

Ramakrishna

An Introduction



Swami Sunirmalananda

Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of the Netherlands

Ramakrishna

An Introduction

His Life Itself was His Message

Swami Sunirmalananda



Publisher's Note

Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings are the same. His life itself is his teaching. And his teaching is all about God. He knew nothing but God. Sri Ramakrishna is a source of inspiration to spiritual aspirants of all cultures, classes and races. He cannot be limited to any particular group, denominational religion or geographical portion. He like the sun sheds light everywhere: Ramakrishna sheds light on every aspect of spirituality. He is like a living encyclopaedia of spirituality—for aspirants in all stages of life to look to for guidance, inspiration, knowledge, training, awareness of pitfalls, and the certainty of the attainment of the goal. Ramakrishna is also the ideal and role model for all stages of life.

This small book has been written particularly with the present-day reader in mind, and can be a good introduction to Ramakrishna's glorious life. Divided into many small chapters, with teachings appended towards the end of each, *Ramakrishna: An Introduction* is a simple presentation of the life of one who lived spirituality. Swami Vivekananda wrote to his disciple, Kidi, that a life of Ramakrishna should be written in such a way that it should serve as an illustration of his teachings. A list of books for further reading has been added towards the end. We thank everyone who has helped in the publication of this book.

We hope that the reader will benefit from reading *Ramakrishna: An Introduction*.

The first print edition of this book was published by Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, India. There were a few typos in that edition. This is the revised, fuller second edition and it's only online.

The Story Begins with a Sacrifice

Our story begins in Dere. Dere is a small village in Bengal. Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya was born here in 1775. Even as a child, Kshudiram assimilated and practised the ideals of the ancient Hindu way of life— austerly, purity, truthfulness, devotion, service, etc. He lived like a sage. His primary concern was Ishvara. He married Chandramani Devi in 1796. True to the culture of a brahmin, Kshudiram consciously practised the virtue of truthfulness and never in his life did he utter a falsehood. He knew nothing but the worship of the Divine, the service of the afflicted and the poor, and the study and practice of virtues. Kshudiram was respected by everyone in and around the village. Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya had become a living example of saintliness.



All his life, while this humble and unassuming man walked along the streets, people would stand up in reverence. Ramakrishna would say about Kshudiram, his father: 'My father spent much of his time in worship and meditation, and in repeating God's name and chanting His glories. Whenever in his daily prayers he invoked the Goddess Gayatri, his chest flushed and tears rolled down his cheeks. He spent his leisure hours making garlands for the family deity, Raghuvir.'

Chandramani Devi, Kshudhiram's wife, was an example of piety and simplicity. There was perhaps nobody in the village whom she had not fed or

helped in some way or other. Ramakrishna commented about his mother's simplicity in later times: 'My mother was the personification of rectitude and gentleness. She did not know much about the ways of the world; innocent of the art of concealment, she would say what was in her mind. People loved her for her open-heartedness.' Innocent of the ways of the world, this angelic couple depended on the Lord and lived like the hermits of the Vedic times. Though they did not possess much, there was peace and contentment. A son, Ramkumar, was born to this couple in 1805 and a daughter, Katyayani, in 1810.



The landlord of this village, Ramananda Roy, was a tyrant. He lived to satisfy his insatiable hunger for wealth and to fill his coffers through cunning and deceit. The villagers suffered under him. Around the year 1813, Ramananda set his eyes on the land of some innocent villager and brought forth a lawsuit against him. Since Kshudiram was respected as a person of virtue, the landlord asked him to testify in his favour. Kshudiram flatly refused. One, he would never lie. Two, come what may, he would never cause suffering to some helpless villager. The consequence of his not agreeing to utter a falsehood was terrible. Ramananda Roy arranged for things in such a way that the noble Kshudiram had to leave behind his ancestral property, house, and everything else and go away from the village with his wife, their nine-year old son and their four-year old daughter.

Thus, in the year 1814, this uncompromising man of virtue and piety walked away with his family, family deities and a few other belongings, not knowing what God had in store for the family. There was no hope, or so it appeared. But 'God protects His devotee,' as Ramakrishna says. Kshudiram had a friend in another village, whose name was Sukhlal Goswami. This virtuous man was nobility itself. Sukhlal came to Kshudiram's rescue. He welcomed Kshudiram to Kamarpukur, gave the family a part of his own house (a few huts) and also a little piece of land for free. Thus Kshudiram settled down in Kamarpukur. The people of Kamarpukur were not slow in recognizing this unworldly couple. What the village called Dere lost, Kamarpukur gained.

Kamarpukur was an unknown village then. Almost all villages around were similar in appearance. Lush green as far as the eyes could see, a few small huts scattered here and there, one or two big houses of rich men, a few beautiful tanks and ponds, many varieties of seasonal as well as annual birds and flowers everywhere, and people going about their simple business with innocent dedication and regularity—this was the village scene. There was poverty, but people were satisfied with what they had. The greed born of the interaction with contemporary civilization or the wickedness associated with politics had not yet polluted the air. The air of the villages was itself fresh, the food simple and natural, and people lived in peace. In Kamarpukur, life flowed easily. People loved one another and tried to be of help to everyone in times of difficulty. Thus, here was a village reminiscent of the ancient times, when people did not know how to live in tension and turmoil. Kshudiram and Chandramani Devi added more affection and warmth to Kamarpukur by entering it and living there since the year 1814. Now this village is known the world over—it's an important place in Hooghly District.



Ramakrishna says:

➤ God can be realized through truth alone. I was very particular about telling the truth.¹

➤ Truthfulness in speech is the austerity of the present cycle [Kaliyuga]. It is difficult to practise other austerities in this cycle. By adhering to truth one attains God.²

➤ One cannot realize God without sincerity and simplicity. God is far, far away from the crooked heart.³

➤ Man loves his own riches, and so thinks God loves His, too. He thinks that God will be pleased if we glorify His riches.⁴

¹0. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 418

²0. *Gospel*, p. 749

³0. *Gospel*, p. 557

⁴0. *Gospel*, p. 321

The Dawn and the Sunrise

Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya continued with his usual way of life in Kamarpukur also—his piety and devotion increasing by the day. Life had shown him what Ishvara's mercy is, and he had no other wish but to please Him. His son, Ramkumar, studied the Hindu Law (*Smriti*) and proved his intelligence, devotion, and sincerity. The children grew up. Since the son and daughter had come of age, Kshudiram arranged for their marriage on the same day in 1820. It was a simple ceremony, but every one was pleased; the people of Kamarpukur came to the family's aid in many ways. Since his son was now capable of caring for the family well, Kshudiram dived deeper into spiritual practices. He also thought of going on a pilgrimage to Rameshwaram, situated in Tamil Nadu. He had to travel over 1500 km on foot. He was of course ready for this, and so in 1824, Kshudiram visited Rameshwaram. He also visited many other temples along the way. After an arduous one-year long walk and pilgrimage, Kshudiram returned home in 1825. His second son, Rameshwar, was born in 1826. And his simple, uneventful life continued.



When he was nearing sixty, Kshudiram thought of making one more pilgrimage, this time to Gaya, an ancient pilgrim place connected with Vishnu, to offer oblations in the name of his ancestors. Offering oblations in

the name of departed ancestors at this sacred place, at the feet of Vishnu, grants liberation to them. He started for Gaya in early February 1835 and reached there towards the end of March. Happy that he could go there, Kshudiram offered oblations in the name of his ancestors with humility and devotion. He felt deep within that the ancestors were pleased and were blessing him. That night, while he slept, he had a dream. Bhagavan Vishnu appeared in the dream and said that He would like to be born as Kshudiram's son. Kshudiram replied with tears in his eyes that unfortunately he could not be the correct choice of the merciful Ishvara, because he was poor and would not be able to serve Him properly. Bhagavan Vishnu replied with a beatific smile that He would be pleased with whatever He would receive. Kshudiram got up from sleep with tears still running down his cheeks and wondered about the strange dream.



Kshudiram Chatterji's hut and Jugi Shiva Mandir, Kamarpukur

When he returned home, he observed changes in Chandramani Devi, who appeared to be overflowing with compassion for all. He also heard another strange thing having happened to his innocent and simple wife. Chandramani Devi had gone to worship Lord Shiva in the local temple with another woman. Suddenly, a huge flood of brilliant light emanated from the image of Shiva and entered her womb. She fell down unconscious. She had to be brought home. Since then felt she had conceived. Nobody would believe her story and women made fun of her. But she was convinced that

some such thing had happened. When Kshudiram heard this story, he consoled her and said that such strange things could indeed occur, and both waited for something astonishing to take place at home. The devout couple began to prepare themselves for the advent of an extraordinary soul by constant prayer, fasting, worship, and so on. During these months, Chandramani Devi had numerous extraordinary spiritual experiences. Her heart overflowed with love for not only human beings but the gods.



Ramakrishna was born here

The joyful day arrived. Ramakrishna was born on 18 February 1836, a Wednesday. It was almost dawn when the baby was born. Quite large for a newborn baby, the child did not even cry after birth, as the astonished village midwife exclaimed. All were happy. Conches blew in the village to announce the child's birth. Kshudiram spared no words and forgot no hymn to thank God for His mercies. On an auspicious day, the child was named Gadadhar, remembering the 'mace-holding' (*gadâdhara*) Vishnu of Gaya. Perhaps the name 'Ramakrishna' was given then, keeping with the family tradition of naming children after Rama. However, in his childhood Ramakrishna was called Gadadhar or Gadai, and the family name was Chattopadhyaya or Chatterji for short. Little Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya began to spread peace, love and bliss everywhere. When Gadadhar was

three years old, another member was added to the family: in 1839, Gadadhar's younger sister, Sarvamangala, was born. Gadadhar's father fondly remembered how Gadadhar was a child of extraordinary memory, and could memorize and repeat mantras and hymns exceedingly well. As a child, Gadadhar also manifested a strong will, not stopping until completing the tasks he undertook, and having a rare sense of music.



Ramakrishna's hut from a distance

As it is with other extraordinary children, Gadadhar's presence itself was mesmerizing. Village women would forget everything and rush to see the smiling child and his sweet pranks. They would invent a hundred excuses both to be away from their own houses and to be in the child's presence. Everything the child did, he did sweetly. Gadadhar grew up to be a very lovely child, dear to everyone. The villagers adored him. A few qualities showed themselves in the little one since his childhood: firmness of purpose, extraordinary brilliance, the power of intense concentration and intense love. He had to hear something only once to be able to repeat it verbatim. And he was an expert in mimicking, especially the voices of women.

