only goes as far as *bhava*. But Gauranga experienced all three states, isn't that so?'

Devotee: 'Yes, sir, that is true. The utmost state, the semi-conscious state, and the conscious state.'

Master: 'In the utmost state he would remain in *Samadhi*, unconscious of the outer world. In the semi-conscious state he could only dance. In the conscious state he chanted the name of God.' To this he added the

essence of the *Gita*: 'O man, renounce everything and practise spiritual discipline for the realisation of God.'

Swami Yogeshananda (1989) writes that Sri Ramakrishna experienced *Samadhi* on several occasions, this, too, differing in the degrees of consciousness. The saints and seers who have reached this stage of *Samadhi* experience it daily, and on some occasions many times during one day. Yogeshananda reminds us that around 1865-66, the Master remained in *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* continuously for six months.⁷ It is recorded that one of his devotees, 'Captain' Upadhyaya, saw the Master in the state of *Samadhi* continuously for 'three days and nights'. The experience of a yogi during these states is extremely difficult to ascertain, since it so very subjective to the experience. What is clear, however, is the prevailing 'mood of ecstasy' which outwardly becomes visible. All those who saw the Master in this state testify that his face exhibited a 'radiant glow'. As to what the Master saw or heard 'during these protracted absences from common consciousness' remains uncertain.⁸

Discussing the states of consciousness Swami Saradananda argues that a great deal of the Master's consciousness emerged as a result of 'steadfast and constant practice'. Other states of behaviour, such as '*nirvikalpa* and *bhavamukha* planes, were experienced and his predictions in the latter state were later proved to be true by actual events.' In other words, these levels of consciousness all possess relative or

absolute consequences and the main results sometimes remain innate and at other times are reflected in futuristic events. Such is the power of faith, as described by the Master.⁹

After Sri Ramakrishna achieved *Tantrika Sadhana*, Swami Saradananda notes that he was subjected to 'extraordinary visions and experiences' continuously throughout his life, not all of which have been recorded. Moreover, Saradananda points out that the 'deepest *samadhi* is a content-less consciousness' and hence difficult to document and describe.

To the enquiring mind, the source of visionary experiences is *dharma*—essentially a belief in the transcendental reality. There is a need for a collective transcendental experience world-wide in order that supersensory experience sharpens and enlightens individual souls towards a new world of God-consciousness. How then, one might enquire does the visions of a saint affect the average seeker of truth? Yogeshananda partly answers this question when he states, 'The Visions of a great saint can be of incalculable value to us because of what they reveal [about] a realm which is beyond ordinary experience, and yet attainable at least in part, if we ourselves became extraordinary.' Yogeshananda further states that the visions of Incarnated Souls are 'so vastly superior' to that of saints or seers. It is thus agreed among the community of mystics that the ladder in the path of self-realisation is steep and the visions themselves are of

differing natures. Discussing the visionary experiences of the Gotama Buddha, one is informed that during the quest of God consciousness and realisation, there was a distinct possibility of 'night long temptation by *Maya*, with its seductive and fantastic visions.' Extreme caution on the path of spiritual progress cannot be suspended for a moment, lest temptations or seductions creep into the experiences and appear as valid, when in fact they are *maya*, as was the case with Buddha.

There is little doubt among scholars who have studied the science of *Samadhi* that the process itself is perhaps one of the most difficult for humans to achieve. The Master confirms this through his own experience, arguing that the reason is due primarily to the difficulty of getting rid of *Ahamkara* (Ego or 'I' consciousness). In all of the exercises, its re-appearance, as illustrated by the Paramahansa's story of the Popul tree, which when cut sprouts forth the next day, is perhaps the closest analogy to the 'I', for such is its tenacity and persistence. Therefore, for the state of *Samadhi* to be achieved, according to the Master, amidst other requirements is the overcoming 'of severe struggle with one's lower nature and the assiduous application to the culture of Self- knowledge.' While the road to *Samadhi* might be achieved after many trials, there is no guarantee that one may remain at this level of consciousness for all time, for the power of Ego forces one to be reborn again and again.

