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# Ramakrishna & Mystical Experience

Dipali Chattopadhyay



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# RAMAKRISNA AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

*By*  
**Dr. Dipali Chattopadhyay**

## RAMA KRISHNA AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

*Dr. Dipali Chattopadhyay submitted the  
same in partial fulfilment of the requirement  
of the Degree of Master of Philosophy to  
North Eastern Hills University,  
Shillong in April 1982*

First Edition : 1997

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Price Rs. 100/-

ISBN 81-501-020-7

14609

110 / CHA

100/-

*Laser Typesetting:*

QUICKCOMP SYSTEMS & SERVICES

201-A, East Azad Nagar, Delhi-110051

*Printed By :*

ROMIL PUBLISHERS (P.) LTD.

A-18, Street No.10, East Azad Nagar

Delhi-110051 (INDIA)

Phone off. 2211154, 2436849 (Res.) 2421652

Fax : 011-2212435

at Speedo Graphics Press Delhi-92

## FOREWORD



**RAMAKRISHNA MISSION**

Laitumkhrah, P.O. Box-9

*Shillong-793003*

Meghalaya

Phone No. 230079

January 4, 1996

We find mystics and their life stories in mythology and history of all religions. Mystics are those spiritually elevated souls who have realised the Truth in their life time and stand as beacon lights for the guidance of humanity. Mysticism transcends physical, mental and intellectual spheres and can be rationally explained. It also transcends barriers of all religious and philosophical limitations and takes the spiritual aspirant to the heights of universalism.

Ramakrishna was one such saint in whom one can find varieties of religious and spiritual experiences. *Dr. (Mrs.) Dipali Chattopadhyay* has made an excellent study of the saint's life and has made out a thesis on the mystic experiences of Ramakrishna, giving elaborate insight into different aspects of mysticism.

I believe a study of the following pages of her work will enthuse readers to study the lives of the saints of various religions and that of Ramakrishna in detail for their spiritual benefit.

**SWAMI RAGHUNATHANANDA**

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "Ramakrisna and Mystical Experience" submitted by Srimati Dipali Chattopadhyay in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy. To the best of my knowledge, the dissertation has not been submitted anywhere else for a degree. All the quotations, extracts and ideas of other studies have been duly referred.

This dissertation may be sent to the examiner for necessary formalities and evaluation.

**SHILLONG**  
The 15th April '82

**( DR (Mrs) SUJATA MIRI )**  
**Reader & Head**  
**Department of Philosophy**  
**North Eastern Hill University**



## PREFACE

This dissertation "Ramakrishna and Mystical Experience" was submitted by me for M.Phil Degree under North Eastern Hill University in the year 1982.

In the preparation of this dissertation I received immense help from different sources.

Words seem inadequate to express my indebtedness to Professor (Mrs.) *Sujata Miri* whose inspiring guidance was a constant support in the completion of the thesis.

I own a great deal to *Dr. Mrinal Miri* who initiated the subject in my mind and *Dr. Harsh Narain* for his advice and encouragement.

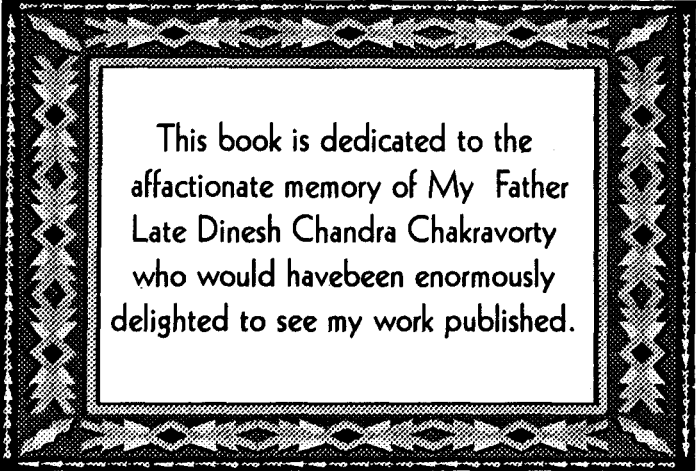
I am extremely grateful to Reverend *Swami Raghunathananda* of Ramakrishna Mission, Shillong who has showered his blessings on me by going through the manuscript and writing a forward for this book.

My heartfelt thanks are also due to my husband. *Dr. S. K. Chattopadhyay*. Addl. D.P.I. Government of Meghalaya for his valuable suggestions and *Dr. I.P. Gupta* of *Romil Publishers (P.) Ltd.*, Delhi for undertaking the publication of the book.



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This book is dedicated to the  
affectionate memory of My Father  
Late Dinesh Chandra Chakravorty  
who would have been enormously  
delighted to see my work published.

## INTRODUCTION

Among the different kinds of experiences mystical experiences are more fascinating and thought provoking because they reveal a realm which is beyond ordinary experience and yet attainable in part. For different religions mystical experience is an integral part—the technique to understand spiritual truths and to have a direct experience of the ultimate reality whatever that may be. Mystical experience for some people (sceptic) is too other worldly and serves no useful purpose. To study the possibility of mystical experience and to analyse its significance for man, I have taken the case of Ramakrishna as a case study. Of course, I am not interested in finding evidence for the validity of (Ramakrishna), various experiences which may be termed as mystical. In other words, mine is not an empirical enquiry. I am rather concerned with understanding how such experiences formed a consistent whole along with the doctrines preached by Ramakrishna. As it is found in Ramakrishna's life, the mystical experience gives the explanation of his doctrine of harmony of religions. In his life one can notice the extreme tolerance, reconciliation and harmony of different religions. The secret of his balanced living can be found in his mystical experience.

Ramakrishna's mystical experience is primarily characterised by a universal outlook, and this outlook had its basis mainly in the tradition of Vedantic. Therefore, to have a better understanding of Ramakrishna's spiritual life one is to take into consideration his religious, social and cultural tradition which form its background. So, in the Chapter I, I have given the background of Ramakrishna's thought and visions and the purpose of my studying his life history. In this connection I have described the mystical tradition along with the Vedanta. Bhakti and Tantrika traditions existing during Ramakrishna's life. So also I have attempted to give a

socio-religious picture of the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj and also the position of Christianity and Islam in India.

Ramakrisna was a mystic, and not a philosopher. Yet he dealt with various metaphysical questions, like God and world, problem of evil, Karma and rebirth, Samiskaras, suffering and liberation, doctrine of Maya and Brahman etc. But all these were apprehended by him through mystical experience. Different contradictory metaphysical notions were reconciled by him in a simple way by the help of symbols and parables. In the Chapter II, I have discussed mysticism in general with the sole purpose of understanding Ramakrisna as a mystic. Though he received the earlier visions without any formal preparation, yet in his later experiences one can notice the result of Sadhana under different sects of Hinduism and also of Christianity and Islam. Ramakrisna himself never bothered about any theory of mysticism. His experiences arose from the depth of his soul and enriched his entire emotional life which was filled with immense spirituality. In the same chapter I have also compared the mystical experience with other experiences. I have narrated a few visions, classified them and interpreted them philosophically. Though I have said that culture and tradition is the background of mystical experience, yet I find, ability or capacity and intuitive power of a mystic is also important. Because it is found that all mystics cannot reach the same higher state inspite of their belonging to the same cultural tradition. The reason for this may be found in the concept of *samskaras* or inherited tendencies. These tendencies help or serve as an obstruction (as the case may be). In the brief biography of Ramakrisna I have said that he was born and brought up in an orthodox and poor Brahmin family. But inspite of the narrowness prevailing in that time, his mind was free from bias and caste prejudice. In his boyhood he had a sudden mystical vision which left the impression of spiritual reality in his mind.

For experiences of this type, I felt the need to spell out the doctrine of *samskaras*, involving the concept of self, the law of Karma and rebirth, in the same chapter.

The unusual vision in the childhood led Ramakrishna to seek the explanation, foundation and goal of such mystical vision. This search made him feel that man has another place to live in, i.e., a realm of inner realisation. This idea I have explained in Chapter III. Sometimes it is found that mystics are not approachable to a non-mystic, and like to exclude themselves from the rest of the society. But Rāmakrishna was found to serve the society for its spiritual good even after attaining the highest experience and also advised his intimate disciples to serve the Jiva (individual) regarding them as Siva (God).

While dicussing his vision of harmony of religions, I have discussed the modern Bahai religion and Akbar's religion Din-Elahi and found the synthesis offered by them as a mere compilation of only what is good in other established religions. Though Ramakrishna shared the desire for a unity of all religions with these two, yet I feel his solution to be greatly different from them. In his case, what is required is not an artificially created synthesis of various doctrines but an actual harmony of all religions finding its justification in the highest truth of mystical experience. Ramakrishna also preached freedom and choice in religion and never believed in conversion.

Among the different mystics, Ramakrishna was the most humanistic. The value of his mystical experience lies in the conceptions of the humanised God and the divinised man. Thus, after obtaining union with the Divine Ramakrishna showed the possibility of divine life on earth.

The last chapter of my thesis emphasises my main idea that

Ramakrisna's doctrine of harmony of all religions can only be understood with the Advaita doctrine of the levels of being (namely Vyavaharika or empirical and Para marthika or ultimate) serving as its foundation. It is only because Ramakrisna grew up in such a tradition that he was prepared for tolerance and respect for plurality of opinions. On the other hand, if one's religious philosophy teaches that one's own religion is the only true religion and one's own God is the only true God, such a conclusion that Ramakrisna reached would not have been possible.



## CHAPTER I

Religion in India means a way of living, not mere speculation, and the aim of all religions lies in the attainment of higher state of consciousness, the experience of which is mystical in nature. Mystical experience is such an experience through which man can obtain a direct and immediate contact with supreme being. It is the instrument of experimental knowledge of the ultimate Reality which is described in various names and in various ways.

Ramakrisna's life and teachings have been commented upon a number of times. While undertaking this theme, I am aware that I am not doing a work of great original importance. I have selected this topic as I have felt the absence of any serious philosophical handling of the mystical experiences of Ramakrisna. Moreover, an understanding of the distinctive features of Ramakrisna's mystical experience, I felt may help to spell out the characteristics of mystical experience in general. To understand mystical experience as such I needed a case-study of mystic and the reason for taking the case of Ramakrisna lay in the fact that in his life, one finds all the varieties of mystical experience.

Though there are innumerable works on mysticism, yet the subject appears as baffling as ever. A saying of Ramakrisna appears apt in this connection—"A many faiths, so many paths" (*yata mata tata patha*) as many minds so many interpretations.