Ramakrishna says:

- I know that God is both with and without form. And He may have many more aspects. It is possible for Him to be everything.⁵
- God has form; again, He is formless. How many aspects He has! We cannot comprehend Him. Why should we say that God is formless only?⁶
- Do you know what God with form is like? Like bubbles rising on an expanse of water, various divine forms are seen to rise out of the Great Akasha of Consciousness. The incarnation of God is one of these forms. The Primal Energy sports, as it were, through the activities of a Divine Incarnation.⁷
- Fire, as an element, is present more in wood than in any other object. If you seek God, then seek Him in man; He manifests Himself more in man than in any other thing.⁸



Ramakrishna's house [right] and temple for family deities [facing]

⁵0.Gospel, p. 291

⁶0.Gospel, p. 577

⁷0.Gospel, p. 180

⁸0.Gospel, p. 726

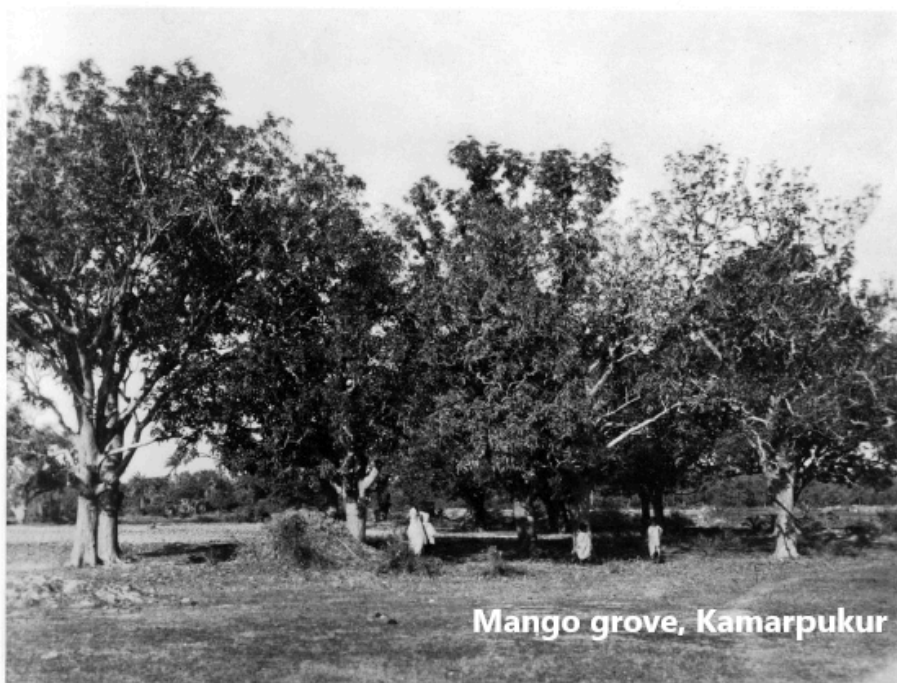
The First Sign of Love

When Gadadhar was about five years old, the impatience natural to a child owing to a brilliant mind became manifested in him. His parents admitted him to the village school. So, in 1841, Gadadhar became a student in the local school, which was a simple little place, with only one teacher for all the students. It was a tin-roofed hall, open on all sides. Here, Gadadhar learnt to read and write very quickly, but he could not give his mind to Mathematics. Somehow he was averse since the beginning to calculation, multiplication, etc. But that does not mean that Ramakrishna did not understand this subject; he was averse to it. However, his mind was easily attracted to art, sculpting, drama, singing and such other cultural activities. Gadadhar would go to the sculptor's and observe how he would make images. Returning home, he would also make images and worship them with flowers. He was also a good painter for his age. Whatever he did, he did with the utmost dedication and sincerity, giving all of his mind to the job. Gadadhar was so perfect in observation that, having seen a theatrical performance just once, he would enact it to perfection before his friends and the village women. He would read religious books to the villagers and also enjoy reading them for himself. His absorption in the stories narrated in the books was extraordinary. Added to it was his concentration.

Gadadhar loved nature. The flourishing green surroundings of his village pleased the spiritual nature of the little child. One day in June or July 1842, he was walking along the village path, all by himself. Above him was the sky with dark clouds, about to rain. Suddenly, a flock of white cranes flew by—a perfect contrast of white against the black background. This scenery took the child into a glorious world altogether, and he fell down apparently unconscious. This was the first time he became completely absorbed in ecstasy. Some people saw him in that state, could not understand what had happened, and brought him home. His parents were extremely concerned. His mother thought that an evil spirit must have taken possession of the boy and suffered agony. His father thought it was an epileptic fit and became concerned. Some medicines were tried. The

parents prayed intensely for the well-being of the child. Gadadhar, from his side, repeatedly reassured his parents that what had happened was not at all due to a disease but something due to his mind merging in a new feeling; and that he had experienced wonderful bliss.

Seeing no further signs of ill-health in the child but only an exuberance of joy and happiness, everybody forgot this incident. Gadadhar's infectious joy made everyone happy. But this happiness was not to last long.



Ramakrishna says:

- God cannot be realized without guilelessness.⁹
- Pray to God with a yearning heart that you may take delight in His name. He will certainly fulfil your heart's desire.¹⁰
- One doesn't really need to study the different scriptures. If one has no discrimination, one doesn't achieve anything through mere scholarship, even though one studies all the six systems of philosophy. Call on God, crying to Him secretly in solitude. He will give you all that you need.¹¹
- How much of the scriptures can you read? What will you gain by mere reasoning? Try to realize God before anything else.¹²



লাহাদের পাঠশালা

Ramakrishna's school

⁹0. Gospel, p. 176

¹⁰. Gospel, p. 203

¹¹. Gospel, p. 292

¹². Gospel, p. 645

The Effects of Time

In September 1843, a relative invited Gadadhar's father to participate in the Durga Puja festival in a faraway village. Though he had poor health, Kshudiram accepted the invitation. However, when he went there, he fell ill. The relative took all care of him, but after the four-day worship was completed, Kshudiram discarded his mortal garment in full consciousness, repeating the names of his family deity. A simple householder, but a personification of truthfulness and other virtues, was gone.

News reached Kamarpukur the next day. The family was drowned in sorrow; the whole village was deeply saddened—for Kshudiram was such a saintly person. While Katyayani was still a four-year-old girl, Gadadhar was seven. Chandramani Devi had now to care for them on her own. His father's death gave quite a shock to Gadadhar. More than being shocked, he realized the impermanence of the world more intensely now. His innocent mind began to connect reality with what he had heard from religious books. He had heard so many stories from the scriptures about life and death, about the impermanence and the transitory nature of things. Now he had seen with his own eyes how the strength of the family, his dear father, was gone. Gadadhar was worried about his dear, simple mother. He tried to console her, to bring some happiness to her by his actions, and also to help her in her activities. Of late, though it had appeared that the financial condition of the family had been improving slightly, it was never well-off. Added to that, the only earning member of the family was no more. Further, earning money was not an easy task in those days, especially in villages. Ramkumar, the eldest son, who was then thirty-eight years old, assumed the family's responsibility, and his wife helped Chandramani Devi in the household work. Ramkumar helped his younger brother, Rameshwar, continue his studies. All were concerned about Gadadhar's education too—for everyone loved him. But Gadadhar was different.

A change had come over Gadadhar since his father's passing. Though he appeared cheerful and happy to his friends, he was not happy in the worldly sense, at least inwardly. The aspirant in him had been awakened. He began to move about alone, seeking lonely places. Deeply immersed in the thoughts of the Divine, Gadadhar's mind sought solitude and contemplation more than anything else now. At home, however, he took great interest in keeping his mother happy. He never demanded anything from her lest she should feel pained for want of money.



Haldarpukur, the pond in which Ramakrishna bathed...

One more change came over Gadadhar: he began frequenting holy men. People who visited the pilgrim place Puri passed by Kamarpukur in those days. The village landlord had built a small resting place for pilgrims, especially holy men, on the edge of the village. Many monks and mendicants would pass by Kamarpukur and stay overnight at the resting place. Gadadhar began frequenting these monks. They were charmed with the purity and simplicity of the boy, and loved the little one. They narrated stories from scriptures to him. Gadadhar observed everything: their

meditations, simple lives and spiritual struggles. He tried to serve them as much as he could—brought water, fetched firewood for cooking, etc. Initially, Chandramani Devi did not think much about her little one's frequenting monks. She rather thought that their blessings would benefit her son. She began sending food to the monks often.

One day, however, she became alarmed. Gadadhar came home that day and said: 'Mother, Look here! I have become a monk!' Little Gadadhar was dressed as a monk, with sacred ashes on his forehead. Chandramani Devi was worried. She was worried that the monks would make her son want to become a monk and take him away some day. But he was only eight then! Gadadhar assured her many times that the monks would not do so. He also brought the monks to his house. The monks reassured Chandramani Devi repeatedly that they had no such intention at all, and that taking away a boy stealthily was a terrible crime which they would never commit, and that they wanted the child to be happy always. This reassured the mother.



The sacred pond, Haldarpukur, as it is now...