When asked by devotees to describe being in *Samadhi*, Sri Ramakrishna likened the state of mind to that of a fish that has been taken out of water for a period then put back. He continues that 'in the state of *Samadhi* one floats upon the ocean of *Satchidananda*, all human consciousness lies latent.' But the extraordinary nature of *Samadhi* lies in the fact that the personality of the adherent becomes one with His personality.¹⁰

Few in human history will comprehend the ultimate realisation. Most religions' belief systems, with their respective scriptures, set out guidelines for reaching such a goal. Those few students who do qualify set standards for our ultimate ethics and indeed go through the most difficult and yet perhaps the most 'beautiful' experience living Life can offer. Christ, Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, Mary, Theresa of Avilla and select others have chosen to tread that path. Some have been helped by Incarnations and others have gone through the reincarnationist route and evolved through successive lives.

While the *Sastras*, scriptures and teachings of the Prophets have clearly enunciated the principles, practice and methodology for the realisation of the ultimate in Divinity, each master has contextually adjusted the methods to suit local and psychological conditions enabling aspirants to proceed along the path of consciousness awareness. As mentioned previously, one notices this in the case where Ramakrishna

admonishes two disciples, the one who did not rise to the occasion of defending the Master in the boat conversation or the other for over-reacting in rising to his defence. His advice to temper their psychological responses in accordance to the rules for justice is most revealing.

The mystery of God-Human relationship and co-existence is complex and the human condition of transcendence to fully realise that 'divine relationship' has been basic to the teachings of the Master. This ultimate spiritual destiny, although familiar with Indian religious traditions, has not been common in the West. Recent scholars, however, are being drawn to the area. For instance, Yandell's (1993) primary argument is that 'religious experience is ineffable'; however, through 'luminous experience', it is possible to argue that God really exists. Much of the 'Epistemology of Religious Experience' meticulously sets out to argue that 'the formulation and application of an appropriate principle of experimental evidence' is an intrinsically necessary pre-condition to experience the Divine. Yandell reiterates what Rudolph Steiner refers to as 'luminous experiences', arguing that Judaism, Christianity, Islam and *Bhakti* Hinduism are all familiar with this religious phenomenon. Basically, Yandell argues that individuals who experience this happening mostly use the term 'seems'. In other words, this reflects on the kinds of experiencing, phenomenologically at any rate, through which the individual is undergoing. What indeed is the 'I seem—numinous experience' Yandell describes as 'experience [of] a thing that is awesome, majestic, unique, righteous, over-powering, holy,

intensely alive and the like...the numinous experience is a flagrantly subject - consciousness - object in structure as is sensory experience.¹¹ Further, Yandell argues that the phenomenon itself is mind-independent.

It is the experiencing of the 'object', the final state as described by Hiroshi Motoyama (1992) which enables the aspirant to reach *Samadhi*. Motoyama discusses Patanjali's notion of *Samadhi* noting that he discusses 'gradations of *Samadhi*' and explains that these are all 'states of union.' Numerous other scholars have reiterated the continuing pattern of reaching this pinnacle. For instance, Mircea Eliade (1969) describes the state of *Samadhi* as, 'the *yogin* who attains...*samadhi* realises the dream that has obsessed the human spirit from the beginning of history—to coincide with the All, to recover unity, to re-establish the mutual non-duality, to abolish time and creation.' The Sufis refer to the condition of *samadhi* as *baga*, which literally means 'pure subsistence' or 'beyond substance' (Lings, 1961:122). Coleman (1988) speaks of the *Bhakti Sutras* describing in detail the typology of Divine Love, the ultimate union of *Atman* with *Brahman*, expanded by Prabhavananda, Isherwood and Vivekananda as 'Love, the Lover and the Beloved are One'. Explained more fully, it is 'love intoxication' and the outward signs are 'ecstasy and absorption', 'bliss', 'rapture', 'joy' and concentration. This behaviour is extremely difficult to be recorded let alone understood, and at best Coleman speaks of it as 'erratic as a madman'. Therefore the criticisms levelled at the 'difficult' behaviour which has been difficult to 'pigeonhole',

seems 'irrational' to the observer and is therefore often labelled as madness by some uninformed scholars and academics.¹²

The reasons are not difficult to understand. The behaviour of the *Bhakti* is described in the Srimad Bhagavatam (Swami Venkatesananda, 1981): 'The devotee loses all sense of decorum and moves about the world unattached...This is indeed the very sign of the irrational and a mad person's behaviour to the normal-minded individual. His heart melts through love as he habitually chants the Name of his beloved Lord, and like one possessed, he now bursts into peals of laughter, now weeps, now cries, now sings aloud and now begins to dance.'