Mysticism is a common word found in different religions. But it is difficult to define it and even more difficult to describe it in a particular way. Saints and thinkers—both from East and West have attempted to describe it. But none could give a comprehensive description. Evelyn Underhill gives the following account of mystical experience. She describes

mysticism which 'in its pure form is the science of ultimate, the science of union with the absolute and the mystic is the person who attains this union'. It is mystical because in it the conversation between the God and the Soul is from heart to heart in a communion that cannot be communicated to any one except to the participants themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Ninian Smart has explained the mystical experience and the different aspects as different dimensions of mysticism. These are (i) ritual dimension, (ii) mythological dimension, (iii) doctrinal dimension, (iv) ethical dimension, (v) social dimension and lastly the (vi) experimental dimension.<sup>2</sup>

In Christian mysticism as also in Ramakrishna we find all these dimensions. Though all these dimensions are important for a religious life, the experimental dimension seems to be the most important for all the mystics. Thus Buddha achieved enlightenment after his mystical experience which revealed the secret of the cure of suffering. It is through same mystical experience Muhammad began to preach the unity of Allah. The words of Jesus Christ expresses his intimate closeness to the Father. In the Bhagvad Gita the Lord reveals himself to Arjuna with terrifying splendour who later was filled with knowledge and devotion (11th Canto of the Gita). St. Paul had similar experience on the Damascus Road.<sup>3</sup>

An analysis of mystical experience would indicate that the source of such experience is a non-rational awareness which may be termed as numinous feeling (as R. Otto calls it) or an intuitive grasp of reality as the mystics call it. And this kind of grasp of reality (call it intuitive) presupposes an objective realm of reality from which mystical experience follows. This being the minimum

1. R.C. Zaehner: *Concordant Discord* (1970), p.195.

2. Ninian Smart: *Religious Experience of Mankind* (1969), p.15.

3. *Ibid.*, p.22.

requirement of mystical experience is almost a necessary condition of all mystical experiences. The content of the mystical experience, however, I feel is greatly determined by the particular environment and culture of the mystic under consideration. For instance, the type of "objective" reality whether of Goddess Kali or Jesus Christ or Ramavatara, which plays a role in the mystical experience of the particular mystic is the result of his socio-religious and cultural environment. Thus, after providing the life-sketch of Ramakrishna in brief, I have attempted to give a description of his socio-religious environment. This becomes necessary as a background for the popular thesis of Ramakrishna advocating a harmony of religions which I feel has its foundation in his visions.

To understand mystical experience in general and Ramakrishna's experience in particular, I have felt it necessary to discuss (a) What is mysticism, (b) to which class of mysticism does Ramakrishna belong (c) in what sense Ramakrishna differs from other mystics etc.

Ramakrishna was born in a poor Brahmin family of rural West Bengal in the year 1836. Ramakrishna was the fourth child of a pious and humble parents, and he inherited the piety, simplicity and devotion to God of his parents. It is recorded in his biography that God *Gadadhara*<sup>1</sup> appeared in a dream before his father who had gone on pilgrimage and there he was told that the God would take birth as his son. Accordingly, Ramakrishna's pat name was *Gadadhara* in his childhood. As a boy, Ramakrishna used to sing and narrate stories from Hindu mythology and epics. He possessed supernatural power even from his childhood and had a keen intellect and wonderful memory. He was fond of painting and clay-modelling of Gods and Goddesses. He was sent to village primary school where he learnt reading and writing.

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1. A form of *Visnu* worshipped in Gaya.

The death of his father made a deep impression about the impermanence of worldly things in his mind at the age of seven. He used to listen to religious stories and visit the cremation ground frequently. He began to take great interest in the society of wandering monks. Though Ramakrishna was born and brought up in an orthodox Brahmin family, his mind was free from any prejudice against low caste. Ramakrishna started having '*bhāvāsamadhi*' (i.e. temporary loss of outer consciousness due to intensified emotion) even from his boyhood. This mystical experience occupied the later part of his life in diverse ways.

Ramakrishna was appointed as the priest of the temple of Goddess Kali in Dakshineswara near Calcutta. He got married at the age of twentynine at the wish of his mother. But even while living in the company of his wife he was free from any carnal desire and thus set an example of possibility of spiritual marriage. Ramakrishna looked upon every woman as the manifestation of Divine Mother and his own wife was no exception to it. At Dakshineswara Ramakrishna practised different paths of spiritual discipline of Hinduism such as Tantrika, Varisnava and Vedantic Sadhana successively and later on practised the spiritual discipline of Islam and Christianity and thus experienced the ideals of different religions. The underlying unity of different religions is manifested in life of Ramakrishna. He realised the essential truth of all religions and gave the message that "all religions are true". "As many faiths so many paths." Ramakrishna was neither a philosopher nor a religious reformer, nor did he preach a single system of Hindu religion. But as it is generally said the whole body of doctrines ranging from Puranic Polytheism to Vedantic monism can be found in his life.

Ramakrishna passed away in 1886, while he was in a state of *bhāvasamādhi*.

The nineteenth century India was passing through a very critical stage due to the religious and social reformation and political changes. The Hindu society was in confusion between their orthodox ideas and the opposition to idolatory and caste system by the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Christian theosophical movement.

In 1828 Brahmo Samaj was founded by Raja Ramnohan Roy who was well-versed in Christian and Islamic theology. He had the modern cosmopolitan outlook. Taking necessary materials from Hinduism he built up a unitarian faith basing its belief on the concept of the formless God. This movement brought various social reforms like abolition of caste system, emancipation of women, etc. It protested against various superstitions, child-marriage and Hindu orthodoxy. But from its very inception it was influenced by Western Christianity. The founder blended protestant Unitarianism with the Upanisadic creed. This movement affected the educated young generation and came on the way for large-scale conversion into Christianity.

As a contrast to this, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj came into existence to check the reform done by the Brahmo Samaj. Swami Dayananda—the founder of Arya Samaj was an eminent Vedic scholar and could not share the opinions of the Brahmo leaders who did not acknowledge the superiority of Veda, its divine origin and doctrine of rebirth. He translated and interpreted Vedas in his own light and gave no place to the absolute Brahman of the strict monist or dualist's God with various names and forms as the object of worship.

This movement also was accompanied by different social reforms like abolition of polygamy, caste system, etc. The monopoly of the Brahmins over the Vedas was denied. The

Samaj was engaged in various philanthropic activities including the spread of education liberation of women from various disabilities. Idolatry was replaced by Vedic sacrificial rites.

Along with the above movements another religious movement known as the theosophical movement also appeared on the scene. It was a mixture of Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism, Yoga techniques of the Hindus and modern spiritualism. It succeeded in making converts in the West and translated and published many Hindu scriptures.

These movements, however, appeared to the orthodox Hindu masses as a hotchpotch of western theology and Hindu rituals. They longed to retain the Hindu tradition in all its glory under the leadership of different Hindu saints and classical Vedic scholars (Pandits). So when Ramakrishna came with an all inclusive Vedantic view about religion, the Hindus felt a great relief. In his *sadhana* different aspects of Hindu religion found their due place and values.

Generally speaking, Vedas are the primary sources of Indian religion and philosophy. In spite of apparent polytheism in the Rig Veda, there is a faith in the One Real which is called by various names. Vedic monotheism took turn to monism in the age of Upanishads. Brahman—the Absolute and Ultimate Reality is conceived as both immanent and transcendent. The idea of *Satcidananda* (Reality-Consciousness-Bliss) is found in the Upanishads in an amorphous form. The goal of the Upanishads is the enlightened state in Brahman or Moksha (Release) from the empirical world, and this is to be gained through intuition (*prajñā*) and desireless meditation. The Upanisadic philosophy forms the basis of Vedanta, which in various ways dominates the life and culture of the Indian even today.

The most influential school of Vedanta, advocated by Sankara emphasised the transcendental aspect of Brahman as the only Reality, the world as an appearance. Worship of God is regarded as a step to the realisation, but the final salvation lies in the knowledge of identity of the individual soul and the Brahman. The other schools of Vedanta founded by Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha gave theistic interpretations of the Upanishads. They admit the personality of God and also advocated devotion as a necessary way for liberation.<sup>1</sup>

Vedantic thought is grounded in *Prasthanaya trayi-Sruti, Smriti* and *Tarka-Prasthanaya*. Thus Vedanta primarily means the Upanishads and secondarily, the Brahma-sutra and the Bhagvad-gita. Vedanta signifies both, a kind of philosophical discipline and religious and ethical practice. Ramakrishna meditated upon the Absolute Brahman successfully under the guidance of his spiritual teacher Totapuri—a monist.

In the Bhagvad Gita, different paths are prescribed, for God realisation. The path of devotion, knowledge and action—any of which can be chosen<sup>2</sup> by the aspirant according to his fitness. Action should be understood in the sense of duties to be performed in disinterested manner, and this performance of duties for the sake of duty leads the soul to its highest realisation.

From the teachings of Ramakrishna, Bhakti appears to be the easiest way for God-realisation. The paths of knowledge and action are hard to follow, and *bhakti* is the only way for a man who is not totally detached from the world and at the same time

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1. D.M. Dutta: Contemporary Philosophy (1961), p.565.

2. In the Bhagvad Gita much stress is given in the path of Bhakti e.g. as in the 12th Canto.

longs for God-realisation. Bhakti<sup>1</sup> or devotion is an attitude of love contemplated in Theism with the conception of a personal God. This religion of devotional love is also known as Bhagavata Dharma. Five forms of Bhakti are mentioned in the Bhagavata. These are *sānta* (peace), *dāsyā* (the attitude of a servant to his master), *sakhya* (attitude of friendship), *vatsalya* (the tender affection of parents) and *madhura* (intimacy between the lover and the beloved). Much stress is laid on the grace of God, and the doctrine of divine incarnation is also emphasised here. Ramakrishna practised all these above forms of Bhakti discipline.

The Alvir saints and other Vaisnāvites also emphasised the possibility of God-realisation with the doctrine and philosophy of love and devotion to God. Here also different emotional attitudes towards God are prescribed. God thus comes to be worshipped as Truth, Master, friend, child, lover and so on.

Sri Chaitanya revived Vaisnavism in Bengal in its fullest form with the conception of a personal God. Vaisnavism is a religion exclusively of Bhakti. Bhakti is described here as nature of pure bliss. According to Vaisnavism God-realisation is not possible through logic and reason.

The Upanisadic<sup>2</sup> literature, the Tantras, the Vaisnava literature along with the Christian and Sufi culture bear testimony to the success of the path of devotion. The path of Bhakti is described as the easiest way for God-realisation. The path of devotion assumes different forms according to the diversity of

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1. The word 'Bhakti' (Devotion) means a variety of emotional responses. In the Gita it means devotion and loyalty to Krishna, the personal God, Bhakti, in its initial stage means both the trustful faith and love. R.C. Zaehner has translated 'Bhakti' as 'loving devotion'.

2. In the Svetāśvetara Upanisad the doctrine of grace is emphasised. The Chhāndagya Upanisad teaches that a devotee of God becomes immortal.



psychical nature of the aspirants. In the Philosophy of devotion, dual nature of the supreme reality can be found. However, in the Visistādvaita of Ramanuja we find that Bhakti is not a bar to monistic thought of the Absolute. Total self surrender (prapatti) through Bhakti leads to the unitive consciousness.

The nature of bhakti may be described as intense love for God. It is through this loving devotion one can attain perfection. According to Bhagvad Gita this devotion should be unmotivated and free from desire. But Ramakrishna thought that it would not be possible for common people to achieve desireless, passion free-devotion. So he wanted the desires should be diverted Godwards instead of directing towards the material objects. Over and above, he emphasised that if devotion could be enlightened by knowledge than it would be best of all. In the Bhagvad Gita also we find that a wise devotee is dearer to God.<sup>1</sup> One should not think that the path of devotion leads to inaction. Rather Gita preaches that action should be directed and dedicated to God. In the life of Ramakrishna one finds that *Jnana* and *bhakti* were integrated together in the experience of the Supreme.