Ramakrishna says:

➤ Devotion to the husband is also a dharma. The husband is God. Why shouldn't it be so? If God can be worshipped through an image, why not also through a living man?¹³

➤ One should constantly remember death. Nothing will survive death. We are born into this world to perform certain duties, like the people who come from the countryside to Calcutta on business.¹⁴

➤ God alone is the Real, that is to say, the Eternal Substance, and the world is unreal, that is to say, transitory. As soon as a man finds his mind wandering away to the unreal, he should apply discrimination.¹⁵

➤ Repeat God's name and sing His glories, and keep holy company; and now and then visit God's devotees and holy men. The mind cannot dwell on God if it is immersed day and night in worldliness, in worldly duties and responsibilities; it is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God. To fix the mind on God is very difficult in the beginning, unless one practises meditation in solitude.¹⁶

➤ Whatever may be a householder's profession, it is necessary for him to live in the company of holy men now and then. If a man loves God, he will himself seek the company of holy men.¹⁷

¹³. Gospel, p. 688

¹⁴. Gospel, p. 105

¹⁵. Gospel, p. 97

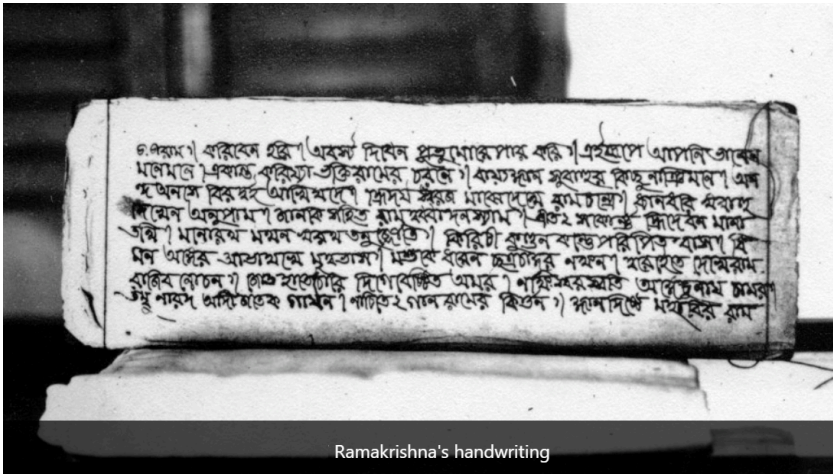
¹⁶. Gospel, p. 81

¹⁷. Gospel, p. 883

Breaking Down the Barriers

One day, in the year 1844, a few ladies of the village, including the landlord's daughter, requested Chandramani Devi that she must consent to their taking Gadadhar on a small pilgrimage. There is a temple of the Divine Mother very near Kamarpukur, and these ladies wanted Gadadhar to go with them—for the attractive little child could sing, mimic, dance, narrate stories, and make everyone burst with joy. Women always discovered some pretext to be near Gadadhar and enjoy his conversation. So this was an opportunity to enjoy the little one's company. Chandramani Devi gladly gave her consent. And the party walked through the green fields with Gadadhar singing sweet songs about the Divine Mother and recounting Her glories. The women were immensely happy. We have mentioned already that whatever Gadadhar did, he did with utmost concentration and dedication. While singing songs and thinking about the Divine Mother, Gadadhar became so absorbed in Her that he fell down on the ground, apparently unconscious. The innocent ladies were helpless, alarmed and were in tears. They did not understand why Gadadhar fell. They tried to revive him by sprinkling water on him, thinking that the little child had become tired. However, he did not wake up. In desperation, they wept and prayed aloud to the Divine Mother. Hearing the Divine Mother's names, Gadadhar returned to normal consciousness. And within moments he was his old self again. The concerned women carried the boy home, Gadadhar resuming his singing and joyful conversation.

Back home, they explained to the extremely apprehensive Chandramani Devi that it was nothing at all but an intensity of spiritual ecstasy, but she would not agree. She began to imagine many things: perhaps a ghost, perhaps a spirit.... Gadadhar himself explained to her that it was a spiritual state. But how could she understand? She was firm that it was an epileptic fit once again. Gadadhar explained to her many times over that his mind became immersed in the Divine Mother and so he lost external consciousness. This was the second manifestation of Gadadhar's spiritual state in public.



Gadadhar continued with his meditation, enactment of dramas with friends, singing, worship, studies, and other activities and his joy was infectious. Every moment of his life was a source of joy, education and enrichment to others. In 1845, when he was nine years old, an important event took place in Gadadhar's life. Having been born in a brahmin family, Gadadhar was to be invested with the sacred thread. Ramkumar and others began making preparations. About the ceremony, Gadadhar had something to say to his elder brother: 'I shall accept Dhani Kamarani as my godmother.' Dhani Kamarani was a woman of a non-brahmin caste. She loved Gadadhar immensely and, some time ago, had requested the boy that when he would be invested with the sacred thread, he must call her 'mother' and accept the traditional first alms from her. Gadadhar had promised her that he would do so. Dhani had become happy, and had begun to collect money to buy things for that blessed day. However, such a thing could not happen in a brahmin family in those days. A brahmin boy receiving first alms from a non-brahmin woman and calling her godmother was out of the question in a rigid society. Ramkumar was of course liberal and sympathetic and loved his dear little brother, but he was worried about the other brahmins and the reactions that were to follow. The family tried to convince Gadadhar, but he was firm: 'If I have to receive the sacred thread, I should be truthful. How can an untruthful person be worthy of the sacred thread?' This was a convincing

argument, and everyone knew Gadadhar was firm in his resolve. They did not know what to do.

The problem was solved with the intervention of the pious landlord of the village, Dharmadas Laha. He explained to the worried family that they need not be apprehensive about caste problems. There were precedents to Gadadhar's accepting a low-caste woman as his godmother; such a thing had happened in brahmin families before. Dharmadas added that Gadadhar's acceptance of Dhani as his godmother would be fine. All were pleased with this solution, and Gadadhar was invested with the sacred thread after traditional rituals. Since everyone in the village loved their Gadadhar, the sacred-thread investiture ceremony, though planned to be a small event, became a big celebration. The landlord took all interest in the ceremony. Gadadhar, of golden hue, shone brightly in his new robes and sacred thread, and received the holy Gayatri Mantra. Dhani offered the first alms to Ramakrishna and became his godmother.



After this event, Gadadhar dived deeper into the ocean of spirituality. Having been invested with the sacred thread, he now had the permission to worship the family deities—Raghuvira, Shitala and Shiva—and he performed the worship with utmost devotion. His worship would continue for hours. During this period, he had several spiritual

experiences, which he kept within himself lest his mother should be alarmed.

Days passed by. Gadadhar's absorption in contemplation and spiritual yearning increased constantly. A particular incident happened when Gadadhar was eleven years old. We have mentioned Dharmadas Laha, a virtuous man in Kamarpukur. During the year 1847-48, a religious ceremony took place in his house. Some scholars who had been invited to the ceremony began an argument over a complex scriptural issue. It was a long and unresolved debate—no solution could be found to the problem. Gadadhar was present there. He had heard the debate quietly. He whispered the solution to the problem into the ears of one of the arguing brahmins. That brahmin was astonished; Gadadhar was indeed right. He announced Gadadhar's solution and all were amazed.

Perhaps the first person to see that Gadadhar was out of the ordinary was a low-caste conch-bangle seller, Srinivas by name. This old man was a devotee of Krishna and used to listen to the recitations from *Bhagavata*. Somehow he had developed the 'third' eye, and could see through little Gadadhar's apparent personality. One day, taking Gadadhar to a secluded spot, Srinivas placed a garland which he himself had prepared around his neck and fed him with a few sweets. Then he said with tears: 'Gadadhar, I have become old and feel my end is approaching. I shall not have the good luck to see the many wonderful things you will be doing. Please bless me.'

Ramakrishna says:

➤ The first birth is a gift of the father; then comes the second birth, when one is invested with the sacred thread. There is still another birth at the time of being initiated into monastic life.¹⁸

➤ Without having realized God one cannot give up rituals altogether. How long should one practice the *sandhya* [the dawn-and-dusk adoration] and other forms of ritualistic worship? As long as one does not shed tears of joy at the name of God and feel a thrill in one's body. You will know that your ritualistic worship has come to an end when your eyes become filled with tears as you repeat 'Om Rama'.¹⁹

➤ You see, caste restrictions fall away of themselves. As coconut and palm trees grow up, the branches drop off of themselves. Caste conventions drop off like that.²⁰

➤ The mind is dispersed. Part of it has gone to Dacca, part to Delhi, and another part to Coochbehar. That mind is to be gathered in; it must be concentrated on one object. Yoga is not possible if there is the slightest obstacle. If there is a tiny break in the telegraph wire, then the news cannot be transmitted.²¹

➤ The grace of God falls alike on all His children, learned and illiterate—whoever longs for Him. The father has the same love for all his children. Suppose a father has five children. One calls him 'Baba', some 'Ba', and some 'Pa'. These cannot pronounce the whole word. Does the father love those who address him as 'Baba' more than those who call him 'Pa'?²²

¹⁸. Gospel p. 247

¹⁹. Gospel, p. 465

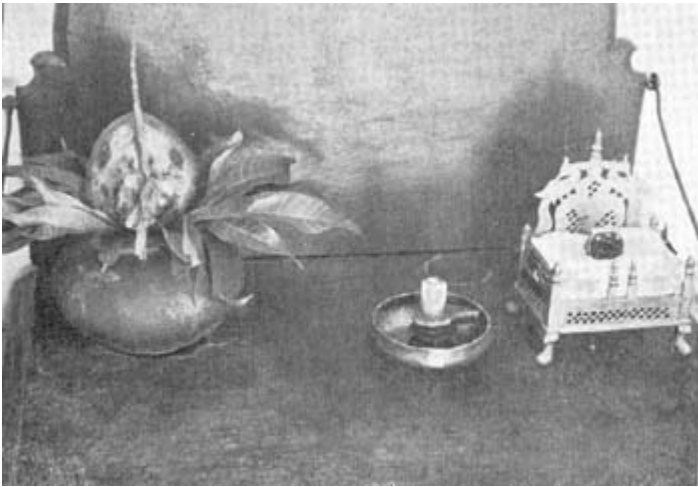
²⁰. Gospel, p. 1024

²¹. Gospel, p. 612

²². Gospel, p. 407

Opening the Floodgates of Emotion

Gadadhar, tall and golden in complexion, with chiselled features like those of a Roman God, with an unearthly, moon-like face, with a heavenly smile always—moved about in the village, spreading joy everywhere. The boy was well-known in the village as a wonderful painter, a remarkable sculptor, a soul-stirring reader of religious texts, a melodious singer, an excellent dramatist, an incredible devotee, and so on. Over and above all this, his deep unselfish love and concern for everyone was the highlight of his character. This expert in mimicry would imitate itinerant singers by copying their voices and songs, imitate dramatists and women, and through all this, remove the sadness or sorrow from their hearts and make people happy.