Coleman (1988) suggests that the 'enraptured devotee' is very close to *Samadhi* and the ecstasy level is indicative of *jnana*. At this level one's intensity is focussed on one's *Ishta*, and that is the milestone in reaching *Samadhi*. According to Coleman, Swami Muktananda argued that once this stage is reached, the need for chanting, prayer, *japa* and other steps cease to be necessary. Sri Ramakrishna however, needed the least of the 'stimulus' since he had already reached an extremely high level of consciousness.

The Paramahansa's mystical journey, one discovers, has been amazing, especially viewed within the modern experience. Scholars engaged in spiritual discourse are unanimous that 'sensate culture' has

become the norm of present society, and therefore Sri Ramakrishna's Divine experiences stand in stark contrast to the aspirations of individuals in post-modern societies. It is this contrast that 'raises' the Master to majestic heights and discloses the tragic gap that exists between the sensate and material world to that of the world of Truth, and ultimately, spiritual wisdom.

¹ For a detailed discussion on the path of ultimate union with *Brahman*, see Swami Nikhilananda, 1948:75-6.

² See the chapter 'The Master with the Brahma Devotees (I)' (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986: 151).

³ See Swami Prabhavananda (1969:45) for further interpretations of the 'I' and 'Ego' relations.

⁴ Trailanga Swami was a holy man who lived in Benaras and was a contemporary of Sri Ramakrishna.

⁵ Here, the Master reinforces the 'struggle' of the individual to free himself from the shackles of 'humanness' to reach the 'goal' or purpose of Life itself, i.e. the Unity with God.

⁶ Swami Yogeshananda (1989) discusses this fully and details the various instances of the Master's visions.

⁷ The Vedanta refers to this condition as the 'destruction of consciousness', or 'the body falling like a dry leaf'; the ultimate stage endows one Eternity.

⁸ In some cases, the literature informs us that the human soul comes back to earth with specific purpose, usually as a Divine Incarnation.

⁹ Swami Saradananda (1978:235) discusses this at length in his chapter, 'Master's Sadhana of the Vatsalya Bhava'.

¹⁰ See the chapter on Ramakrishna in *Kali the Mother* (Sister Nivedita, 1989: 67-8).

¹¹ The states of 'experiences' and 'altered consciousness' are all seen as various stages of spiritual development.

¹² Coleman discusses the labeling theory as applicable to 'spiritual personalities'.

CHAPTER 8

RESPONDING TO THE CRITIQUES OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Abstract

This final chapter examines some of the criticisms levelled at the experiential existentialism of Sri Ramakrishna, which attempt to devalue his contributions to the spiritual progress of humanity. The writer here rebuts certain issues raised and argues that some of these criticisms arise out of gross misinterpretation of the Master's life.

Sri Ramakrishna's life has not only been described as 'strange or mad', but since his arrival at Dakshineswar in 1855, he encountered relentless condemnation. Foremost among those engaged in his censure were members of the Brahmo Samaj, especially their leader Keshab Chandra Sen. The Samaj preached social reforms in the tradition of the West, particularly since some of its members had visited countries outside India and were influenced by social issues raised by Christians there. The Master, on the other hand, remained enwrapped in the Divine and 'thought out' social life from that perspective.

The Samaj especially disapproved of his 'ascetic renunciation' and condemnation of 'women and gold'. Instead, they measured Ramakrishna according to their own ideals of the householder's life. They were unable to understand his *Samadhi* and described it as a nervous malady. Pratap Chandra Mazumdar, who was close to Keshab, criticised Ramakrishna's use of uncultured language and also his austere attitude towards his wife. Eurocentric-minded critics emulating colonial mentalities saw Ramakrishna's natural attitudes and interpretations as 'primitive'.