The path of knowledge helps an aspirant to discriminate between the real and the unreal, between the eternal and non-eternal. In the path of knowledge three stages are prescribed for realisation. These are *sravana* (listening about God), *manana* (meditating upon the teaching) and *nididhyāsana* (contemplation). These three constitute the direct encounter with Karma and Jnana-knowledge and action are combined in devotion. Thus Bhakti is a synthetic experience. Worship as a form of Bhakti presupposes a definite conception of reality.

Along with Vaisnavism other religious sects, mainly Saivism

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1. The Gita. VIII.7.

and Saktism were also prominent during Ramakrishna's life. The Sakti cult or the worship of the form of mother-Goddess attained a great importance basing its belief in Sankhya Cosmology. Purusa and Prakriti were identified here with *Siva* and *Sakti*. Sakta and Tantrika doctrine hold that the absolute is associated with the dynamic principle for the origination of the Universe.<sup>1</sup> The Tantrika method is a combination of Yoga and Karma and is also characterised by rituals. There are several sects of Sakti cult like Kapālika, Aghora, etc. each of which encourages performance of ritual as a qualification for the transition to a higher sphere. In this context it may be mentioned that, though Ramakrishna did not belong to any of these sects particularly, yet he had to pass through all the conditions prescribed in the sixtyfour Tantras.<sup>2</sup>

In the Tantrika Sadhana, the devotee is to meditate on his oneness with the formless Absolute, and then to think that out of the formless impersonal God emerges both as his own self and the form of a goddess whom he is to place before him through imagination, and worship as the divine mother.

The Tantrika rites place before the devotee objects of sense-enjoyment and then require him to deify these and gradually to sublimate these by the love of God. The devotee is to curb his carnal desires in the presence of opposite sex which is also a part of Tantrika rites. Here the aspirant is to look at the women as sacred manifestation of Divine Mother and thus by conquering flesh, he is to keep his mind ready for spiritual realisation.<sup>3</sup>

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1. R.C.Mazumdar : *Evolution of Religious Philosophic Culture in India in Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. IV (1956), p.52.

2. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 195.

There is a reference to sixtyfour Tantras in Sankara's *Saundarya Lahari*.

3. Swami Nirvedananda 'Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance', pp. 667-68.

In course of Tantrika Sadhana, the dormant spiritual power (Kundalini Sakti) was awakened in Ramakrisna and he successfully completed the sadhana in heroic attitude (Vira Bhava). Divine forms of various types appeared in his vision during the Tantrika practice.<sup>1</sup>

Sufism and Christian mysticism also influenced Ramakrisna's spiritual life. Sufism which is taken for Islamic mysticism has admitted the immanence of God. It represents the esoteric doctrine of Prophet Muhammad. Sufi doctrine in its advanced form resembles Vedanta. The Sufis believed in the essential unity of all religions, transmigration and eternity of soul and immanence of God. God is regarded as pure being and absolute Beauty. They believe that seventy thousand Veils hide the absolute omnipresent God and a Sufi in his journey along the inward path of self realisation tears off these veils and identifies the self with God. Purification, devotion and deification are the three main stages for this realisation.<sup>2</sup> Self surrender to the will of God appears to be the cardinal feature of Sufism. It seems, sufism is nearer to theistic mysticism than prophetic mysticism, because intense love and devotion are regarded as its means.

Similarly the very foundation of Christ's religion is mystical. Preaching of Christ's mysticism is both theistic and Prophetic. The centre of preaching is the fatherhood of God. Christianity had both a direct and indirect influence on the development of the religions of Hindu, Muslim and Parsis. The Christian doctrine of the love of God, which is a necessary element in the fatherhood, passed into the preaching of Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and also influenced other religious movements.<sup>3</sup> One could go on with elaborations but as the

1. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 200.

2. Hiralal Chopra: 'Sufism' in the *Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. iv, p.594.

3. J.N. Farkuhar: *Modern Religious Movement in India* (1967), p. 433.

mystical tradition is vast, I have discussed mysticism only in the context of Ramakrishna's life in this thesis. His life affords a constructive case-study for an analysis of mystical experience. At the different course of his sadhana, he attained different spiritual experience.

## CHAPTER II

The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics uses the word mysticism in two different senses. Firstly, it stands for the cult of the supernatural, for a theosophical pursuit and for a spiritualistic exploration of psychical research. This sense of mysticism is very often misunderstood and sometimes confused with occultism, magic and different types of obscurantism. Secondly, it stands for immediate experience of souls' possible union and relationship with Absolute Reality. Mystical experience in this sense is primarily a psychological phenomena and is marked by the emergence of a type of consciousness which is not clearly differentiated into a subject object state. Here the individual soul feels invaded, vitalised with new energy, merged with an enfolding presence, liberated and exalted with a sense of having found what it has always sought. In the narrower sense, mysticism means a doctrine of union with the Absolute. In the broader sense, religious mysticism is an intuitive, ecstatic union with the deity obtained by means of contemplation and other mental exercise. The mysticism of Christianity, Islam and the Bhagvad Gita is of this type. It is a personal, intuitive immediate and non-discursive relationship. But in Neo-Platonism and vedanta this relation is impersonal.<sup>1</sup>

However, for my study I shall use only the narrower sense of mysticism. I shall accept the use of the term to explain the merging of one's own being into something which is vast and often beyond human conception of divinity. It should be noted that mystical experience must

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1. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol.9, pp. 83-85.

involve (1) a numinous feeling and (2) a corresponding objective realm. The content of mystical experience, of course may differ from person to person and from race to race. The various mystical visions of Ramakrishna satisfy the minimum requirement. He himself stressed that the content of vision has not got to be necessarily of one type but could be or rather should be of various Gods and Goddesses corresponding to the Deities of different religions. Ramakrishna had innumerable mystical experiences throughout his life. I will take only a few important experiences for analysis and interpretation.

The first recorded vision<sup>1</sup> of Ramakrishna is very much close to aesthetic experience. At that time Ramakrishna was six or seven years old. He was walking through the corn fields carrying some parched rice in a small basket. Looking at the sky overhead, he saw that the sky is covered with black rain cloud, and across this black cloud a flock of milk-white cranes flew. The beauty of the contrast made him absorbed in an extraordinary mood, and he lost all external consciousness.<sup>2</sup> The first vision changed the entire life of Ramakrishna. In the lives of most of the mystics normally the vision comes after a long preparation like rigorous disciplines, deep meditation, etc. But in case of Ramakrishna the experience was spontaneous without any prior preparation.

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1. The word 'vision' can be used to mean all sorts of mystical experiences—visual, auditory, tactile, or smell, taste, even loco-motor sensation. This experience is super sensuous, because mystics had vision even with closed eyes. As it is said even the blind can see God and his words are heard by the deaf. In case of Ramakrishna it is to be noted that he not only has seen God or heard his voice but felt the personal touch of Divine mother.

2. Saradananda: *Ramakrishna the Great Master* (1952), p.101.

There is another important instance of Ramakrishna's mystical experience at the age of eight. Ramakrishna went to visit the temple of Goddess *Visalakshi*<sup>1</sup> accompanied by a party of village women. They had to walk about two miles. While proceeding, he was singing devotional songs all along. Suddenly he stopped singing, the limbs became stiff and tears began to flow. Thinking, that was due to the summer heat the women began to nurse him accordingly but in vain. When they began to repeat the name of the Goddess for help, Ramakrishna regained his consciousness and normal behaviour.<sup>2</sup> (Since the details are not available, it is presumed that it was the first vision of the Divine Mother whom he started to worship later on). There is another recorded experience of Ramakrishna in his boyhood, which was also without any effort on his part. Ramakrishna was asked to play the role of Siva. He was dressed accordingly. But on the stage he stood motionless and lost himself completely in the divine glory of God. He regained normal consciousness only on the following day.<sup>3</sup> Ramakrishna later categorised this state as a state of *Samādhi*. Since *Samādhi* or ecstatic trance is common to all mystics and aspirants, I feel it will be useful to narrate its essential characteristics for my study. The ecstatic trance is the highest kind of mystical experience. Since the consciousness of a 'beyond' or transcendence is the aim of all the mystics of different religions, the Upanisads, the Gita, the Bible, the Sufi literature and other scriptural instructions insisted upon this mystical trance as the end of Samadhi. At this moment the aspirant gets a sudden flash of light revealing the fulfilment of life.

The experience of *Samādhi* or Divine ecstasy or the experience of cosmic consciousness are different terms denoting

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1. A form of Mother Goddess.

2. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, pp. 103-4.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

the same experience. Samadhi is described as,

“Consummation of all action and feeling. It is a state where the question of Knowledge and ignorance does not arise. A stage comes when the Sadhaka realises that he is one with the object of contemplation. From that plane he may again come back to the ordinary level of self consciousness. This type of Samadhi also must be transcended. The ultimate state, being unparalleled cannot be explained or expressed in any language. It is solely a matter of direct experience.”<sup>1</sup>

Sāmadhi literally means “to direct together”. It is a blissful superconscious state in which a Yogi perceives the identity of the individualised soul and cosmic spirit.<sup>2</sup> In the lives of many aspirants we find that Samadhi is the culmination of their divine search. To have the experience of Samadhi, the aspirant is to discipline himself with Yogic practices. When ‘Consciousness is enlarged by Yoga practice and devotion, one can absorb the liberating shock of omnipresence’.<sup>3</sup>

Describing the state of Samadhi the Gita says— ‘the yogi released from the sins and evils of the world, with his mind resting in contemplation enjoys with ease the bliss springing out of his contact with Brahma’.<sup>4</sup> In this state, one is unconscious of the body, but is conscious of the divine presence in his inner being.

Withdrawal, concentration, meditation and contemplation are linked with one another, each step leading to the other. From our daily psychological experience it can be assumed that after

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1. Shyamanand Banerjee: *A Mystic Sage Ma Ananadamayi* (1973), p.112.

2. Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1977), p.144.

3. Yogananda, *Op.cit.*, p.144.

4. Gita, 6:28.



concentrating upon an object or a thought we enter into it, become engrossed with and lost into it, unconscious of our existence. This state of awakened consciousness which is attained by entering into the super conscious is called *samādhi*.

In the Yoga system of Indian philosophy, Pantajali (IIInd century B.C.) has prescribed a way to attain perfection through the control of physical and psychical element of human nature. It is a system of practical discipline and a spiritual exercise which helps to conquer and sublimate the desire. The system of Yoga has given the eightfold method of (1) *Yama* or moral conduct, (2) *niyama* or religious observance, (3) *āsana* or posture, (4) *Pranayāmā* or breath control, (5) withdrawal of the senses from external objects or *Pratyāhāra*, (6) *dhāraṇa* or concentration, (7) *dhyāna* or meditation and (8) *samādhi* or super conscious experience.

Each system of yoga ultimately aims at renunciation. A karma-yogi renounces the fruits of his actions. The Bhakti-yogi sacrifices individual love and emotion to the Supreme. And the Jñānayogi surrenders his individuality and merge into the Absolute.<sup>1</sup>

*Samādhi* is also spoken as *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa*. In *savikalpa samādhi* the devotee retains a slight feeling of separateness from God, but in *nirvikalpa samādhi* he realises fully his identity as spirit.<sup>2</sup> *Nirvikalpa samādhi* takes one beyond normal psychical life and it is here that one passes into the realm of mysticism. The catholic theologians divide this experience into three states: the way of purgation, the way of illumination and the way of union. The sufi mystics describe it as a journey of

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1. Satyabrata Siddhanta Talankar, *Heritage of Vedic Culture* (1969), p. 321.