Raghuvira, Shitala Devi and Vishnu Shila, family deities

Shivaratri has been celebrated throughout the whole of India since ancient times. The day is marked by fasting the whole day, keeping an all-night vigil, and worshipping Shiva with prayers, rituals, and recitations

from scriptures. In some places, night-long religious dramas, called *jatras*, are arranged. During the Shivaratri festival of 1848, a drama was arranged in Kamarpukur. Gadadhar had fasted that day and was meditating on Shiva. That evening, when the drama was about to begin, they found out that the actor who was to play Shiva had become unwell, and could not play his role. People were waiting to see the drama. It was a difficult situation. The thought came to the authorities that Gadadhar could step into the breach. Gadadhar was an expert in all roles and so they could request the boy to play Shiva's part. That done, Gadadhar agreed reluctantly. At night, by the time he was decorated like Shiva, Gadadhar's mood had already changed: thoughts on Shiva had made deep inroads into his consciousness. When he entered the stage, he was all Shiva—he had completely forgotten himself. His whole soul had become immersed in Shiva, and he lost all outer consciousness. There was a commotion, and the drama had to be cancelled. But people had witnessed something extraordinary. Gadadhar had finally been 'exposed'—the whole village had witnessed his state of spiritual consciousness.

From then on, Gadadhar entered such high states of mind almost habitually. He would lose himself totally in whatever he did, and that would result in ecstatic states of raptures. He spent long hours in prayer and meditation, singing devotional songs and worship. He had no interest in education, or 'money-making' learning, as he called it. When his brothers and mother insisted on him continuing his studies, he said that he did not relish worldly education which would give him only a few pennies in return. However, he had an interest in spiritual literature. He himself copied many religious stories from books.

As days passed by, life showed several of its other faces to Gadadhar. When he was twelve years old, in 1849, an important ceremony took place in the house. His second brother Rameshwar, who was twenty-three years old, got married and so did his sister, Sarvamangala, who was nearing eleven years of age²³. This brought some joy to the family,

²³ Please don't be disturbed reading about the marriage of a girl-child of 11 years. Mother Sri Sarada Devi was just five years old when she was married to Ramakrishna. Such marriages were mere betrothals. The girl would visit her husband only after she had grown up and was an adult. Until then, she remained in her parents' house. Such marriages were common in Hindu households in ancient times, largely to protect girls from terrible attacks.

especially to his aging mother. She saw her daughter proudly go to her husband's house, and another daughter-in-law arriving home. Though there was poverty now, this event brought some breather to the pressure on the family. But this joy was short-lived; the family had to face sorrow the same year. Gadadhar's eldest brother, Ramkumar, lost his wife. Ramkumar was some sort of a visionary and could foretell the future. He had foretold that if his wife ever conceived, she would die. And this came to pass. She gave birth to a child, Akshay, and passed away. At the age of 44 then, Ramkumar had become a father but had lost his wife. Though he had all affection and love, he did not get much attached to the child. When enquired, he replied that there was no point in getting too attached to the child because he was not destined to live long.

Gadadhar observed everything. He saw the quick changes that the family had undergone: there was joy and there was sorrow, and everything seemed superficial and impermanent. He therefore began to long more and more for the Permanent behind the superficial and the temporary.

The family began to suffer for lack of money, as Ramkumar's meagre income somehow carried the day. To improve the situation, he thought of going to the city and try his hand at something. He chose Calcutta (now Kolkata), since it was the biggest city in Bengal. He decided to open a Sanskrit school to earn money. So Gadadhar's eldest brother, who was like his father in the father's absence, left the village in 1850. It was a heart-rending event for Gadadhar and the family.

Ramakrishna says:

➤ The way to realize God is through discrimination, renunciation, and yearning for Him. What kind of yearning? One should yearn for God as the cow, with a yearning heart, runs after its calf. Add your tears to your yearning.²⁴

➤ There are two kinds of meditation, one on the formless God and the other on God with form. But meditation on the formless God is extremely difficult. In that meditation you must wipe out all that you see or hear. You contemplate only the nature of your inner Self. While practising this form of meditation, one directs one's look to the forehead. It is meditation on the nature of one's inner Self after negating the world, following the Vedantic method of 'neti, neti'. There is another form of meditation known as the 'Vishnu Yoga'. The eyes are fixed on the tip of the nose. Half the look is directed inward, the other half outward. This is how one meditates on God with form.²⁵

➤ Cry to the Lord with an intensely yearning heart and you will certainly see Him. People shed a whole jug of tears for their wives and children. They swim in tears for money. But who weeps for God? Cry to Him with a real cry.²⁶

➤ God can be realized by true faith alone. And the realization is hastened if you believe everything about God.²⁷

²⁴. Gospel, p. 485

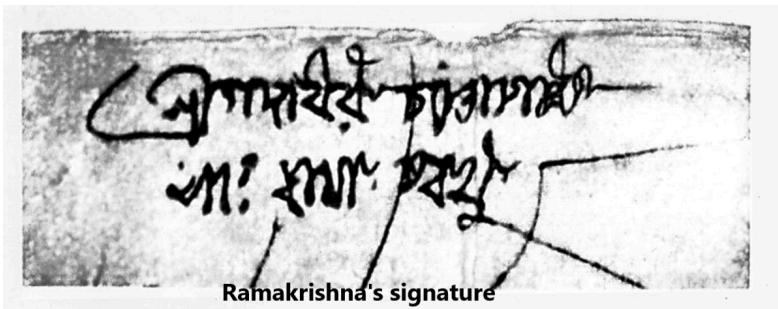
²⁵. Gospel, p. 403

²⁶. Gospel., p. 83

²⁷. Gospel, p. 293

Horizons Have no Limits

The transformations that took place made a deep impression in Gadadhar's mind. Death, birth, marriage, separation—all had happened in quick succession in the Chatterji family. All this made Gadadhar, who was now on the threshold of adulthood, deeply introspective and contemplative. He had given up his school-going. This was a big cause of worry for Chandramani Devi and Rameshwar. Further, Gadadhar now concentrated more on dramas. He formed a little theatrical group with his friends, and would practice and enact religious dramas—Rama's and Krishna's stories. All this effort just for the villagers. The one thing that the villagers got from Gadadhar was unselfish love. He loved everyone so deeply that they would find it difficult to be away from him. That apart, all his time was spent in solitude—with the Divine. Gadadhar's love for solitude made him enter the remote woods or the graveyard in the outskirts of the village and remain there in contemplation for long hours. Rameshwar observed his brother's unusual behaviour but could not say anything initially as he was aware of Gadadhar's so-called peculiarities.



Once on an annual visit to the village, the eldest brother, Ramkumar, also noticed Gadadhar in an extraordinary mood and living a peculiar lifestyle. He also came to know about the fate of Gadadhar's studies. He was anxious because life was hard. The fate of one who was quite qualified—as Ramkumar knew well enough—was hunger, poverty and

struggle for survival in those days; what to speak of an uneducated brahmin? So he tried to convince his dear Gadadhar that his future would be very difficult if he did not educate himself. However, Gadadhar was not keen enough to go for secular education; he was not just meant for the world. So Ramkumar decided that being in Kamarpukur would not help Gadadhar. He spoke to his mother that he would take Gadadhar with him to Calcutta: both to help him in his school as well as for Gadadhar's education. Chandramani Devi, who was deeply attached to her youngest son, reluctantly agreed. But



when the day of departure arrived, not just Chandramani Devi, but the whole village wept—for the beloved of the village was going away. It reminded some of Krishna's going away from Vrindavan to Mathura. The wonderful lad who kept the whole village in constant bliss was leaving. The beautiful village lost its lustre, some felt. Even as everyone wept, Gadadhar, who was then almost seventeen years old, came to Calcutta. It was the year 1852 and a new chapter had begun in his life.

Ramkumar's school was in a locality called Jhamapukur in Calcutta. It had already earned a good name and quite a number of students studied Sanskrit under him. The financial situation of Ramkumar, of course, had not improved much. Gadadhar's advent made things a little easier for his brother. Gadadhar took up the priestly activities--worship and other ritualistic services—which Ramkumar had been performing in different households.

He did this service with his natural devotion and intense sincerity—of course out of devotion and not for a salary. He became everyone's own. The elder brother tried to inspire him to study. But Gadadhar was not interested in studies at all. When Ramkumar wanted to know the reason, Gadadhar said that he was not interested in earnings-related education. Ramkumar could not say anything. Primarily, he could not gauge the depth of his brother's personality. However, Ramkumar did not object to Gadadhar's ways because he observed that Gadadhar was always in a highly devotional mood, without caring about the world; and this was not bad.



Three years passed in this way. Mother Chandramani Devi always waited eagerly for some good news from her son and spent her days in tears in memory of the activities of the sweetest child ever. Villagers repeatedly reminisced about his pastimes and enquired about the charming young man—was there news of his coming? There in Calcutta, the people with whom he interacted began to love this striking young man, so charming and yet so otherworldly, so brilliant and yet so devoted. Between 1852 and 1855, three years passed in this manner at the Jhamapukur Sanskrit School. And then things began to unfold.

Ramakrishna says:

- You all know from your experience how impermanent the world is. Look at it this way. How many people have come into the world and again passed away! People are born and they die. This moment the world is and the next it is not. It is impermanent. Those you think to be your own will not exist for you when you close your eyes in death.²⁸
- Don't you see that God incarnates Himself only in a family where innocence exists? How guileless Dasaratha [Rama's father] was! So was Nanda, Krishna's father.²⁹
- Does book-learning make one wise? He who has a commission from God never runs short of wisdom. That wisdom comes from God.³⁰
- If you meditate on an ideal you will acquire its nature. If you think of God day and night you will acquire the nature of God.³¹

²⁸. Gospel, p. 325

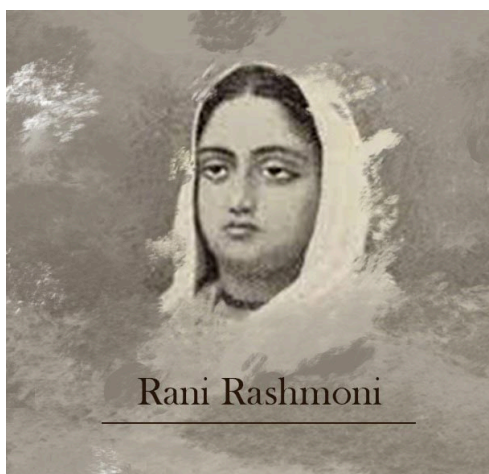
²⁹. Gospel, p. 448

³⁰. Gospel, p. 466

³¹. Gospel, p. 657

Seeking a Place in the Sun

Rani Rasmani was a rich lady in the Jan Bazar area of Calcutta. She and her husband, Raj Chandra Das, were devoted to Goddess Kali. After Raj Chandra passed away, Rani Rasmani inherited a lot of wealth. Wealth never left Rani Rasmani in peace though she was never selfish and spent money in charity. This brave and virtuous widow was tested and tried from all quarters—but she passed through all the ‘tests’ successfully, never compromising her principles such as truthfulness and sincerity. Down the years, Rani Rasmani helped hundreds of poor people. Raj Chandra and Rani had four daughters, all married. Their third daughter had been married to a virtuous young man named Mathuranath Biswas [also Mathur Mohan Biswas]. When she passed away at a young age, Mathuranath married the fourth daughter and continued to be Rani’s son-in-law and right-hand man.