Sri Ramakrishna remained unmoved and undaunted by such reproach, so certain was he of the philosophy of the Vedanta (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986: 44-5). Sivaramakrishna systematically deconstructs the attitudes of the so-called 'insiders' who conform to the prevailing ritualistic behaviours and attitudes of society and who forever are labelling 'outsiders' as deviants. Sri Ramakrishna, we are informed through the current critical literature, was indeed regarded as 'deviant', or in Sivaramakrishna's words, an 'outsider' or an 'existentialist.' The inability of the average individual to understand the 'transcendental' led, in the Master's case, to 'pigeon-holing'. Not easily classified into 'type', the Master became an easy victim of gossip, which fuelled the labelling process. Therefore, it is not altogether surprising that extraordinary individuals who are not fully understood are indeed labelled as 'deviant', 'mad', 'lunatic' or 'queer'.

Sri Ramakrishna, prey to such categorisations, endured them philosophically with the occasional enquiry as to whether he was really mad. There seems no doubt that he was aware to a large degree of his condition. However, there were those moments when 'self-doubt' got the better of him and he would enquire from his 'teachers' and 'disciples' as to whether he was the incarnation of God or mad (Sivaramakrishna 1992:68-77).

Scholars in recent years have made attempts to present a sustained critique of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and have been raising critical issues in the continuing debate about his life. Criticisms of his somewhat erratic and unexplainable behaviour did perplex the Master himself at times. Doubts existed whether he was 'mad'; and, although he realised intuitively that his condition was very different from ordinary souls, the self-doubt was a nagging phenomenon. Furthermore, the debates raged as to whether he was a very evolved human entity or an incarnation of God Himself come to this world with a special purpose.

Both these of these questions were answered in due course by the timely or rather God-ordained arrival of Bhairavi Brahmani¹ who had mastered one of the most difficult forms of worship, the *Sakta* form of Tantric worship (Swami Nikhilananda, 1948: 14-6). It was she who, with her experiential knowledge, convinced Sri Ramakrishna that she noticed 'signs of an *avatar* or incarnation of the Divine' in him. Neeval (1976)

discusses how the issues of incarnation and madness bedevilled Ramakrishna, together with Bhairavi's assurances, 'The Bhairavi assured him that he was not mad but was experiencing a phenomenon that accompanies *mahabhava*, the supreme attitude of loving devotion towards the Divine (*prema-bhakti*).' She said that the *bhakti sastras* indicate that such symptoms occurred regularly in the lives of *avatars*, especially in that of Sri Chaitanya (1486-1533).² On the basis of these signs, together with her own impressions of Ramakrishna, Bhairavi declared that he was an *avatar*, an opinion which, though not universally agreed to, was accepted by at least two other prominent Vaisnava scholars and Tantric masters. Bhairavi's confirmation was important to Ramakrishna since most writing in the field of Tantra confirms that this form of God-realisation is perhaps the most complex and arduous within the Hindu system of spiritual goals. To have found a 'master' in her who seemed adept in the teaching and knowledge legitimated by her confirmations, was so essential for mystic reaffirmation and a great relief to the Master.³

Narasingha Sil (1993), for instance, attempts to shed new light, with the help of personal letters, on the relationship between Vivekananda and the Master and refutes the widely held belief that Vivekananda was a critical disciple of Ramakrishna. Sil also argues that Vivekananda had 'manufactured' the image of Paramahansa Ramakrishna from a *Bhakti* position to that of a social welfare or Karma Yoga one. In other words, the political objectives of regaining the past glory of India and establishing a

Vedanta perspective to the teachings have been, he argues, the work of Vivekananda rather than Ramakrishna.