2. Yogananda, *Op.cit.*, p.238.

the mystics through seven valleys. Therefore two stages in *Samadhi*, namely *Samprajnata* and *asamprajnata*. In the first stage, mind takes up various aspects of *prakriti* for communion. In this stage consciousness of individuality still remains. In the second stage there is no substratum for meditation and the individuality is completely lost. This is the highest stage of *patanjalayoga*.

From the discourses of Ramakrishna we find another type of *samādhi* which is known as *Bhava samadhi*.<sup>1</sup> In the *Bhava samadhi* there is a relation of identity between *Savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa samadhi*. The Divine form is manifested everywhere as seen by the inner eye. This is the result of following the path of devotion. *Nirvikalpa Samadhi*, according to Ramakrishna, follows from the path of knowledge. During the Sadhana in the vedantic tradition Ramakrishna experienced *nirvikalpa samādhi* in various degrees.

Through mystical experience are of various types and described as supersensuous, I want to state that such experiences, though subjective in nature, have objective reality. From the recorded experiences of Ramakrishna, and the mystics of other religions, it appears that mystical experiences have common characteristics referring to an underlying unity. This underlying unity is the reality with which the mystics identify themselves. This experience is sometimes the experience of 'one' with whom the mystics merge with (as St. Theresa) and sometimes feel as the presence of 'another'. As in case of Ramakrishna, after his first vision he began to see another person with himself.<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Bhava samādhi* is translated also as 'ecstasy in which the devotee retains his ego and enjoy communion with the personal God'. It also means inhibition of the mind due to excess of devotional feeling—Sobharani Basu, *Modern Indian Mysticism*, Vol. III, p. 146.

2. Nihilananda: *Gospel of Ramakrishna* (1974), p. 891.

According to R.C. Zaehner there are three types of mystical experience. Firstly, there is (1) nature mysticism which sees the human self as encompassing all nature; and the subjective 'I' is merged into the Cosmic All and there is no distinction between subject and object. (2) Secondly, there is mysticism of 'isolation' —the isolation of the soul from all that has its being in space and time, and (3) Lastly there is mysticism of the love of God in an ecstasy of eternal love.<sup>1</sup>

In the experience of Ramakrisna, the first and the third type is pre-dominant though there are instances of experience of the second category also. But Zaehner has described Ramakrisna purely as a nature mystic. The common experience of the nature mystics, according to him, is to see all beings in the self and the self in all beings and the intuitive vision of the interpretation and reconciliation of all things.

Zaehner has described the experience of cosmic consciousness as the common experience of nature mystics.<sup>2</sup> Mystical consciousness transcends all barriers of space, time, culture and Cosmic consciousness appears to be the appropriate word to avoid contradiction and conflict in religious experience. This can be illustrated with an instance of the experience of cosmic consciousness from Ramakrisna's life. At the age of sixteen Ramakrisna came to Calcutta to perform the worship in the temple. During those days Ramakrisna wanted to have vision of Divine Mother. He became restless to have the vision, and failing which he wanted to commit suicide. He took the sword

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1. R.C. Zaehner: *Concordant Discord* (1970), p. 59.

2. Richard Maurice Bucke used the phrase 'Cosmic Consciousness' in his book named on the same (New York, 1901). He identifies mysticism with all its manifestations with the word 'Cosmic Consciousness' vide, R.C. Zaehner, *'Concordant Discord'*, p. 41.

of the temple when suddenly he had the wonderful vision of the Divine Mother. On another occasion, he himself described the above vision. He said,

"It was as if houses, doors, temples and all other things vanished altogether; as if there was nothing anywhere; And what I saw was a boundless infinite conscious sea of light; However far and in whatever direction I looked, I found a continuous succession of effulgent waves coming forward, raging and storming from all sides with a great speed. Very soon they fell on me and made me sink to the unknown bottom. I panted, struggled, and fell unconscious."<sup>1</sup>

Ramakrishna is described as nature mystic because he used to have visions of God through the veil of nature. He used to see God manifesting Himself primarily, through nature as well as charity and grace. He also explained creation in terms of love.<sup>2</sup> In this respect Ramakrishna's experience is nearer to Christian mysticisms. Again practice of Vedanta made his mind to live in the non-dual plane of consciousness. He could identify himself with the things and persons without any effort. I shall illustrate this with the help of two instances as recorded in his biography by Swami Saradananda:

- (1) At that time Ramakrishna had completed his Sadhana according to Vedantic course. Then he took the initiation from a Sufi and deeded the practice of Islam. One day Ramakrishna was looking at the newly grown Durva Grass (a kind of ingredient necessary for worship) of the Kali temple. While he was looking at it, the master transcended the normal consciousness and was feeling

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1. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p.141.

2. R.C. Zaehner, *'Mysticism Sacred and Profane'* (1971), pp.133-34.

identified with that spot when a man just happened to walk across that field at which he became very restless, feeling unbearable pain in his chest. He was feeling pain which is felt when anybody tramples on one's chest.<sup>1</sup>

- (2) On another occasion, while in the bhāve samadhi, Ramakrisna was looking at the Ganga. Two boat men were quarrelling over some matter. Gradually the quarrel became bitter and the stronger man slapped the weaker on his back. At the sametime Ramakrisna cried out suddenly with pain and his nephew saw a red swollen mark on his back.<sup>2</sup>

In the mystical experience of Ramakrisna there is evidence of 'mysticism of isolation'. He would enter in such a state of trance (*asamprajnata Samadhi*), when he was found losing all contact with the outer world and even with his own body. When Ramakrisna was in *nirvikalpa samadhi* for six months there was complete cessation of I consciousness. During that period the symptoms of death appeared in his body.<sup>3</sup>

It appears that mystical state is also a state of mind, and to distinguish it from other states of mind some have described it as a state of contemplation. The word contemplation has several meanings. The mystics themselves described it as "the ineffable perception of God", "Indwelling presence within us" and as "the direct apprehension of God". But it should be remembered that all these accounts are introspective statements of the mystics. During the mystical contemplation, the voluntary control over the mind seems frequently absent. Contemplation may begin or

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1. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, pp. 261-62.

2. *Ibid.*, p.162.

3. *Ibid.*, p.359.

end without any effort from the part of the mystic and sometimes occur unexpectedly.<sup>1</sup>

Mysticism generally contains three interconnected elements. (1) an experience, (2) an awareness and (3) a state of being.<sup>2</sup> Experiences occur in the life of mystics at a certain time with certain duration, though it transcends our ordinary conception of spatiotemporal relation. In case of Ramakrisna experiences of both, short and long duration can be found.<sup>3</sup>

Awareness is another element of mysticism. This awareness may be of a form of enlightenment, revelation, realisation or inward wisdom (as St. John of the Cross referred it) or Supreme Knowledge (as in the Upanisads). This element can be found in all religious mysticism in some form or the other.

Similarly, mystical experience is also a state of being. Every mystic agrees that a feeling of detachment and indifference from worldly things is necessary for progress in inner life.<sup>4</sup> This detachment is described in different terms as 'egolessness' (by Ramakrisna) denying the self (in case of Buddha), overcoming the conflicts etc. Thus detachment in any form is a state of being and a way of the mystic life.

Almost all the mystics have described mystical experience as beyond description in term of ordinary language. Besides, this ineffability, William James has given three other marks of

1. Thoules Robert H., *The Psychology of Religion*, (1961), pp. 226-27.
2. J. Kellenberzer, 'Mysticism and Drugs' — *Journal of Religious Studies*, June 1978, p.175.
3. Saradananda wrote, "in some cases He was conscious about the outer world and again he was in the state of trance for a period of six months," p.385.
4. R.C. Zaehner, 'Mysticism Sacted Profane' (1971), pp.172-73.

mysticism. These are (a) noetic quality, (b) transiency and (c) passivity.<sup>1</sup> William James regards mystical state as ineffable because it is a state which resembles the feeling state of mind which is ineffable. It is ineffable also in the sense that it transcends all our concepts.

By the above characteristics mystical consciousness can be marked and since the state is different from other mental states James likes to classify the state as mystical. According to the varieties of individual mind types of experience vary. According to W. James, visual and auditory hallucination, some such wonder as levitation, healing of diseases, etc. though have resemblance with mystical experience but have no mystical significance. Because consciousness of illumination which is an essential mark of mystical state is absent in the above cases. Visions of the future, the reading of hearts, the sudden understanding of the text, knowledge of distant events are important mystical ways for communication.<sup>2</sup>

In the experience of Ramakrishna these important marks of mysticism can be noticed. He had the vision of my future events. Though he had no formal education, yet he could realise the basic truth of the scriptures.

One could shrug aside mystical experiences as part of what the psychologists call false perception, hallucination, etc. Indeed some have actually viewed Ramakrishna as suffering from nervous disorder.

Sometimes, his visions are interpreted as hallucination. This may be due to the fact that psychiatry and clinical neurology

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1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1958), pp.292-93.

2. William James, *Op.cit.*, pp. 313-14.

believe that there cannot be a perceptual impression when a corresponding external stimulus is lacking. And since a hallucination also, like a mystical vision, can be auditory, visual or olfactory, it is necessary to distinguish between a hallucination and mystical vision. A hallucination is, in the opinion of psychiatrists a symbol of repressed wishes and reveals emotional conflict. It is a manifestation of psychic depression which is due to environmental crisis such as loss of beloved ones, serious disease, disappointment, etc.<sup>1</sup> There is no such record which could show Ramakrishna had any such repression. Another point of difference between a hallucination and a mystical vision is such that sometimes a person suffering from visual or auditory hallucination feels shy and tries to hide them, whereas the mystic feels proud of his visions and narrates them for the benefits of others. In many cases, hallucinations are merely subjective fancies and are not common even between two persons. But mystics belonging to different cultures may have the same type of vision. Again, a hallucinatory person cannot induce hallucination into another.<sup>2</sup> But a disciple can learn to have vision from another mystic. (As Vivekanand had visions with the help of Ramakrishna.)

As said earlier, in a genuine spiritual experience there is always the support of intuition. Intuition is the medium for mystical experience. It appears generally when the mind is calm and specially during meditation. Of course, there are some common symptoms both mystical experience and in case of hallucination such as trembling with fear, being overpowered by the majesty of the vision and some other physical changes. But to overcome those symptoms a mystic does not require any control or psychiatric treatment. Again by the influence of mystical vision, the entire outlook of a man may be changed,

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1. V.H. Date, *The Yoga of the Saints* (1974), pp.167-68.

2. V.H. Date, *Op.cit.*, pp. 69-70.



which is not be even a remote possible effect of hallucination.