In the year 1847, Rani Rasmani made all necessary arrangements for a pilgrimage to Varanasi. The night before the day of her departure, she had a dream. Mother Kali appeared in her dream and asked her to construct a temple instead of going on a pilgrimage. This extraordinary happening

inspired Rani Rasmani immensely and a strong desire to construct a Kali Temple in Calcutta developed in her. The idea soon became a reality, and she began constructing the temple in Dakshineswar on the bank of the River Ganga. It was to be a huge temple complex. Along with the Kali Temple, there were to be 12 temples for Shiva, a temple for Krishna, quarters for the Rani's family and several other buildings. After several years of hard work and a lot of expenditure, the temple was ready for inauguration by early 1855.



Mathuranath Biswas

There were, however, two problems. One, Rani Rasmani belonged to a so-called low caste and so could not offer food to the deity, though she wished ardently to. This was because the prevalent social custom prohibited her from doing so. Rasmani began to consult many pundits about this question so as to find a solution. Nobody gave a proper solution. When she was about to lose hope, a pundit sent a written solution, which was so wonderful, so apt, and so perfect that Rani Rasmani was immensely delighted. And that pundit was Ramkumar. His intelligent solution was that in order to answer this caste-riddle, Rani Rasmani could donate the temple complex to a brahmin just before the inauguration, symbolically. Thus, there would be no social objection in offering food to the Divine Mother, Kali. Ramkumar's solution found wide acceptance.

The second problem was, the temple having been built by a woman of a lower caste, no brahmin would agree to be the officiating priest, because social custom prohibited it. Rasmani was helpless. After she had done everything, there was this dilemma. A lot of search and research were made for some priest, but without result. Finally, the Rani, who had formed a high opinion about Ramkumar, requested him to be the officiating priest. Ramkumar agreed, and thus he became the first priest of Mother Kali. On 31 May 1855, the dream of Rani Rasmani was finally realized when the temple was inaugurated with pomp. Ramkumar officiated as priest.



Gadadhar continued to stay at the Jhamapukur Sanskrit School and performed his duties for a few more days. But when Ramkumar requested him to come over to Dakshineswar, he did so. It was probably by July 1855 that Gadadhar came to Dakshineswar, leaving the school for good. The Sanskrit school, which had run for five years, had to be closed. However, Gadadhar was austere about his own food: he would not accept cooked food from anybody. So Ramkumar suggested that his brother cook his food at the temple compound. Gadadhar agreed to this. He cooked his food for some days, but subsequently discontinued it.

Though Gadadhar remained aloof and avoided public gaze, by the end of July 1855 he was noticed more than clearly. Mathuranath, Rani

Rasmani's son-in-law, was deeply impressed with the young man who walked about in the complex, absorbed in himself. Brilliant, devout and handsome, Gadadhar was one who stood out in a crowd. Mathur offered him a job, but Gadadhar politely refused it. He wanted God. Meanwhile, Gadadhar's cousin's son, Hriday Ram Mukherji, Hriday for short, came to Calcutta seeking a job from the village and entered the temple precincts. Hriday, a young man of sixteen, had met Gadadhar before but now he was deeply impressed by him. He began to accompany Gadadhar in all his activities. In time, he was to play a pivotal role in Gadadhar's life: he served the God-intoxicated soul for fourteen years.



One day, Mathuranath saw a small image of Shiva, so beautiful and so perfect, which Gadadhar was worshipping. He asked Hriday where they got the image from, because to get such a perfect image was difficult. When Mathur heard that Gadadhar had himself made it, he was amazed. He took the image and showed it to Rani Rasmani, who was deeply impressed too. However, Gadadhar avoided Mathur because he might ask him to accept service in the temple. He was averse to earning money for selfish ends. One day, however, Mathur 'caught' him, so to say, and requested him to accept the service of dressing Mother Kali. Gadadhar had objections because he did not like to earn money for his own sake. However, as it was a service to the Divine Mother, he accepted the job. By August 1855, Gadadhar began serving the Divine Mother.

Ramakrishna says:

➤ You asked about caste distinctions. There is only one way to remove them, and that is by love of God. Lovers of God have no caste. Through this divine love the untouchable becomes pure, the pariah no longer remains a pariah. Sri Chaitanya embraced all, including the pariahs.³²

➤ The goal of life is not the earning of money, but the service of God. Money is not harmful if it is devoted to the service of God.³³

➤ Dive deep; one does not get the precious gems by merely floating on the surface.³⁴

➤ Just as you practise much in order to sing, dance, and play on instruments, so one should practise the art of fixing the mind on God. One should practise regularly such disciplines as worship, japa, and meditation.³⁵

➤ Suppose there is an error in worshipping the clay image. Doesn't God know that through it He alone is being invoked? He will be pleased with that very worship. Why should you get a headache over it? You had better try for knowledge and devotion yourself.³⁶

³². Gospel, p. 157

³³. Gospel, p. 114

³⁴. Gospel, p. 353

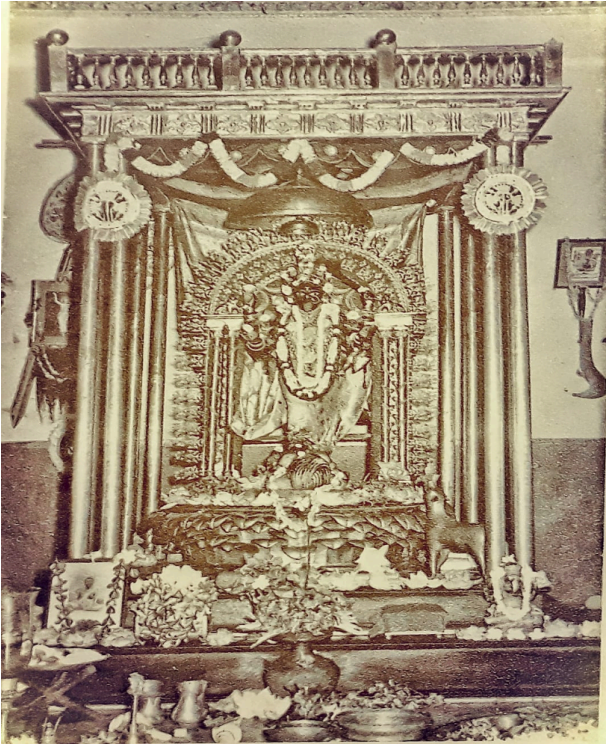
³⁵. Gospel, p. 427

³⁶. Gospel, p. 80

A Massive Step Forward

There are one or two versions as to when exactly Gadadhar came to be called Ramakrishna. We shall call him Ramakrishna from this point of the story.

Ramakrishna's service to the Divine Mother was exemplary. Since Hriday had assumed responsibility for the ornaments of the Divine Mother, Ramakrishna was free and he spent his time in the affectionate service of Mother Kali—collecting flowers, making garlands, dressing the image, and so on.



One day, the priest of the Radhakanta [Krishna] Temple, which is next to the Kali Temple, accidentally dropped the Krishna image and broke its leg. The priest was scared to death and did not know what to do. There was

a big commotion naturally. Should the broken image be replaced or not was the question. Pundits were consulted. They all said that no worship could be done to a broken image, and so the image should be put in the River Ganga and a new image should be installed in its place. Mathur, however, wanted to consult Ramakrishna. Mathur had observed the extraordinary dedication of Ramakrishna in his worship—whether it was the image he himself made, or the image of Mother Kali. Furthermore, those songs which Ramakrishna sang with deep emotion, with tears rolling down, unconcerned about praise or blame of the world, had already touched both Rani's and Mathur's hearts. Mathur also knew that Ramakrishna would enter into ecstatic states frequently and that he was different from others. So his regard for Ramakrishna had increased. Ramakrishna, when asked about the broken image, said in a divine mood that if one of Rani Rasmani's sons-in-law broke his leg, the Rani would not replace him; she would treat him. So should be the consideration towards the image.



This extraordinary solution made everyone spellbound. Mathur and Rani Rasmani were very pleased. Ramakrishna himself was asked to repair

the image and he did it with utmost skill. No one, in spite of keen observation, could say where exactly the image had been broken.

The priest of the Radhakanta temple left the job. So upon Mathur's request Ramakrishna became the worshipper at the Radhakanta Temple. This happened perhaps in September-October 1855. Within four months of the temple's inauguration and Ramakrishna's arrival, he became a priest. Along with all these activities, the yearning of Sri Ramakrishna for God-vision increased tremendously. When some people saw him worshipping, they would comment that it was as if the Lord Himself sat there to worship: Ramakrishna's body would become luminous, and he would be totally oblivious of the world. His worship also proved that the mantras and *mudras* that the scriptures enjoin are not mere words but are all true, meaningful and essential.



Along with Ramakrishna's worship, something else was also happening. His intense yearning for Ishvara was increasing by the minute. His yearning to have God's vision was intense. Ramkumar would observe his brother going away somewhere at night. When he followed him once, he saw Ramakrishna sitting under a tree in the grove attached to the temple, deep in meditation. Perhaps homesick, Ramkumar would think seeing such things, but it was not at all so. Ramkumar could not understand the sentiments of his brother, but wanted to bring his 'erring' brother to the proper path. So he told him that he was getting old and wished to teach Ramakrishna the science of worship of the Divine Mother, so that some day, Ramakrishna could assume the responsibility. Ramakrishna agreed to learn the system of worship. He learnt it very quickly. But in order to worship the Divine Mother traditionally, one has to be initiated into the mantra of Shakti,

say the scriptures. So Ramakrishna received the Shakti mantra from a devotee called Kenaram Bhattacharya. Seeing that his brother had become proficient in the worship of the Divine Mother, Ramkumar one day : requested Mathur to appoint his brother to be the worshipper of Mother Kali in his place.. We have mentioned that Ramkumar had some mystical capabilities and he could foretell future events. Perhaps he had sensed something about himself. Anyway, Mathur gladly agreed to his proposal. He made Ramkumar the priest of Radhakanta for some time. Soon, however, Ramkumar requested to be relieved even of that service as he had become old, and so Hriday became the priest of that temple. In this way, Ramakrishna began worshipping the Divine Mother towards the end of 1855. He was only 19 years old then.