Notwithstanding this approach by Sil, two criticisms refuting such a position are raised. First, Ramakrishna was not totally oblivious to the human suffering around him.⁴ During his pilgrimage to Benares, for example, he confronted the conditions that existed in India, and ordered Mathur to provide food and clothes to the poor. Throughout his lifetime, he commented as well on the social conditions of India, and was not unaware of the exploitation of the poor by the rich in the country. This he demonstrated when certain Marwari businessmen came to the Temple to obtain his blessing, and with whom he was ill at ease because of their 'material thinking'. His injunction to 'do goodness' was to seek God first, so that and social and political leadership would follow. This was perhaps farsighted political thought within an ethical framework that few, except the likes of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, have taken heed of this advice.⁵

Ramakrishna's divinity and the need for God-consciousness are central to any philosophy he espoused. Therefore egoism and self-serving interests are diametrically opposed to the view of Salvation. Hence, his unequivocal stance on spiritual strength, a very necessary prerequisite to any political or social action. Political action is understood here as an extension of spiritual action, and furthermore a 'calling', rather than the self-serving interests like those of the ruling elites.

Sil's major critique rests on the de-legitimation of Ramakrishna's erratic and bizarre behaviour. Sil also suggests that other academics have noted that the 'rationality' of the Saint was questionable, as was his behaviour. He cites instances where Vivekananda himself found the Master's behaviour somewhat deviant from the normal or otherwise 'abnormal'. Sil attacks both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda at various levels, all of which he believes will reveal that Master and disciple were prone to excesses of speech and action and that history has misjudged both the individuals. He cites numerous incidents gleaned from writings of scholars, letters and works of other commentators. Sil believes that Vivekananda was an '*uninspired* devotee' of Ramakrishna. He writes (1993: 38-57):

It is important to bear in mind that Narendranath did not seem much inclined to spiritualism, mysticism, or devotionalism when he first encountered the Paramahansa. He was frankly opposed to the Saint's prescription for total inaction and passive surrender to Jagajjanani (Mother of the Universe, an appellation of the Goddess Kali) as well as to his anti-intellectualism. His thundering admonition to his monastic brethren against Ramakrishna's religious enthusiasm provides a most telling testimony in this regard.

Sil (1993) recounts various instances where the Master openly chastised his devotees who preached about “social activity” in the tradition of the West. The idea that ‘women [were] so certain of changing conditions of existence, seemed to the Master a futile exercise in Egoism.’ Sil continues, ‘Vivekananda was also quite lukewarm about Ramakrishna’s “ecstatic” enthusiasm. To the end of the Guru’s life, at the Syampukur residence, Narendranath openly inveighed against the Paramahansa’s style of dances and trances indulged in by several eager young devotees of the master.’

Sil’s critique remains unconvincing for several reasons. Initially an academic of sorts, using what one Western social science once referred to as ‘a bag of Western tools’ to decode not only Eastern customary ritualistic behaviour, but also the behaviour of one who is seeped in mystical action is highly problematic. Put another way, even those who are schooled in *yogic* practices find it difficult to understand the likes of the Paramahansa. Thus descriptions of his ‘erratic behaviour’ and rationalising this within a framework of what seems to be criticism, is severely limited in its objectivity. While the Master’s behaviour might seem ‘childlike’ to the younger Vivekananda and indeed others, peer-evaluators of the Saint are unanimous in their belief that his behaviour and actions are in keeping with scriptural descriptions. In fact, Ramakrishna himself was unaware and sometimes unsure of his own actions and sought clarification from peers and scholars who assured him that the *sastras* and commentaries of

others who followed the path indicated the 'fate' of similar sufferings.⁶ If this is true, then Sil's assertion that Ramakrishna's behaviour was rationalised has little or no foundation. Vivekananda, on the other hand, lived in two worlds: the one Western, by education and his 'middle class' status; and, the other, by the desire not only to understand his culture and live by it, but also to engage in its spirituality. In other words, Vivekananda had to balance these 'twin rationalities' not only insofar as daily actions were concerned, but with regard to spiritual behaviour as well. If the Brahmo Samaj had a profound influence on the young people in India, the 'modernising' of Hinduism raises numerous conflicting issues. Given the complexity of the exercise, and different levels of interpretation and understanding, it seems that Sil has chosen to view certain behaviours as 'aberrations' and has worked out a thesis in justification for his 'critical position'.