Some regard mystical experience merely as a neurotic condition. But no neurotic state can accomplish a harmony and equilibrium which can be effected by the spiritual experience. Moreover spiritual experience can dominate over us, and remove the conflict regarding the moral questions. It is spontaneous and unlike other psychical states it can control the inner nature.<sup>1</sup>

Mystical vision in its higher stage, has a sense of revelation which cannot be compared with sense-perception. In the mystical ecstasy, the complexity of the universe is gotten rid off and all doubts are resolved and the whole personality of the individual is transformed into cheerfulness and blessedness.<sup>2</sup>

In the mystical vision, the conflict between knowledge and devotion may be resolved. Since it is a form of intuition, here all dualities vanish. Thus, it appears that when Ramakrisna spoke about the 'vision', his mind still remained on the relative plane, since vision is a mode of thinking—still an activity of mind. It is only in the experience of Samadhi—which is a cessation of all modifications of mind that the mystics have a glimpse of reality. A study of Ramakrisna's mystical life makes one acquainted with both types of experience—vision and samadhi.

Thus the mystical life of Ramakrisna can be studied as (1) a type of experience, and (2) as a state of consciousness. He was in continuous union with the one whom he called as Divine Mother. Whatever he experienced he felt it as the expression of the same Divine Mother. This may be regarded as his experience. On many occasions, he spoke about his oneness with the Mother.<sup>3</sup>

1. S.N.Das Gupta, *Religion and Rational Outlook* (1954), p.313.

2. Ibid., p.288.

3. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 387.

There are recorded accounts of mystics who are said to have prepared themselves to get visions. But there are visions, especially in the early life of Ramakrishna where there was no prior preparation, not even any desire to have such visions. An explanation of such peculiar happenings in Ramakrishna's life may be found in the Indian doctrine of Samskaras with the adjacent doctrines of Atman and the law of Karma or predestination. The system of Samskaras or impressions is the keynote for the making a man. A man is what the Samskaras make him. Those who believe in previous birth and rebirth also believe in samskaras. Samskaras whether good or bad are accumulated through previous, present and the next life which in their totality make up the personality of the individual.

In Indian philosophy the nature of self is described as eternal and spiritual substance. It is both birthless and deathless. It resides in the body while the body is living at the same time it transcends it. The Upanishads described the five sheaths (*kosas*) of the body through the medium of which the self acts and expresses itself.<sup>1</sup> The outermost cover or sheath is known as '*Annamaya kosa*' or the sheath of matter which depends on food. Below this, lies the *Pranamaya Kosa* or the sheath of life. *Manamaya Kosa* or the sheath of conscious activity comes next. The fourth sheath is known as *Vijanamaya Kosa* or the sheath of intelligence or impressions and the fifth sheath is *Anandamaya kosa* or the sheath of bliss.

So far as the individual is concerned, *annamaya kosa* is his physical body; *Pranamaya Kosa* consists of five organs of actions and the five *Pranas*; *manamaya* consists of '*manas*' (mind) and the five sense organs; *vijananamaya kosa* consists of *buddhi* or intelligence and five sense organs; and *ananda maya*

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1. *Taittiriya Upanisad*.

*kosa* consists of individual's experience of bliss which can be exemplified by deepsleep. These are, the five levels of reality that have to be transcended in order to realise the Atman. These sheaths are known as *Kosas* because Atman is supposed to envelop itself by them.

Death means the cessation of the functions of the first three sheaths. But this does not mean the end of life. Life remains expressing itself through *Vijnanamaya* and *anandamaya kosa* which are too subtle forms to perceive.

According to the law of Karma the present life is the product of the past. It is due to the pressure of the past that one acts in the present. The tendency of the past is also known as *Vāsana* in the Vedanta. *Vāsana* means fragrance—the fragrance of what we have done and thought of. Whatever we do, and whatever we think of, they all leave impressions on us, they pressurise us to repeat ourselves.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the past pressure can be eliminated if one desires by culture, meditation and prayer.

The word Karma which literally means 'deed' and 'action' is an adjunct in Indian religious thought to the doctrine of reincarnation. In one form or other it is part of the beliefs of Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Ninian Smart holds that, according to the law of Karma, the actions of living beings are regarded as having a special class of causal effects which determine his future spiritual condition, both in this life and in the succeeding ones. These effects are known as the "fruits" of the action.<sup>2</sup> In the Gita it is stated that "It is nature that leads to action;<sup>3</sup> and everyone is made to act by impulse born of nature."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Swami Chinmayananda, *Sunday*, Vol. 9, Dec. 20, 1981, p.18.

2. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. 3 & 4, pp. 325-26.

3. Gita 5:14.

4. Ibid., 3:5.

Good deeds lead to the progress toward liberation, bad ones, to regress from the goal. Usually, caste status, diseases, prosperity, and so forth are thought to be the consequences of actions in previous lives. Thus Karma is an ethically oriented causal law.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the doctrine of reincarnation which is also known as transmigration of soul or rebirth has been and continues to be widely believed. The *Samkhya* school of Indian thought holds that the mental aspect of a person bears the impression of previous deeds (*karma*) and that it accordingly becomes associated with a particular fetus. But since during the fetal development the growing body is not capable of supporting the mental aspect, a "subtle" (unobservedly refined) body is postulated. Thus the continuous element throughout rebirth and until liberation is that mental aspect associated with the subtle body.<sup>2</sup>

The doctrine of Karma thus admits that man is partially a product of the past deeds and certain inborn inclination which influence his thought, action and destiny. The doctrine does not deny the influence and continuity of the past life, since it obviously believes in reincarnation and previous deeds.<sup>3</sup>

It is also stated that actions done by the gross body and in the empirical self exists in a subtle form in the name of *Samakaras* or impressions in the sheath of *vijnanamaya kosa*. And when the self takes a new body leaving its worn up body, the same *vijnanamaya* and *anandamaya kosa* enters in the new body with all its impressions of previous life. This idea can be further explained by taking the analogy of dream. Dreams are due to

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1. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. 3 & 4, p. 326.

2. Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Vol. 7 & 8, p.122.

3. This idea of Indian Psychology can be supported by modern science. According to the laws of conservation of matter and conservation of energy, there cannot be total annihilation of matter and energy.

impressions left by experience of waking life. But one is not conscious of the impressions as impressions. Similarly, every action in life leaves behind an impression or mark on the mind. Vivekananda translated the term *Samskara* in English as 'inherent tendency',<sup>1</sup> and also used the word impression. The successive action which is similar to previous action deepens this impression which assumes the form of inherent inclination. Vivekananda also said 'every wave that rises in the mind, when it subsides, does not die out entirely, but leaves a mark and a future possibility of that wave coming again. This mark with the possibility of the wave reappearing is what is called "*Samskara*."<sup>2</sup> Thus, samskaras are the root of all actions in life.

Thus coming back to the original problem, it can be said that Ramakrishna's visions in his early days (before he became the priest and started sadhana) were due to the *Samskaras* of his previous birth. Some of his later visions he wanted to have, and some came spontaneously without prior preparation. Ramakrishna himself had belief in Samskaras<sup>3</sup> karma and rebirth.

According to empirical psychology and the psychoanalyst of the modern period, there are three levels of consciousness, viz., the conscious, subconscious and the unconscious. Mystical visions may be said to have their origin partly in the subconscious level and partly in the unconscious level of the mind. These can be compared with the *vijnanamaya kosa* and *ananda maya kosa* of the soul from the point of view of Indian psychology as discussed earlier. But to compare the *vijnanamaya kosa* and *ananda maya kosa* only with the unconscious level of mind seems to be superficial. All the facts about the mystical

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1. Complete Works of Vivekananda, Vol. 1, p.52.

2. Ibid., p. 52.

3. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, pp. 361, 405.

experience cannot be explained on the basis of Freudian approach. There is a possibility of existence of a higher mind besides these three levels of mind which modern psychology has ignored. As to the source of mystical experience a super conscious state of mind must be admitted. This super conscious level can be adequately compared with the last two *Kosas* which is the source of intuition. Through the integration of conscious and unconscious state mind reaches to a super conscious state from which higher experiences follow. The super conscious experiences are identical with mystical experiences. According to Evelyn Underhill the sure test of super conscious state is the acquisition of profound insight into heart of things. This intuitive insight comes from the superconscious level of mind which is higher than all other levels and transcends normal consciousness.

According to Indian psychology the word intuition is used as “*Aparoksoanubhuti*” (direct experience). This direct experience has always been considered of vital importance right from the days of vedas.<sup>1</sup>

In mystical experience, mystics use the senses, imagination, memory, intellect, etc. but they are of different order than those used in the case of ordinary perception. The place of the intuition may be pointed out at the bottom of the intellect and at the top of imagination and memory level of mind. Varieties of experience came from the deep sea of intuition. It seems that mystical experience comes from the power of integration, intensification and deepening of the experience. Since mystical experience comes from the subconscious and unconscious level of mind, it expresses itself through symbols, analogies and mystic poems. Every mystic initially takes the help of symbols like religious dogmas, ceremonials, rites, image-worship, etc. to receive spiritual

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1. I.P. Sachdeva, *Yoga and Depth Psychology* (1978), p. 175.

illumination. Once the advancement is made in the spiritual paths, the mystic realises the limitations and imperfection of the symbols. In the later life of Ramakrishna, there is no record of his worshipping and performing any religious rituals.

Thus it may be said that mystical experience is the experience of transcendence which is an essential fact about all religions. Intuition is the medium through which spiritual facts reveal themselves to the mystics. Hence I have used the word revelation as the meaning of intuition, though it is used in different senses. The report of mystical experience comes only through introspection. Of course, mystics show some physical changes when they have some vision. Mysticism can also be described as emotional response towards spirituality. Though a genuine mystical experience is same for all mystics yet personal tradition, temperament, inclination and above all impressions (*samakarās*) change the colour of such experience.

Therefore, it can be asserted that mystical state is essentially a state of mind, and it is a superior state in the sense that it gives an experience of realisation which other states of mind, like sense-perception cannot attain.

To show the possibility of mystical experience let me take some criteria which are taken to test the sense experience for the sake of convenience. These criteria may be called as objectivity, universality and necessity.<sup>1</sup> It is objective not in the sense that observation and experiment can test it, as it does in case of scientific object. The methodology of application of such criteria is different from methodology of experimental science. It is independent of subjective ideas and different from various subjective, hallucination neurotic disease as already discussed.

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1. K.V. Gajendragadkar, 'The Maharashtra Saints and Their Teachings: in the *Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. iv, p. 361.

It is manifested primarily through superconscious state with the help of intuition. It is evident from Ramakrishna's mystical experience that a mystic sees God as real as we see the phenomenal world. The difference is that a mystic's knowledge of God is direct and intuitive whereas our knowledge of the world is sensuous and discursive. Our knowledge of phenomenal world is grounded on subject-object duality, whereas mystical experience is unitive and transcends the subject-object relation. Intuition is, however, present in all men and not a special faculty of the mystics' mind. In case of a mystic the same faculty intuition works from a higher plane—through practice and by the grace of God (as the case may be). Thus, all mystical experiences are intuitive, but all intuitive experiences are not mystical.



### CHAPTER III

An outstanding feature of Ramakrishna's philosophy is his acceptance not only of equality of all religions but more seriously of an active harmony of all faiths. He harmonised not only the different religions but also synthesised the paths of *Karma Jñāna* and *Bhakti*, the *Tantrika*, *Vedantic* and Vaisnava cults of Hinduism. Moreover, he reconciled the two opposite views of the worship of idols on the one hand and that of meditation of formless Absolute, on the other, the life of a householder devotee and the life of world renouncing Yogi, for he did not find any anatagonism between this world and the other world.