Ramkumar Chatterji now saw that his brother had settled down, though there were some “vagaries” in him still. Seeing his dear brother dedicated to his job, Ramkumar felt relieved. Though fifty years old, he had had his share of suffering and sorrow, and had endured life’s peaks and troughs. He was also tired of city life and wanted to go back to his village. His son, Akshay, was in the village, and was six years old then. So he decided to return home. However, this pious soul, who had laid the worship of Divine Mother in Dakshineswar on solid foundations, who had taught Sanskrit to many in Calcutta and had worshipped in many houses, who had been like a father to Ramakrishna and a pillar for the family, could not make it to Kamarpukur. One day, while on a little trip to a nearby place, he died suddenly. Darkness descended in the hearts of everyone back home, and Ramakrishna was immensely sad. It was all so sudden and so painful. Thus the year 1855 gave varied experiences to Ramakrishna. More than anything else, by the age of 19, the responsibility of Kali worship—the most important service in the temple complex—had fallen on his shoulders..

Ramakrishna says:

➤ One must propitiate the Divine Mother, the Primal Energy, in order to obtain God's grace.³⁷

➤ Sometimes I worship God with rituals, sometimes I repeat His name, sometimes I meditate on Him, sometimes I sing His name and glories, sometimes I dance in His name.³⁸

➤ You were talking of worshipping the clay image. Even if the image is made of clay, there is a need for that sort of worship. God Himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the Universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge.³⁹

➤ Even if one lives in the world, one must go into solitude now and then. It will be of great help if he goes away from his family, lives alone, and weeps for God even for three days. Even if he thinks of God for one day in solitude, when he has the leisure, that too will do him good.⁴⁰

➤ One must have stern determination, then alone is spiritual practice possible. One must make a firm resolve.⁴¹

³⁷. Gospel, p. 116

³⁸ Gospel, p. 867

³⁹. Gospel, p. 81

⁴⁰. Gospel, p. 139

⁴¹. Gospel, p. 210

Moments before the Revelation

Ramkumar's passing saddened Ramakrishna. He began to incline more and more towards the Divine as the temporality of the world became as evident as daylight. His yearning for the Divine intensified beyond measure and he concentrated completely on his worship of Mother Kali. Gradually She was becoming a living Image to him and the centre of his life. He served Her with such devotion as would move even a stone, sang songs to please Her, and when the temple closed at night, would enter the little grove nearby, and sit there in meditation. His nephew, Hriday, was perplexed with Ramakrishna's behaviour. A young man who had a good job should think of his worldly prospects and future. Instead, Ramakrishna was behaving strangely. Hriday wanted to see what he did in the grove at night. When he followed Ramakrishna one particular night, he saw that Ramakrishna had removed his clothes and sacred thread, and was sitting naked, in deep meditation. Hriday now thought that his uncle had gone mad. He tried to scare Ramakrishna by throwing stones near the spot. This he did on several nights. Ramakrishna understood that it was all the mischief of his nephew and continued his meditation. Unable to see his uncle 'wasting away his life', as common people think of spiritual aspirants, Hriday tried to warn him, scolded him, and asked him why he sat naked in meditation. Ramakrishna replied that everything was bondage for the soul: name, fame, prestige, social status, etc. In order to see God, one has to give up everything and be free.

Gradually the news began to spread amongst the other employees of the temple complex that Ramakrishna was behaving bizarrely. They used to observe his eccentric methods of adoration, behaviour, and lifestyle. Now they saw him doing insane things, as they thought they were. This handsome brahmin youth cleaned the places where low-caste people sat and ate, rendered service to them, and did other things which a Brahmin or upper caste should never do. They saw him do menial service to the poor to humble himself and wondered what had happened to him. They were shocked: how could he retain his brahminhood, they wondered, if he did

such things? Then they saw him weeping piteously before the image of the Divine Mother, rubbing his face on the ground and pleading for Her vision, and thought he had been suffering from some strange ailment. Further, his method of worship was in itself strange. Ordinary priests followed the prescribed code of worship. But Ramakrishna would continue his worship from morning till night. His food offerings were elaborate: he would think that the Divine Mother was eating the food and would sit and sing for Her. He would lift a morsel and put it before Her mouth. He would talk to Her lovingly as if She were present there. All this was the talk of the temple complex now. How could ordinary people, drowned in small desires and ambitions, understand all this?

Ramakrishna has described his state of mind during the period of his spiritual practices: 'Because at that time I paid no attention whatsoever to taking care of my body, my hair grew long and became matted with dirt. During meditation my body would become stiff and motionless because of my intense concentration. Thinking it to be an inert object, birds would perch freely on my head and peck at the dust of my matted hair seeking particles of grain. Again sometimes the pain of my separation from God would make me rub my face desperately on the ground until it was cut and bleeding in some places. I was completely oblivious to how the entire day would slip away in meditation, devotional practices, prayer and self-surrender. At the advent of evening when the temple garden reverberated with the sound of conch shells and bells, I would be reminded: "Another day is gone in vain; still I have not seen the Mother." Then such a frenzy of despair would seize my soul that I could bear no more. I would throw myself down and shout: "Mother, still You haven't revealed Yourself to me." I would cry bitterly, tormented with pain. People would say, "He is suffering from colic; that is why he is crying so terribly."

Critics carried the news of this peculiar young man's outlandish ways to Mathur and Rasmani. Mathur himself came to investigate. Instead of being angry with Ramakrishna, he was immensely pleased. He reported to Rani Rasmani that Ramakrishna's sincere devotion stood out a mile and that their temple would soon be having the presence of Divine Mother Kali with such a wonderful worship.

Ramakrishna wept constantly repeating the Mother's name. He could not sleep. Who can understand the yearning of a soul for God? His days were passing in great distress for not having had the Mother's vision.

Finally, one day, he could no longer tolerate the pain of his separation from Divine Mother. He thought that his life without the Mother's vision was in vain. So he took a sword that was hanging in the temple, and was about to make the ultimate sacrifice—ending his life.

Then it happened. What happened next comes from Ramakrishna's own mouth: 'It was as if the room, doors, temple, and everything else vanished altogether, as if there were nothing anywhere! And what I saw was an infinite shoreless ocean of light; that ocean was consciousness. However far and in whatever direction I looked, I saw shining waves, one after another, coming towards me to swallow me up. They were madly rushing towards me from all sides, with a terrific noise. Very soon they were upon me, and they pushed me down into unknown depths, I panted and struggled and lost Consciousness.' This was the first cosmic vision of supreme Consciousness that Ramakrishna had and he understood in the core of his heart that he stood in the Mother's presence and that this was indeed the true nature of the Divine Mother.

The vision left him without outer consciousness, and swimming in the ocean of bliss, he did not know whether it was day or night. When he became 'normal' once again, Ramakrishna was once again seized with the most intense yearning to have the same vision again—and constantly. His yearning only increased a millionfold after the beatific experience. He beat his chest, rubbed his face on the ground and wept before the Mother to grant him the vision constantly. Onlookers saw all this with amazement but to him everything around was just like a picture, a hazy shadow; his Mother alone was real. And the Divine Mother blessed him with Her constant vision, consoling words, affection, love, and so on.

'If you are really there, O Divine Mother, reveal yourself to me,' was Ramakrishna's constant prayer, and that had been answered. This was the year 1856, and Ramakrishna was then only 20 years old.

Ramakrishna says:

➤ Spiritual discipline is necessary in order to see God. I had to pass through very severe discipline. How many austerities I practised under the bel-tree! I would lie down under it, crying to the Divine Mother, 'O Mother, reveal Thyself to me.' Tears would flow in torrents and soak my body.⁴²

➤ God talked to me. It was not merely His vision. Yes, He talked to me. Under the banyan-tree I saw Him coming from the Ganga. Then we laughed so much! By way of playing with me He cracked my fingers. Then He talked. Yes, He talked to me. For three days I wept continuously. And He revealed to me what is in the Vedas, the Puranas, the Tantras, and the other scriptures.⁴³

➤ One does not follow the injunctions of ceremonial worship when one develops *raga-bhakti*, when one loves God as one's own. Without this intense attachment, this passionate love, one cannot realize God.⁴⁴

➤ My Divine Mother is not only formless. She has forms as well. One can see Her forms.⁴⁵

⁴². Gospel, p. 238

⁴³. Gospel, p. 830

⁴⁴. Gospel, p. 196

⁴⁵. Gospel, p. 175

The Deluge of Love

Ramakrishna's vision of the Divine Mother transformed him completely. Now he became the child of the Divine Mother. Divine Mother Kali was a constant living presence for him, guiding his every single step. His mode of worship too changed altogether. Hriday, the other priests and onlookers criticized him to their heart's fill, but who could understand the state of one who was constantly seeing God? Hriday used to observe his uncle's strange adoration of Mother Kali. One day, for instance, he saw Ramakrishna meditating with a hibiscus flower in his hand and crying out suddenly: 'Mother, wait, wait! Let me repeat the mantra and you shall eat after that.' Again, Ramakrishna would place the flower first on his head and then offer it to Mother. It was all 'abnormal' to the ordinary mind. Further, Hriday saw Ramakrishna constantly talking to someone, joking, laughing, and so on. How could he understand?



As Ramakrishna himself said in later times, people without spiritual discipline and prayer, without renunciation and dispassion cannot understand the glory of the spiritual world. Ramakrishna saw his Divine

Mother like a little girl, running up the stairs of the temple at night and with her long hair being blown by the breeze, looking once towards the River Ganga, and then towards Calcutta. As She walked like a little girl, her anklets would make jingling sound and Ramakrishna would see all that so clearly. While reminiscing his spiritual practices, Ramakrishna says: 'When I first had my exalted state of mind, my body would radiate light. My chest was always flushed. Then I said to the Divine Mother: "Mother, do not reveal Thyself outwardly. Please go inside." That is why my complexion is so dull now. If my body were still luminous, people would have tormented me; a crowd would always have thronged here. Now there is no outer manifestation. That keeps weeds away.'