Sceptical of Vivekananda's subsequent praise of the Master, Sil cites what the disciple is said to have publicly stated:

Through thousand of years of chiselling and modelling, the lives of great prophets of yore came down to us; and yet, in my opinion, no one stands so high in brilliance as that life which I saw with my own eyes, under whose shadow I have lived, at whose feet I have learnt everything - the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.⁷

One interpretation of the above declaration is that Vivekananda has matured, and at the same time realised the worth of his Master. Indeed others who visited the Paramahansa, and the assertions that this appreciation of the Master was a public relations exercise on the part of Vivekananda, wears thin when one interrogates the compelling arguments of fellow Yogis and learned scholars of the Brahmo Samaj. Scholars familiar with Eastern and Western mysticism and who have seriously engaged in attempting to understand the behaviour of Yogis, saints and *sadhus* have all been confronted with the accusation that these kinds holy men are suspect if not mad, and live by trickery and ingenious illusion.

While all societies exhibit some degree of deviancy by certain groups within those societies, there is a certain attitude cultivated among the so-called 'scientifically minded academics' that any behaviour not legitimated within the accepted paradigms, is suspect. Holy men and women would certainly fall into such a category. Therefore it is not surprising Ramakrishna ought to fall 'victim' to such belief systems. Coleman for instance, mentions that Hindu scripture itself describes the 'God-intoxicated devotee's behaviour' as 'erratic as a madman's.' It is a serious scholar who possesses this knowledge and then judges the likes of Sri Ramakrishna. In the Buddhist tradition for instance, the *Abhidhamma* is the most comprehensive of texts that explores in detail the traditional psychology of different states of consciousness. Coleman also discusses the 'madness' exhibited by Sri Ramakrishna when the Master

saw a theatre performance of Lord Krishna. The Master was so moved by the performance that he entered *Samadhi* several times. While Coleman (1988) concedes that Ramakrishna was a *Bhakta* of excellence, he nonetheless is aware that others might easily view the Master's behaviour as 'madness'.

Sri Ramakrishna's life was subject to much criticism; yet, perhaps the man himself was his own major critic. Referring to 'this body', he subjected himself to utmost austerities. Never satisfied that his actions or thoughts fulfilled the perfection 'Mother' required, he was self-vigilant and did not expect any standards of his disciples that he did not set for himself. He advised his devotees not to accept his teachings or actions uncritically and that they must prepare themselves to take issue with him should he transgress the rules. The *Gospel* records an incident whereby a devotee noticed the Master one night silently leaving his precincts and suspected that the Master was having night visits with his wife, although it was well known that that was something the Master would not do. However, the devotee walked some distance unnoticed, when suddenly he saw Ramakrishna walking towards the cemetery where he did his night meditations. Ramakrishna, of course, commended the young devotee, when told of the incident. Such was his meticulousness.

Accepting the belief that he acted like a madman, not fully able to understand his own behaviour, Ramakrishna was relieved when informed

that such behaviour was 'normal' with seekers of Divine Faith.⁸ Criticism, it seems, has been primarily that the level of understanding of the mystic is still in a stage of infancy. As such, commentators have attempted to make a case. While it must be accepted that Sri Ramakrishna, like Christ and other sages, did and do possess human frailty, criticism must, however, be undertaken at the level of peer-critique, and at least from one who is endowed with penetrating perception of the mystic phenomenon. We are told also that '*Sadhus* roam like children or madmen or in various other guises' and only those of high spiritual qualification could recognise the distinction.