What I shall insist in my thesis is the point that Ramakrishna could undertake such an attitude to religions mainly because of his *Vedantic* background and it was the same *Vedantic* attitude that enabled him to look upon all the different faiths as the different roads leading to the same goal. His thoughts and ideas centred around the Vedantic doctrine of Unity in variety.

The *Tantrika* spiritual discipline which is essentially based on the performance of rituals made Ramakrishna realise the utility of the path of Karma. After that he undertook the practice of *Vaisnavism* which is essentially a path of devotion. In both the *Sadhanas* he attained the goal, that is the highest spiritual realisation. He had many mystical visions during the practice of *Tantrika* and *Vaisnava Sadhana*. Later, he got himself initiated in the monastic life as prescribed by *Vedanta*, and was acquainted with the Upanishadic Teaching of the identity between Atman and Brahman and experienced the *nirvikalpa samadhi* and knowledge of the non-dual, unitary consciousness.

He did not distinguish between *Vedantic Brahman* and *Tantrika Sakti*. So also he felt the identity between *Purusa* of *Samkhya* and Absolute of *Vedanta*. The inactive principle is called *Purusa* or *Brahman*. The *prakriti* or the *Sakti* is the active principle—the cause of creation. To clarify the idea of identity between *Brahman* and *Sakti* he used to say—thus *Brahman* and *Sakti* are identical. If you accept the one you must accept the other. Their relation can be illustrated with the analogy of fire and its power to burn. You cannot think of fire without its power to burn. You cannot conceive the sun's rays without the sun, nor can you conceive of the sun without its rays.

Ramakrisna admitted the power of *Prakriti* which is creation, preservation and destruction. This power, he termed as *Kali*. For him Reality is one and the same; the difference is only in name and form. In this connection I may quote Ramakrisna—

“It is like water, called in different languages by different names, such as ‘Jal’, ‘pani’, and so forth. There are three four ghats\* on a lake. The Hindus who drink water in one place, call it ‘jal’ the Muslim at another place call it ‘pani’. And the English at a third place call it ‘water’. All three denote one and the same thing, the difference being in the name only. In the same way, some address the Reality as ‘Allah’, some as ‘God’, some as ‘Brahman’, some as ‘Kali’ and others by such name as ‘Rama’, ‘Jesus’, ‘Durga’.”<sup>1</sup>

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\*Ghat is a Bengali word means steps to a river.

1. The Gospel of Ramakrisna (1974), p. 64.

Like other *vedantists* he did not distinguish among monism,<sup>1</sup> dualism<sup>2</sup> and qualified non-dualism.<sup>3</sup> To him they are complementary steps, not at all contradictory. He realised the fact that non-dualistic (*Advaita*) *sadhana* is not possible for everybody. Moreover, he has a fascination for personal God and never considered the phenomenal world as illusion.

He reconciled the two views of *Advaita Vedanta*, one which regarded the world as illusion and the other which granted its oneness with God. By his own empirical observation and spiritual intuition he felt the necessity of image worship as a step towards realisation. Let me take the following argument of Ramakrishna in this connection:

“It is true that he is with forms and it is equally true that he is without form, who knows what else he is besides these? Do you know how God with forms is? Just like water and ice. By freezing, water becomes ice; ice is water inside as well as outside. Water has no form but ice has. Similarly

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1. The Schools of Vedanta differ regarding the nature of the relation between the self and God or Brahman. Sankara holds that the two are absolutely identical, this view is known as monism (*Advaita*). According to him Brahman is the only reality and is beyond all discrimination and hence indeterminate and attributeless. There are many other views, each specifying a particular types of identity (*abheda*), difference (*bheda*) or identity in difference (*bhedabheda*) between the self and God, etc.

2. Dualism (*Dvaita*) arose as a reaction against *Advaita* and *Visistadvaita* by *Madhva*. He regarded the supremacy of Brahman can be preserved only by granting the absolute difference between the world and souls and Brahman.

3. *Ramanuja* had formulated the system of qualified non-dualism (*Visistadvaita*) admitting the notion of difference between the world, and the soul on the one hand and Brahman on the other.

the indivisible Existence—Knowledge—Bliss Absolute gets condensed as it were, through one's devotion and assumes various forms like ice.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, people who are devoted by nature were prescribed image worship as it is hard to meditate on the formless just at the beginning. But ultimately, worship culminates in meditation. So long as the aspirant apprehends the One by the process of surrender, meditation and prayer, his worship should continue. Those who were against image worship Ramakrishna's advice was to accept the feelings of the worshipper and not the image. It is the yearning for God—which one should learn.<sup>2</sup>

As do the tastes and temperaments of people differ so do the paths of realisation. An individual's spiritual ideal has to be selected by him as per his tendencies and capabilities and hence there cannot be one fixed method for all mankind.

There are three main paths — the path of devotion, action and knowledge (*Bhakti, Karma* and *Jnana-marga*) and these are prescribed according to the type of person, undertaking the sadhana. Men are generally of three types. They are emotional, volitional and intellectual. The emotional type has the natural tendency to follow the path of devotion. The volitional type is inclined to the path of action, while the intellectual type prefers the path of knowledge. As a matter of fact, paths are merely the means, not the end. These paths are known as *Yoga* according to the Bhagvad Gita. *Yoga* means ‘union’ or communion. These paths are spiritual techniques by which the *yogi* or aspirant attains the union with God. Any of these paths can lead the aspirant to the chosen ideal.

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1. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 375.

2. Gospel, p. 151.

Ramakrisna's conviction was that a sincere seeker will begin his *sadhana* with a pluralistic conception of God and ultimately reach to the nondualistic one. To simplify the course of *sadhana*, Ramakrisna admitted the necessity of symbols i.e. image worship. Because, it is easy to concentrate in a form than to a formless. Therefore, it may be said that though Ramakrisna was a *Advaita Vedantin*, yet he reconciled the *Dvaita* (dualism) and Visistadvaita (qualified non—dualism) world views along with image-worship.

Ramakrisna was initiated by a *sufi* and had a successful *sadhana* in accordance to the code of *Sufism*. He engaged himself in the reading of the *Koran* and practised devotional moods like a true *sufi*. Regarding his practice of *Sufism* he himself said—

“I then devotionally repeated the holy syllable ‘Allah’, wore cloth like a Muslim, said Namaz thrice daily and felt disinclined even to see Hindu deities.....I spent three days in that mood, and has the full realisation of the result of practices according to that faith.”<sup>1</sup>

He had the vision of prophet Muhammad which he described was an effulgent, impressive personage with long beard. Similarly after a year of his practice of *Sufism* Ramakrisna became acquainted with Jesus and Christianity. After having the vision of Jesus<sup>2</sup> he remained absorbed in the meditation of Jesus.

There are instances in the spiritual history of man where a devotee of a particular deity or spiritual leader has mystical vision of that particular image. As for example, St. Paul had the vision

1. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 260.

2. *Ibid.* 296.

of Jesus Christs, devotees of Rama or Kali had the vision of Rama and Kali respectively. But there are very few persons who have experienced the Divine in various forms as Ramakrisna.

As mentioned in the introduction, nineteenth century India was marked by the impact of reformation by the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj and the Theosophical Society. Though these movements were accompanied by various social reforms yet they lacked the wide tolerance in matters of belief and religious practices which was the characteristics of Hinduism. The orthodox Hindus could not accept these religions and in the teaching of Ramakrisna they found protection of their socio-religious belief and ideals of theology. This is how metaphysical and discriminative process of the Advaitins, the technical methods of *Raja-Yoga*, ritualistic devotion and culture of divine love of the Sakta, Vaisnava and other followers of *Bhakti* cult had the occasion to revive. Even the inner urge for spiritual realisation of the ascetics and monks of different orders got the inspiration from Ramakrisna's spiritual *sadhana*. Though he did not say anything new, yet, it appeared as new because through practice he could reconcile the different conflicting ideas. It was a practical demonstration of the truth which lies behind all the various creeds of Hinduism.

The different courses of *sadhana* met in the life of Ramakrisna. It was possible for him to practise the different (apparently contradictory) disciplines because the very ideas of different religions are inherent in Hinduism. Let me give an example to make the idea comprehensible. The religion of monotheism which is the claim of Christianity Islam, Sikh and the modern Bahai religion can be found in the religion of Veda and the Upanisads. The same idea is carried down by the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj. Even in Buddhism and Jainism this motheistic idea is predominant. Ramakrisna himself worshipped

different images of Gods and Goddesses. Following *Puranic* polytheism he felt the necessity of the choice of each individual regarding his ideal deity. Accordingly, an explanation of this peculiarity of Ramakrisna can be found in the statement that he was a true student of his scripture and a genuine follower of his tradition.

It should be noted that Ramakrisna did not speak about a universal religion, nor did he synthesised the different religions taking the partial view of the truth of each religion. Because for him Truth is one and indivisible.

In this connection it may be mentioned that the *Bahai* faith<sup>1</sup> which claims to be an independent religion also speaks about the oneness of God and of all religions. Let me describe the position of Bahai religion in this connection. This faith does not deny other religions and accept the validity of the Bible and the Quran to some extent, e.g. prophecy about the second coming of Christ and similar prophecy of the Quran. The Bahais believe all religions as divine origin. To become a Bahai one need not change his religion because there is only one religion which comes from time to time. The real Bahai will be a perfect lover of all mankind, and this universal love is possible if one believes that "love which exists between the hearts of believers is prompted by the ideal of the unity of spirits. This love is attained through the knowledge of God, so that men see the divine love reflected in the hearts."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Bahaullah which is a Arabic word means 'The Glory of God' is regarded as one of the chief manifestation of God. It was founded in the Middle East. It is regarded as an independent sect—different from Islam, Christianity or Judaism. Vide—John Ferraby, *All Things Made New—A Comprehensive Outline of the Bahai Faith* (1977), pp. 20–21.

2. Hooshmond Fatheazam, *The New Garden* (1980), p.5.

The Bahais believe that the belief in God can be made more perfect by accepting the religion of all ages and there cannot be any distinction among the prophets of different religions because all of them enjoy the same nearness to God. According to Bahauallah the foundation of all religions is one. The Bahais believe Krisna, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad are Messengers of God along with Bab who appeared exactly one thousand years after the revelation of Islam. Immediately after him Bahauallah declared his mission as a Messenger of God. Bahauallah taught the Oneness of God, the oneness of religion and the oneness of mankind. He praised all the prophets of the past and drafted the plan for the unity of mankind and also selected the necessary materials to lay the foundation of this religion. After his death his son Abdul Baha expounded the faith and interpreted the writings of Bahauallah. Bahai faith was carried to many countries of the world along with the Bahai literature in different languages. Bahauallah was against all kinds of prejudices—national, racial or religious. A person belongs to a particular religion because of his birth in that particular religion and he imitates the religion of his fore father and cannot find the truth of other religions. But according to Bahauallah by imitation of religion people cannot become united. So they should stop imitating the religion of their ancestors and search after truth for themselves and then only they would all reach the same conclusion and became united. The fundamental reality underlying all religions is one and with this realisation mankind will reach to the point of unity and reconciliation.