The manager of the temple also belonged to the ordinary run. Many people complained to him about the 'madness' of Ramakrishna, the 'sacrilege' he was committing and the 'irreverence' he was showing to Divine Mother. So once again the manager and others complained to Mathuranath: they said that in the name of worship, Ramakrishna was ruining everything. Ramakrishna himself says: 'The manager of the temple garden wrote to Mathur Babu saying that I was feeding the cat with the offering intended for the Divine Mother.' Mathur himself came to investigate again. He saw Ramakrishna's worship for a long time. He felt the divine presence there and understood that all the movements and devotional sentiments Ramakrishna expressed were born of genuine love for the Divine Mother, that he was *the* salt of the earth, and that Mother was present there in flesh and blood for him. Mathur was immensely pleased that the consecration of the temple had been fruitful. He sent an order to everyone the next day, saying that nobody should disturb Ramakrishna in his worship.

The temple staff saw that Mathur did not pull the plug on Ramakrishna's eccentricities. They decided that it was impossible to understand the ways of the rich. Jealousy ruled the roost now. Some time later, a family priest of Mathur's attacked Ramakrishna physically when he was sitting in an exalted state of consciousness. He pushed Ramakrishna twice or thrice and said: 'Tell me how you hypnotized Mathur Babu.' Ramakrishna could not speak because his mind could not come down to the normal plane immediately. The priest then kicked Ramakrishna thrice and went away.

Rani Rasmani, on hearing that the 'Young Bhattacharya' had 'awakened' the Divine Mother, wanted to participate in the worship and came to Dakshinewar. As she did occasionally, she came one morning, sat in the temple offering flowers to Mother Kali with all devotion. She asked Ramakrishna to sing a few songs for her. Overpowered by devotion, Ramakrishna began to sing. Suddenly, he slapped Rani and exclaimed: 'Shame! Such thoughts even here?' Rasmani had become absentminded and engrossed in some pending lawsuits. So Ramakrishna, like a father, had taken exception to that in an exalted state of mind. Rani understood the situation, considered it Mother's blessing and concentrated on Her. She and Ramakrishna then continued with their adoration. But how could the employees of the temple understand this? They seized the opportunity to teach the 'mad brahmin' a lesson. There was a big commotion outside, everyone wanting to please Rani by punishing Ramakrishna. Rani Rasmani understood that these opportunists would harm Ramakrishna so that she should be pleased. So she declared: "What Ramakrishna had done is correct. Nobody should bother about it." Mathur too sent a similar order. Sadly for the temple workers, one more golden opportunity to prove that Ramakrishna's actions were histrionics went awry.

The year 1857 saw India in great political turmoil [known popularly as "the sepoy mutiny". Please read all about it on the internet, if you are interested.], and the epicentre was just a few kilometres away from where Ramakrishna manifested his divine nature. However, here Ramakrishna dived deeper and deeper in his struggles, forgetting the world absolutely. He remained in the temple garden always, immersed in his practices. He went out of the temple complex very rarely. If he did, he would go to the Kali Temple in Kalighat, or to some other temple. Ramakrishna would also participate—accompanied by Hriday—in the Vaishnava annual festival at Panihati, a place not so distant from Dakshineswar. His participation in the festival in June 1857 must be mentioned. During this year's festivities, a saintly person by name Vaishnava Charan met Ramakrishna and immediately saw in him someone out of the ordinary; he saw that Ramakrishna was by all means different from others. He was astounded to see such a manifestation of spirituality. He inspired his friends and soon they began singing devotional songs in front of Ramakrishna and started dancing around him. Ramakrishna went into profound ecstasy or samadhi. This was the second open recognition of Ramakrishna's divinity. The first instance was, as we remember, when Srinivas worshipped him in Kamarpukur.

Ramakrishna's was all spirituality: he remained inebriated with divine love continuously—day and night. It became impossible for him to continue ritualistic worship at that state. As he remarked: 'An elephant entering a hut creates havoc within and ultimately shakes it down. The elephant of divine emotion enters the hut of this body and shatters it to pieces.' He had to do something about this. So he confided to Mathur about his inability. Mathur, who respected Ramakrishna very highly, immediately understood him and arranged for Hriday to worship the Divine Mother. A new arrival in Dakshineswar from the village, Haladhari, was made the worshipper of Radhakanta. Mathur now tried his utmost to keep Ramakrishna in the temple complex, caring for him, protecting him, serving him, and seeking his company—knowing well that here was someone unique.



পঞ্চবটী
১৯০০ খ্রিস্টাব্দে গৃহীত চিত্র

Ramakrishna used to spend his nights in meditation here

Ramakrishna says:

➤ When a man is inebriated with divine love, he doesn't abide by the injunctions of the Vedas. He picks *durva* grass for the worship of the Deity, but he doesn't clean it. He picks whatever he lays his hands on. While gathering *tulsi* (basil) leaves he even breaks the branches. Ah! What a state of mind I passed through. But a devotee must assume toward God a particular attitude, God in His incarnation as Rama demonstrated *shanta*, *dasya*, *vatsalya* and *sakhya*. But Krishna demonstrated *madhura*, besides all these.⁴⁶

➤ When one develops love of God, one needs nothing else.⁴⁷

➤ One should have such burning faith in God that one can say: 'What? I have repeated the name of God, and can sin still cling to me? How can I be a sinner any more? How can I be in bondage any more?'⁴⁸

➤ With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. The Vaishnavas will realize God, and so will the Saktas, the Vedantists, and the Brahmos. The Mussalmans and Christians will realize Him too. All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere.⁴⁹

⁴⁶. Gospel, p. 957

⁴⁷. Gospel, p. 957

⁴⁸. Gospel, p. 138

⁴⁹. Gospel, p. 191

The Blazing Fire of Aspiration

It was still 1857. Having had the extraordinary vision of the Divine Mother and having experienced the bliss of Her presence constantly, Ramakrishna's mind now turned to his family deity, Raghuvir. Raghuvir is one of Rama's names. Ramakrishna wanted to have Rama's vision. The devotee who seeks God generally follows the example of some of the well-known devotees who have tried this path to perfection. So Ramakrishna thought that the best way to please Rama was to be like Hanuman, Rama's devout servant. Hanuman had practised *dasya bhava*, the servant attitude. Ramakrishna chose this attitude. In Ramakrishna, even an insignificant act gained supreme attention; even a simple thing was done with utmost care, devotion, attention, and to perfection. So when he began to practice the mood of the servant of Rama, all his activities and movements became exactly like those of Hanuman. Never for one moment did he remember his real identity: he was completely Hanuman. He constantly repeated the name of Rama and even tied a piece of cloth resembling a tail. What was most surprising in Ramakrishna were the changes that his physical body showed: the intensity of his sentiment brought about suitable changes in the body. Thus, to the surprise of all, he mentioned later that during this period his coccyx had extended about an inch like a little tail.

The result of his passionate spiritual struggle was not delayed for too long. We must quote his own words here: 'One day at that time I was seated under the Panchavati [the grove]. I was in a state of ordinary consciousness, well aware of my surroundings. All of a sudden, a luminous female figure of exquisite grace appeared before me. Her radiance lit up everything around her. I could see her, and at the same time I could see the trees and plants of the Panchavati, the Ganga, everything. I saw that she was human, for she had no marks of a divine being upon her, such as a third eye. But the sublime qualities reflected in her face—love, sorrow, compassion, and fortitude—are seldom to be seen even among goddesses. Slowly she advanced towards me, from the direction of the north, all the while looking at me with gracious eyes. I was amazed. I was wondering who

she might be when suddenly a monkey uttered a cry, fell at her feet, and rolled on the ground. Then it came to me in a flash that this must be Sita, the daughter of King Janaka, who had suffered so greatly all her life, and whose whole life had been devoted to her husband, Rama. Overcome by emotion, I cried out “Mother” and was about to fall at her feet when she instantly passed into my body and became merged in it. Overwhelmed with joy and wonder, I fell unconscious on the ground. This was the first vision I ever had with my eyes wide open, and when I wasn’t meditating.’



Panchavati

A word about the grove or Panchavati, which was situated next to the temple compound. Scriptures say that in order to practice austerities, the ideal place is a Panchavati—a group of five holy trees. Ramakrishna himself planted the five trees in the grove, whose traditional names are: Embelica (*Amalaki*), Peepul (*Ashwattha*), Ashoka, Bel (*Bilva*), and Banyan (*Vata*)—and thus the little grove too came to be known as Panchavati.

After having had the vision of Mother Sita, Ramakrishna discontinued the practice of *dasya bhava*, the mood of the servant of God. His insatiable aspiration to know God through diverse ways raged like wild fire within him. A few days later, there came a few mendicants and monks to Dakshineswar, from whom he learnt the art of respiration [*pranayama*] and other practices of Hatha Yoga. Ramakrishna diligently practiced all the exercises that Hatha Yoga teaches. However, he discouraged others from

following them because the concentration in that system is mainly on keeping the body strong and making life longer. Further, there could be complications. Ramakrishna himself had to suffer the effects of the practice. This was how.

One night, some days after he had completed the Hatha Yoga practices, Ramakrishna suddenly began to vomit blood. It was dreadful. He and the others standing around imagined that it was all due to Haladhari's curse. Haladhari, one of the priests, had cursed Ramakrishna some days ago. The reason was, Ramakrishna had objected to his immoral practices. Haladhari, seeing Ramakrishna vomiting blood, began to weep out of fear that his curse had taken effect. However, a monk who was visiting Dakshineswar at that time saw the colour of the blood and said that it was something different. The blood was the effect of his advanced Hatha Yoga practices. Had the same blood entered the brain, Ramakrishna would have remained like a stone in samadhi. Fortunately, it had somehow found its way out. The monk said that it was a miracle that such a thing had happened. He was sure that Ramakrishna had a great mission to fulfil in the world and so he had been saved.