Responding to critics of Ramakrishna, Coleman demonstrates that in misunderstanding Ramakrishna, they confound two important notions. Firstly, the understanding of *Bhakti* requires more than human understanding of the phenomenon. Thus the criticism levelled by ordinary mortals has serious limitations. Secondly, the manifestation of *Bhakti* in the various religious traditions renders invalid the behaviour of Ramakrishna as a singularly mad act. In other words, Coleman (1988) demonstrates that Christians singing *Amazing Grace* exhibit an emotion outside the 'normal' behaviour; or if one sees the Hassidic Jew 'dancing and singing at the Wailing Wall', or one notices the Sufi reciting *El Llah Hu* shows extraordinary emotion. All of these acts, if culturally misunderstood, might be interpreted as deviant. More recently, the chanting of *Hare Krishna* and the Japanese Buddhist repeating *Nu-mu-a-mi-da-bu-tsu-Na-*

mu-a-mi-da-bu-tsu, all exhibit a 'deep emotion of extraordinary form and trance-like oblivion and therefore beyond the rational controlled behaviour. To label this behaviour as 'mad' indicates limited knowledge in this cultural experience.'

Swami Yogeshananda (1989), in response to the critics, points out that some of the devotees of the Master were not only intellectually extraordinary, but through their austerities reached a high level of realisation and were thus more 'in tune', as it were, with the Master's experiences. These, he explains, were much more than 'a collection of daydreams of a religious enthusiast.' Spiritual records by people who themselves had set a goal of self-realisation and perfection, in accordance with the *sastras*, attest to this expected normative behaviour of God-realised beings. Countering the 'sceptical rationalist', Swami Yogeshananda points out that he 'may find some fascination in the great variety of symbols through which this unusual mind gave expression to the profoundest truths.'

What appears to be madness and strange behaviour to ordinary human beings is due primarily to their 'shallow' understanding of spiritual reality. In fact, at the higher levels of realised souls, as demonstrated elsewhere, the 'elevated minds march to their own drums'; and, it is thus extremely difficult to decode their behaviour (Swami Yogeshananda, 1989:1-7). Sri Ramakrishna demonstrates this himself in a story that is

recounted of a God-intoxicated *Sadhu*, whose behaviour to the uninitiated would seem that of a madman. This *Sadhu* came to Rani Rasmani's Kali Temple; and, one day, not having food, but being rather hungry, saw a dog eating the leftovers. Embracing the dog, he says, 'Brother, how is it that thou eatest without giving me a share?' Having eaten thus, he goes into the Temple and prays with such earnestness that the Temple literally shakes with his devotion. The faith and holiness of the *Sadhu* strike Sri Ramakrishna, and he asks his nephew Hriday to follow him. The *Sadhu*, on seeing Hriday, was not pleased on being followed, but because of Hriday's entreaty, calmly says: 'When the water of the dirty ditch and the yonder glorious Ganges will appear as one, then thou shalt have reached Divine Wisdom'. When reported back to Sri Ramakrishna, the Master clarified that the *Sadhu* had reached a very high state of God realisation.

In conclusion, it becomes clear that the criticisms levelled at Sri Ramakrishna, some of which the Master respectfully accepted and understood since he himself was perplexed at times by his own behaviour, nonetheless can be discounted by the fact that he possessed the power of Divinity which was not readily understood by his critics. Moreover, the terms of reference used in judgement seldom approximate spiritual behaviour in the best of times, let alone different societies and cultures and therefore pose serious problems of interpretation.

¹ First teacher of Sri Ramakrishna on his spiritual path; the second was Totapuri. Bhairavi was a nun and Brahman Sannyasini from the Jessore District in East Bengal. Her original name was Yogeshwari.

² Cited earlier; also known as Gauranga.

³ The practice of Tantra, we are informed, is perhaps the most complex and 'dangerous' of spiritual activities, and yet represents the pinnacle of spiritual aspirations. Therefore, Ramakrishna was delighted to find a 'Master'.

⁴ See Chapter 6 of this thesis for a discussion of the Master's relationship to Karma Yoga; also Swami Saradananda (1978: 507-32) explores this at some length in his chapter 'Grace Bestowed on Mathur'.

⁵ Gandhi was perhaps one of Sri Ramakrishna's most prominent 'political' disciples, ensuring that spirituality was at the core of political action.

⁶ Note Ramakrishna's response when told by the Bhairavi only to be confirmed by the leading pundits Vaishnavacharan and Gauri that he was not 'mad' or 'ill', 'Just fancy that... I am glad to learn that it is not a "disease"!'.