According to the Bahauallah absence of one common language is one of the causes of difference among different religions. Therefore he felt that a common language must be taught in every part of the world. The difference in language is the cause of misunderstanding and conflicts. The Bahais believe in the equality between men and women. They also believe that



every child—boy or girl—must receive proper education. Every system of education must be based on spiritual values and free from superstition. There is no conflict between religion and science because they bear the same truth. Bahauallah preferred justice and equalisation of the means of livelihood for every human being. Bahais think reward and punishment are necessary for the order of the world and also emphasised the importance of ethical teaching. Priesthood is abolished from Bahai religion though professional priesthood was necessary in the days of illiteracy and ignorance but a Bahai acquires sufficient knowledge about their faith and need not pay another man to pray for him. Instead of having priests to see religious affairs, Bahais have a system of administration through which spiritual welfare and progress of faith can be maintained. The spiritual assembly is elected by the members of the Bahai faith to serve the local community. The Bahais lay importance on cleanliness and prayer. Work is regarded as worship. Bahai faith has forbidden alcoholic drinks and intoxicating drugs. There is no monastic life in the Bahai faith. Anybody can become a Bahai only with conviction in the oneness of God, mankind and religion. This teaching appears to have something in common with another religion, namely Din-Elahi as advocated by Emperor Akbar the great.

Dissatisfied with the philosophical and theological discussion and bitter controversies of the Muslim scholars Akbar invited scholars of different religions to his Ibadatkhana (House of Worship). He attended the arguments of Hindu Philosophers, Jaina teachers, Parsee priests and Christian missionaries. Though there were reasonable grounds for affirming him to be a Hindu, a Jaina, a Zoroastrian or a Christian, but he was not converted to any of these faiths. Thus taking some elements from the Koran, partly from the scriptures of the Hindus, and to a certain extent from the Gospel of Christ he compounded a new religion—

Din—Elahi. Because of his firm faith in the policy of universal toleration he made no attempt for conversion. Though he had to face severe criticism and resentment—he still remained fearless and never meant to assume the spiritual leadership without having spiritual attainment. His birth, upbringing and association helped him to realise the religious conflict of that period. Above all these he had yearning after truth. “The conflicts of the different religious sects shocked his soul and he devoted himself to the evolution of a new religion which he hoped, would prove to be a synthesis of all the warring creeds and capable of uniting the discordant elements of his vast empire in one harmonious whole.”<sup>1</sup> The catholicity of Akbar’s temperament developed due to the influence of Sufism. Moreover, his mother gave him the idea of tolerance and his tutor implanted upon his mind the idea to attain ineffable bliss of direct contact with Divine reality and lastly his Rajput wives introduced him intimately with Hinduism.

Religious synthesis is no doubt a great task. The synthesiser has to go through all the religions either in theory or in practice or both. But if it is a fact that all religions contain the same truth then the very purpose of synthesising the ideas became meaningless. A synthesis, as the kind attempted by the Bahais as well as DinElahi ends up being another type of sect linking quite loosely, different bits of rituals, theologies and other ideas. A person like Ramakrisna proves the thesis that a truly religious person can understand and communicate with another person even belonging to different religion without having the urge either to change or convert him. This is possible because there is no bias in favour of his own religion in Ramakrisna's teaching. Another reason for this in Ramakrisna's case is that he was disciplined after practising the various dictates of Hinduism. All religions have injunctions (vidhis) and prohibitions (nisedhas). In

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1. R.C. Mazumdar and others: *An Advanced History of India*, p. 458.

Hinduism, theory follows practice or rather realisation. So each sect of Hinduism is primarily an art of living and secondarily an attempt to satisfy spiritual, intellectual and emotional curiosity. As far as Ramakrishna was concerned, different faiths meant different paths leading to the same realisation. He realised this fact not only in theory, but also in practice. Thus it is noted that Ramakrishna rejected nothing except dogmatism. His attitude was not that of reformation. Unlike Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj his religious ideas were very much liberal. As for example, he spoke nothing against caste system. He did not comment whether woman liberation is good or not. Rather, it seems, his opinion was that if some one can justify caste system let him follow it. Again, those who are against or for woman liberation they should have sufficient argument in favour or against that.

Unlike the other two faiths, Ramakrishna did not seek any reform rather he wanted that each individual should follow his own religion to realise divine potentialities within himself. And as a matter of fact, one's mind is one's the best teacher. He used to say "A human teacher imparts a Mantra to the ear; the divine teacher imparts it to the soul."<sup>1</sup> Thus ultimately responsibility lies with the individual himself. It is only through one's own effort one can have God realisation. For this Ramakrishna did not prescribe any fixed ideas. Thus he allowed choice and freedom in the matter of religion and was never in favour of conversion.

So in case of Ramakrishna, religion was not a outcome of synthesis of different religions. Rather it was a harmonious blending of different religions retaining ritual every particular.

Thus to harmonise the different religions, Ramakrishna had to realise the basic theme of all religions. Ramakrishna definitely

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1. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 399.

believed that the life of a householder is not detrimental for God .realisation. He said on one occasion:

“You are leading a householder’s life. That is very good. It is like fighting from a fort. There are many disadvantages in fighting in an open field. So many dangers too . . . . But one should spend some time in solitude and attain knowledge. Then one can lead the life of a householder.”<sup>1</sup>

This, I think, clearly shows that like other truly religious people Ramakrishna did not accept the distinction between this world and the other world. It is not necessary to renounce the life in this world to attain the vision of God. Ramakrishna did not like to be involved in the controversial questions of life after death or immortality of soul etc. For him spirituality is not a matter of abstract discussion of the learned, rather it should be the most vital quest for every human life. But at the same time he used to admire the scholarly devotees and admitted the value of renunciation. The meaning of renunciation, according to him, is the cultivation of discipline in every walk of life, not mere non-attachment from worldly things. Realising the difficulty in overcoming the desire for enjoyment by the common man, he advised his devotees to direct their desires towards God and perform their duties in a detached way. Man should live in this world, but the world should not live in him just as a boat is to float in water without water entering into it. As he said,

“Before you break the jack fruit open, rub your hands with oil, so that the sticky milk will not smear them. The maid servant in a rich man’s house performs all her duties, but her mind dwells

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1. Gospel, p. 151.

on her home in the country. This is an example of doing duty in a detached way. You should renounce the world only in the mind. But a sanyasi should renounce the world both inwardly and outwardly.”<sup>1</sup>

Ramakrisna was not a ‘sanyasni’ (monk, ascetic) in strict sense of the term. Rather he took a synthetic attitude towards these two apparently contradictory lives—life of a householder and that of a monk and maintained a balanced relation between the two. In his youth he married and lived with his wife, mother, nephew and others. Everybody, got due attention and service from Ramakrisna. The most striking thing in Ramakrisna's married life is that though he had love and affection for his wife, he never thought of any conjugal relation with her. Rather he looked upon his wife as one of the manifestations of the Divine Mother and worshipped her in the form of ‘Sodosi’\* prescribed by the Tantras.<sup>2</sup>

Ramakrisna did not think of the other world in terms of Heaven or Hell. Spirituality i.e. the realisation of God was the special realm of existence for him. For Ramakrisna there is no dichotomy between the “life as it is” and the quest for “life as it can be”. Through his mystical vision Ramakrisna could understand the internal harmony which links this world with that which lies beyond. Life in this world is only the foundation upon which the higher quest begins. Ramakrisna accepted this world with all its variety and multiplicity. He used to witness theatre, drama and cinema and also visit the zoo and garden. In every sphere of life he used to see the manifestation of the Divine. Thus he used to

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1. Gospel, p.150.

\* Form of the Divine Mother.

2. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 292.

see the One in all and all in the One—which is the ultimate aim of mystical experience.

There are various interpretations of the existence of the other world in Hindu scriptures and mythology. But Ramakrishna conceived the other world in the context of his mystical experience. Ramakrishna admitted the conflicts and contradictions in the life of a householder and found out the way to transcend such contradictions. In this connection he admitted the influence of tendencies from past births and the result of *prarabdha karma*.<sup>1</sup> He also believed that by earnest prayer one can attain the grace of God by which fruits of action can be transcended. He did not speak particularly about the nature of salvation (Moksha). He condemned the type of salvation which seeks one's own release from suffering only. That is why when Vivekananda wanted to remain absorbed in *Samadhi*, Ramakrishna condemned his desire and advised him to serve the suffering people. Because service to humanity is possible only by living in this world. *Vedantic* transcendence, according to Ramakrishna, means transforming the inner nature of man. In the Hindu scripture God is described as '*Antaryamin*'. To realise that one need not necessarily leave the world. Thus shaping the mundane life accordingly man can feel the oneness with God, who is not anywhere outside.

Ramakrishna however, thought that the experience of salvation can pervade the whole walk of life ( i.e., in the sense of *Jivanmukta*). He himself proved that a man could be perfect, even in this body. His idea of salvation was possible only through renunciation or dispassion. But how to get rid of passion without renouncing the world? To get the answer let me quote Ramakrishna: "Dispassion is not possible unless there is satiety through enjoyment. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 215.

Therefore, it may be said that by emphasising the harmony and balance between the two stages of life Ramakrishna has interpreted the meaningfulness and value of worldly life. Since this interpretation is based on his direct experience, it may appear different from the explanation of the theologians, logicians or scientists. He felt the possibility of establishment of spirituality in the mundane world, and this is the result of his mystic perception and belief that all things and beings are manifestations of one. This seems that Ramakrishna followed Dualism indirectly. But this Dualism, for Ramakrishna, is the direct dependence of man on God. He thought man cannot become God and the devotee does not also like to become God.<sup>2</sup> The devotee wants to enjoy the companionship of God. For him, man's ultimate objective of life to know God and for that a loving surrender (*Bhakti*) is necessary. According to Ramakrishna there cannot be any conflict between flesh and spirit.<sup>3</sup> It is only man among other creatures who can think of God.

Thus the whole spirit of Ramakrishna's sadhana is humanistic. Though the basic humanistic approach is centred on man, Ramakrishna's humanism had its centre in God. The ideal of humanism is rooted in the Vedas and the Upanisads where men were addressed, as the sons of immortal spirit (*Amtasya Putrah*). In Ramakrishna's thought and practice this ideal got a new interpretation. Here I may recall Ramakrishna's birth and parentage. He was born in a poor and orthodox Brahmin family of rural West Bengal. That period was full of different chaos and confusion. People were class-conscious and caste-system prevailed in a rigorous form. But Ramakrishna's mind was free

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1. Gospel, p. 151 cf. (Teno taktena bhunjita) - Veda.

2. Gospel, p. 63.

3. In medieval Christianity a tendency can be found where flesh was always condemned and spirit only got the most superior position.

from such caste-prejudice. During his sacred thread ceremony (Upanayana) at the age of nine. He took alms<sup>1</sup> from a women of the blacksmith class and addressed her as 'Mother' inspite of the repeated objections of his elder brother.<sup>2</sup> Again, he was a priest of the temple of Daksineswara which was installed by Rani Rasmani who was a low caste by birth. It was against the social custom to offer cooked food to the Gods or Goddesses by a non-Brahmin. Ramakrisna's elder brother who was also a learned priest solved the problem of installation of the said temple and himself took the priesthood there. In the later period of his life Ramakrisna solved many controversial social problems in a simple way. I have already described how he practised Islam and Chrisianity. According to Ramakrisna *bhaktas* (Devotees of God) have no caste. With the devotion of God even the Chandala (pariah) becomes greater than the sages. On the other hand, a faithless person ranks below the Chandala even.

In the worship of images Ramakrisna used to feel the presence of the divine. There is a strange synthesis of human interest and Divine grandeur in his life. In image worship Ramakrisna used to humanise the deity which in turn led him to divinise man. During his spiritual practice he served the image of Ramlala (of child Ram) which may be cited as a case of extreme humanisation of deity.<sup>3</sup> Though the whole quest of Ramakrisna's life is directed towards God yet it was never anti-humanistic. He always insisted that the flesh i.e. the body can not be neglected which is the instrument for God realisation. By God realisation one can live a worthy life. Here I may quote Ramakrisna,

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1. Acceptance of alms is a part of the ritual of sacred thread ceremony of the Brahmin class.

2. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, pp. 54-55.

3. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, pp. 526-27.



“But you should remember that the heart of a devotee is the abode of God. He dwells, no doubt, in all beings, but He especially manifests Himself in the heart of the devotee. A landlord may at one time or another visit all parts of his estate, but people say he is generally to be found in a particular drawing-room. The heart of the devotee is the drawing-room of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Ramakrishna's life proves the possibility of God—realisation by man. This again, in turn, presupposes the divine nature of man. According to Ramakrishna superiority of human life lies here that among all creatures, only men have the power of God realisation. There is a identity between man and God and realisation of that identity brings the unity between the individual and Absolute and between individual and individual. The realisation of this identity is the aim of mystical experience. It seems through God realisation Ramakrishna could value the divinity in man. Hence he could suffer with suffering fellow-human beings. That is why also on different occasions he wanted to serve the poor.<sup>2</sup> He regarded all *Jivas* (creatures) as *Siva* (God). It is recorded in his biography that he took the left-over of the poor people after they had been fed at the Kali temple and afterwards washed the place by himself.<sup>3</sup> Thus in many respects Ramakrishna's humanism is more radical than Buddhistic or Christian humanism. Even a prostitute woman was regarded by him as the manifestation of Divine Mother.<sup>1</sup> Since every man is the image of the divine, no man can be the subject of pity and

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1. Gospel, p. 62.

2. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, p. 462. While on a pilgrimage to Vaidyanath he wanted his host should serve the poor village with food and a piece of cloth. The latter obeyed accordingly.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

mercy. Our attitude should be one of service to man. According to Ramakrisna this feeling can be developed only by God realisation. When one can see God in himself, then only he can see Him in all. Thus humanism become spiritualised in the *sadhana* of Ramakrisna, for this realisation of oneness with the rest of mankind is the basis of humanism.

The realisation of essential unity of mankind made it possible for him to accept the harmony of all religions. Though he did not find any conflict between polytheism and monism yet in his own living faith God was a spirit incarnated in all men and the only true worship of God was the loving service of mankind.<sup>2</sup> He could identify himself completely with rest of the humanity.<sup>3</sup>

In the experience of Ramakrisna man as well as the universe were divinised. Thus Ramakrisna gave a positive philosophy denouncing nothing from man's life in this world. Again Ramakrisna's world view is optimistic in the sense that he gave infinite hope to the whole of mankind. Just as nobody starves in the house of Annapurna<sup>4</sup> in Benaras, so also every seeker or *bhakta* will sooner or later get what he seeks that is, a vision of his God.

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1. Ibid., p. 586.

2. ed. Nanda Mukherjee 'Sri Ramakrisna in the eyes of Brahma and Christian Admirers' (1976), p. 2.

3. Saradananda, *op.cit.*, pp. 261-62.

4. A manifestation of Goddess Durga worshipped in Benaras associated with the distribution of food.

## CONCLUSION

After a study of the mystical visions of Ramakrishna in the context of his culture and tradition, it is necessary to evaluate his contribution, if any, to the modern Indian mysticism. Though, mysticism is charged as vague, unexpressable in conceptual language, I find it is not always true. A student, however critical he may be, if he is impartial, will definitely find it of immense value in the field of religious study. It is a fact that there cannot be anything as 'modern' in mysticism. It is a natural expression, though of few, which begins with sense impression developed through the process of reflection and will, in action and finally culminating in union with the desired object or goal. From this point of view mysticism would appear to have traditional, historical rational and intuitional aspects. As I have shown in Chapter I this is true of Ramakrishna also. In his mystical experience there is immense influence of tradition. Ramakrishna had complete understanding of his own religious tradition by which he could reach to the point where he transcended the limitations of traditions.

In Chapter II, I have made the claim that Ramakrishna belonged to the Vedantic (Advaitic) tradition. In this chapter I will elaborate this and analyse the further thesis that Ramakrishna's mystical experience (comprising of a plurality of Gods and Goddesses) along with his insistence of harmony of all religions can be consistently explained only with the Advaita doctrine of two levels of reality, namely, the *Vyavaharika* and *paramarthika* levels. In the *Vyavaharika* level Brahman appears as many. The world, the individual soul and even God are appearances of Brahman. In this level Brahman is associated with Maya. Thus from empirical (*Vyavaharika*) level the appearances are admitted. As distinguished from this, in the *Paramarthika* or ultimate level Brahman is regarded as non-dual.

According to Advaita Vedanta the world had no absolute reality. Sankara maintains that so long as Brahman is not realised external world should be accepted as fact. Only Brahman has the absolute reality (*paramarthika sattva*). But until that realisation the world too has a reality of its own different from absolute reality and this may be called as having *Vyavaharika sattva* (empirical reality). As for example, the objects of a dream, though known as false after waking up, are real in the dream-state. Similarly, the world also appears as relatively less real after the attainment of the highest knowledge i.e. of Brahman. Thus the transcendental (*Paramarthika*) reality (Brahman) appears as the empirical (*Vyavaharika*) reality (world). The proper understanding of these levels of truth gave Ramakrishna an outlook of tolerance and respect for individual differences. So far as the *Vyavaharika* phase is concerned, plurality, multiplicity, difference (between Atman and Brahman)—all these must be admitted. In the end of sadhana when the samadhi state is attained the Real Truth is known and in this *paramarthika* state plurality etc. disappear and the realisation of identity calms the mind. Further, Ramakrishna believed also in the Vedantic doctrine of *adhikari-bheda*. According to Vedanta the difference of *adhikara* or spiritual status does not mean gradation or does not suggest any relation of higher and lower. In the first instance it means just an acceptance of fact and of one's duty. The efficient performance of duty, according to one's suitability gives one the opportunity for self-realisation. Thus by proper understanding of one's own religion the individual feels that the religion of others is not only sacred and true to them but to himself also. The oneness cannot be contemplated on the empirical level and there is no prescription of universal brotherhood in the sense of altruism. The brotherhood that is practically recognised in Vedanta is the brotherhood of spirits realising their *svadharma*, the dharma of each being sacred to all.

In this context Ramakrisna wanted that each man should follow his own religion. Here I quote his own words:

"You must stick to one path with all your strength. A man can reach the roof of a house by stone stairs or a ladder or a rope ladder or a rope or even by a bamboo pole. But he cannot reach the roof if he sets foot now on one and now on another. He should firmly follow one path. Likewise in order to realise God a man must follow one path with all his strength . . . . But you must regard other views as so many paths leading to God. You should not feel that your path is the only right path and that others paths are wrong. You must not bear malice toward others."<sup>1</sup>

Along with this, the existing plurality of cults and sects of Hinduism<sup>2</sup> prepared Ramakrisna for accepting additional list of sects namely, Christianity and Islam. It is because of this Ramakrisna had vision of the spiritual presence in all religions and thereby could grasp the meaning of man's existence. Like the theologians he did not compare Hinduism with other religions to prove its superiority. His inward urge to know the different paths led him to practice different religions.

The purpose of discussing the background of Ramakrisna's thought and vision in Chapter I is mainly that the formulation of any opinion regarding religion depend mostly on one's background. Therefore, I have discussed the Vedantic, Bhakti, Tantrika and mystical tradition of India during Ramakrisna's time. He saw the urge behind image worship of different kinds, accepted the emotional significance of it. Not only this, he could

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1. Gospel, p. 472.

2. The Vaisnava, Tantrika, Saiva, etc. are different sects of Hinduism.

also see the need for transcendence of the same. This I think can be explained as part of the devotee's journey from the *Vyavaharika* level to the *paramarthika* level. Image worship, be it of any deity should be regarded as a stepping stone towards nirvikalpa samadhi which is the ideal of the Advaita tradition.

The last stage of mystical experience is the experience of the identity with God or Brahman. This unitive life in God is the common experience of all mystics of different religions. In this state Ramakrishna felt his identity with the Divine Mother. It is said that a mystic who has had this experience has no duty to perform. He is expected to remain absorbed in the bliss of the unity with God. Ramakrishna preferred to remain in the state of *bhavamukha*<sup>1</sup> for the service of humanity, even after experiencing this ultimate goal of mystical experience.

To remain in the state of *bhavamukha* is a rare stage of the mystical life. Ramakrishna had such a control over his mind, that he could pass in the state of samadhi (trance) with incidents of even little spiritual significance, and also could keep his mind conscious about the surroundings even in the matters of great spiritual significance.

In the biography of Ramakrishna, it is recorded that he prayed and tried not to slip into the deep ecstasy, but to remain in the state of relative consciousness (*bhavamukha*).

In this state of ecstasy the confusion and doubts prevailing

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1. The word 'Bhavamukha' is used by Ramakrishna himself which came from the Divine Mother, means a state of consciousness which is not above the 'bhavas' i.e. mental modifications, but is one from which all possible 'bhavas' (thoughts) imanate or an intermediary position between the ordinary consciousness and cosmic consciousness. Saradananda, *Op.cit.*, pp. 86-87.

in the different theologies are resolved and the whole personality can be transformed into cheerfulness and blessedness. Referring to this state the Upanisad says "All knots of the heart are torn and all doubts are resolved."<sup>1</sup> In this state the subject-object duality vanishes, knower and the known became one and the same thing and the mystic feels a vastness within his mind.

It appears that samadhi is the highest stage of mystical experience and sometimes it is described as a state beyond all such experiences. However, it may be mentioned that, during the mystical experience, the subject still feels that he is having 'vision' and sometimes his experience is reported through introspection. On the other hand, in the state of samadhi subjective consciousness (I-consciousness) appears to be remain absent. One's I is merged with the cosmic consciousness in a state of samadhi. Sometimes, samadhi experience also can be communicated through introspection.

In the third Chapter I have examined the exposition of the doctrine of harmony of religions. This fundamental thesis which Ramakrishna contributed is also important from the philosophical stand point. With the doctrine of harmony of religions Ramakrishna gave mysticism a unique character. No one among his predecessors (leaders of Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj) could establish such harmony. The relevance of his teaching lies greatly in this need for harmony of religions. In this connection I have also discussed how Ramakrishna could reconcile different contradictions among different sects of Hinduism and the most important is his reconciliation of the conflict between this world and the other world. He said on one occasion that after reaching the roof one can see that the roof and the steps are made of one and the same

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1. cf. 'Bhidyate hrdaya granthi chhidyante sarva samsaya, - Mundaka Upanisad, 11.8.

thing. Similarly, after reaching the highest stage (paramarthika level) one can see that there is no difference among different religions. All are coming from the one eternal source and again merging in the one. It can be said that Ramakrishna reached that highest stage from where he could see the unity in variety, concordant in the discord, the one who has become many.



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