⁷ Swami Vivekananda was supposed to have made this statement at a massive gathering in Calcutta in 1897 (Sil, 1993:49).

⁸ See chapter on 'Rules for Householders and Monks', in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Swami Nikhilananda, 1986:400-14).

CONCLUSION

When world-renowned academics and scholars, celebrated for *their* literary and scientific achievements, pay homage to a self-professed 'ignorant' and 'simple' Hindu Saint from a village in India, a curious interest develops on the part of the readers. Sivaramakrishna (1992), the noted Indian scholar, follows this interest and discovers that among those who have paid tribute to this remarkable *yogi* of the twentieth century are none other than: Arnold Toynbee, Will Durant, Rudolf Otto, William James, W. Allport, C.G.Jung, Joseph Campbell, Robert Oppenheimer, Max Muller, Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann and Christopher Isherwood. While mentioning only these few, others fascinated by Ramakrishna's teaching number among the thousands of renowned artists, poets, writers and spiritual adherents, not to mention the millions who regard him as a spiritual master of the highest order. Sivaramakrishna also refers to Pitrim A. Sorokin, a Harvard sociologist, who commented that the Vedanta philosophy in general, and Sri Ramakrishna in particular, has forever changed the course of 'sensate culture' and the 'predominant materialistic tendencies of the West'. This has been achieved by universalising the 'experiential nature of worship and prayer' and concretising one's daily thoughts and practices into the Biblical 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'.

Swami Saradananda (1978), a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna provides the genesis and 'roots' to the Master's thought and philosophy in his statement:

From time immemorial, India has accepted the super-sensuous, spiritual-like God-soul and the hereafter as absolute facts, whose existence could be realised and verified even here in our earthly life; and, has as a consequence formulated ways of life for man, both individual and collective, that are conducive to the attainment of this goal. The national life of the country has been characterised by an intense spirituality all through the ages.

The revolutionary spirit of God-consciousness re-emerged in India in the late 19th century when India was experiencing a decay of its own cultural and spiritual life. It was Sri Ramakrishna with almost 'super human strength' who provided the impetus to Swami Vivekananda to achieve *Sadhana* and undertake social regeneration. He also inspired Mahatma Gandhi to set the parameters for a moral 'political revolution' in India's colonial landscape.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's spiritual journey to *Maha-samadhi* remains a unique experience in the annals of human achievement. Few in the modern era have displayed such God-intoxication and love for 'Mother' as an enduring passion in one lifetime. The path of God realisation has been complex, self-sacrificing and demanding with the extremities of human endurance and pain, all of which

the Master endured with equanimity. We are informed that the Master was an incarnation of God Himself, and therefore lived in this world and yet not of 'it'. Yet, each episode of his life was symbolic in that it remains a 'message' to humanity.

Another interpretation might be that Ramakrishna concretised the Kabbalistic worldview, synchronising what might be 'the ultimate relationship between the terrestrial realm of the *cosmos* and the terrestrial realm of *man*'. Living in both worlds, Sri Ramakrishna experienced the mystical relationships exhibited by the major world religions, arguing and establishing beyond all reasonable doubt that God is One. Different religions are but cultural paths to this 'Oneness'. Sivaramakrishna reiterates the Master's declaration: 'Do you know what I see right now? I see that it is God Himself who has become the block, the executioner and the victim for sacrifice!'

Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual message has undoubtedly found its way 'home' throughout the length and breadth of the modern world, even among rationalist and scientific thinkers. While his teachings have been challenged, debated and criticised both in the East and the West, paradoxically, they are becoming influential in centres of excellence and learning in science and technology. Gregory Bateson, for example, declares that 'experiences provided by the sense data are illusions upon which our civilisation is based'. Ramakrishna's 'philosophy of mind' is still revolutionary and subject to critique by philosophers, neurologists,

physiologists and others. However, religious practices, religious fundamentalism and even religion itself, have certainly been challenged at their very foundations by the experiential existentialism of this Saint, who has by his sheer capacity for 'love of Mother' revolutionised the spiritual quest of the 20th century.

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