One more thing Ramakrishna did during this time was to take a coin in one hand and a lump of clay in another, and throwing both into the River Ganga, saying: 'Rupee is clay; clay is rupee.' He commented about this act: 'I renounced gold and silver, saying "Rupee is clay and clay is rupee: gold is clay and clay is gold." With these words I threw gold, silver and clay into the Ganga.' This symbolic act was to impress on his own mind that for a man of spiritual attainment, the world had little meaning and significance.

Ramakrishna says:

- I am the servant of God alone. Whom else shall I serve?⁵⁰
- Do your duties and fix your mind on God. And know that house, family, and son do not belong to you: they are God's. You are only His servant.⁵¹
- 'O God, Thou art the Lord and I am Thy servant'—that is the servant's attitude, a very good one for aspirants.⁵²
- Egotism is of the nature of inertia (*tamas*): it is begotten by ignorance. On account of the barrier of ego one does not see God. 'All troubles come to an end when the ego dies.' It is futile to be egotistic. Neither the body nor wealth will last. ...Therefore I say to you all, you may be a judge or anybody else, but it is all for two days only. Therefore you should give up vanity and pride.⁵³

⁵⁰. Gospel, p. 518

⁵¹. Gospel, p. 561

⁵². Gospel, p. 610

⁵³. Gospel, p. 630

In Nature's Company

Sometimes even those who understand somebody very well become confused, seeing certain oddness, what to speak of understanding Ramakrishna, who lived in so many different kinds of spiritual states every day! Rani Rasmani and Mathur also became confused once. Though they were convinced that Ramakrishna, an extremely handsome young man, was an extraordinary spiritual aspirant who had attained God, his apparently strange behaviour occasionally made them think that perhaps Ramakrishna's strict and too rigid moral life was the reason for such a behaviour. They therefore decided that he had some strange mental disorder and owing to this he would constantly cry 'Mother, Mother.' So they planned to get his mind attracted to the world. Mathur sent a few women to 'bring normalcy' to his mind. When Ramakrishna saw these women, his whole nature became exactly like that of a little, helpless child, and he cried 'mother, mother' and entered a state of trance. Instantly, those women felt an intense feeling of maternal affection towards him instead of other feelings. The ladies also became scared that they were trying to disturb a absolutely pure person and left the place quickly.

It was the year 1858. Rumours had reached Kamarpukur that Ramakrishna had gone mad. Chandramani Devi was terribly affected to listen to this sad news. She loved her youngest son very dearly, and was tormented to hear that he had gone wayward and was disturbed mentally. Rameshwar too was concerned and felt that his brother should immediately be brought back and treated well. So arrangements were made and Ramakrishna agreed to visit the village.

Ramakrishna was undoubtedly happy to be in the village once again after so many years. He was not the same Gadadhar though. The villagers, however, saw the same compassion, more love and more affection this time and they crowded around him as usual. Chandramani Devi was relieved to find that her son was not 'mad' after all. Ramakrishna's yearning for the Divine Mother could not be hidden. His mind constantly ran towards the

Divine Mother, and ordinary people could never understand his outbursts of divine names. To everyone's dismay, he showed absolutely no attachment to anything of the world. Though Chandramani Devi tried her utmost to create interest in him in household affairs, he showed no interest at all. That does not mean, however, that he did not revere his mother. He served her more affectionately, seeing the signs of age in her. But he remained completely indifferent to everything worldly.



Chandramani Devi now wondered: had a ghost entered him? She, who had suffered much in life, decided that she had to do something to cure her son. An exorcist was brought to drive away the 'ghost' which she thought had entered her son. The exorcist came, prepared an elaborate ritual and displayed all his knowledge, but nothing happened. Later, a team of specialist exorcists were invited. They tried to drive away the 'ghost' through séance and mediumistic methods. They also did something more: they brought down a spirit. And that spirit declared: 'Gadadhar is not possessed by any ghost, and he has no disease at all. It is all intense divine aspiration.' That settled matters at least for sometime.

In Kamarpukur, Ramakrishna only intensified his spiritual practices, as it were. He would go away at night to the cremation ground and practice meditation and other rituals. Those rituals were not for the ordinary at all. In spite of such small 'peculiarities' according to the worldly minded, he was largely 'normal' now. So the family now began contemplating his marriage. They thought that marriage would make him further normal and cure him of all ailments. Though they searched for a girl in secret, nowhere could a suitable girl be found. Ramakrishna came to know of their attempts and said that there was a girl earmarked for him in Jayrambati. A search was made, and it was found that indeed Ramachandra Mukherji and Shyamasundari Devi of Jayrambati had a daughter, whose simplicity, purity, and devotion were the talk of the village. She was Sarada Devi.



Simhavahini Temple, Jayrambati



Jayrambati Village

Sarada Devi was born in December 1853. Before her birth, both her parents had had extraordinary experiences. And since her birth, though she apparently remained a simple little girl, her spiritual glow manifested itself. This little girl, Sarada Devi, was chosen as Ramakrishna's bride.⁵⁴ The news spread that Ramakrishna was getting married. People rejoiced. Ramakrishna was married to Sarada Devi in May 1859. Poverty forced both families to keep the ceremony as simple as possible. Even ornaments for Sarada Devi had to be borrowed. But the marriage took place, to the immense satisfaction of Chandramani Devi and others.

For Ramakrishna himself, marriage, other than being a ritual, did not matter at all. Ramakrishna was to say about his marriage: 'Marriage is necessary for the sake of formal procedure (*samskara*). But how could I lead a worldly life? So uncontrollable was my divine fervour that every time the sacred thread was put around my neck it dropped off.' So this was a

⁵⁴ By "marriage", betrothal is intended here. In ancient India, though the ceremony of marriage would take place, the girl would remain with her parents until she was old enough to shoulder responsibilities. It was then alone that she went to her husband's house. Further, marriage and *vivaha* are two different concepts. In *vivaha*, the relationship is life-long and intensely spiritual. Grihastha Dharma is one of the spiritual paths to Divine.

celestial marriage, far away from anything mundane or worldly. After marriage, little Sarada Devi was taken away to Jayrambati. Ramakrishna remained in the village for some more months and towards the beginning of 1860, he returned to Calcutta. He was now an attractive young man, twenty-four years of age. The peace and serenity of the village had removed the physical strain that Ramakrishna's spiritual struggle had wrought.



Ramakrishna says:

- After enjoying divine bliss, one looks on the world as crow-dropping. At the very outset I utterly renounced everything.⁵⁵
- You don't have to perform duties all your life. As you develop unalloyed love and longing for God, your duties become fewer and fewer. After the realization of God they completely drop away.⁵⁶
- But you must remember one thing: God is very far away from the mind tainted with worldliness.⁵⁷
- I ask people to live in the world after the awakening of their spiritual consciousness. I ask people to live in the world in a spirit of detachment.⁵⁸

⁵⁵. Gospel, p. 757

⁵⁶. Gospel, p. 585

⁵⁷. Gospel, p. 837

⁵⁸. Gospel, p. 827

The World of Maternal Affection

Coming back to Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna forgot the world once again and dived deeper into his spiritual practices. His experiences during this time were too many and too varied. In later times he mentioned only a few of the different states he passed through during this period. 'The ordinary man could not have borne a fraction of the tremendous fervour; his body would have shattered by a quarter of that emotion. I could forget my indescribable pangs only by seeing the Mother in some form or other for the greater part of the day and night. Otherwise this body could not have survived. For six years these eyes remained wide open, not a wink of sleep visited them. I could not close my eyelids, however much I might try to do so. I had no idea of time or of the body...'



One time, while he was reciting a hymn in one of the Shiva temples in Dakshineswar. Ramakrishna went into a deep trance while chanting those verses which say that it is impossible to glorify the Lord fully. Seeing his ecstatic state, people gathered around him to watch the fun. Mathur was in the temple compound. He came there quickly, and was thrilled to see Ramakrishna in that extraordinary state. He guarded Ramakrishna from harm. When Ramakrishna came down from that supreme state after some

time, he saw Mathur as well as many people around him and was shy and upset. He exclaimed: 'Oh, I must have made a spectacle of myself during my state of unconsciousness!' Mathur assured him that it was nothing of that sort, and Ramakrishna was reassured.



Ramakrishna's mother, Chandramani Devi, had thought that he had become 'normal', but was deeply distressed when she heard that he had become his 'old self' once again. All her life she had been tortured by misfortunes and miseries. Now, to know that, despite all her efforts, her dearest son was imbalanced made her distraught. She therefore decided to fast unto death to please Lord Shiva; that way her son might perhaps be cured. And the poor lady went to a distant Shiva temple, kept vigil and fasted for several days. After days of fasting, the Lord appeared in a dream and showered reassurances on her: 'Do not be afraid. Your son is not at all mad. On the contrary, he is passing through unbelievable states of spiritual realizations.' After almost three decades of doubt, knowing from the horse's mouth that her son was a boon to the world and a blessing to humanity, she felt immensely relieved. She was already seventy years old then.

Ramakrishna says:

- God's devotees have nothing to fear. They are His own. He always stands by them.⁵⁹
- The greatest manifestation of God is through His incarnations. Not all, by any means, can recognize an Incarnation of God. Assuming a human body, the Incarnation falls victim to disease, grief, hunger, thirst, and all such things, like ordinary mortals.⁶⁰
- By repeating the name of God secretly and in solitude one receives divine grace.⁶¹
- Attribute to yourselves the bliss of God-Consciousness; then you too will experience ineffable joy. The bliss of God-Consciousness always exists in you. It is only hidden by the veiling and projecting power of *maya* (delusion). The less you are attached to the world, the more you love God.⁶²

⁵⁹. Gospel, p. 545

⁶⁰. Gospel, p. 355

⁶¹. Gospel, p. 588

⁶². Gospel, p. 277

Newer Waves in the Spiritual Sea

In 1861, Rani Rasmani had a fall and took seriously ill. Despite the best medical treatment, she passed away in full consciousness, having the vision of the Divine Mother as she departed from the world. Mathur became the owner of the estates and the temple now. He was always dedicated to Ramakrishna. While others thought that the priest, Ramakrishna, had used some charms to delude him, Mathur knew very well that he had been attracted to Ramakrishna owing to the latter's intense devotion, spirituality, and also the visions he had had.



Rasmani Residence, Calcutta

One of the side-effects of Ramakrishna's intensity of love for God and unimaginable yearning for God's vision was a constant burning sensation all over his body for many days, and sleeplessness. Then there was the problem with the stomach. Mathur tried several native doctors but nothing appeared to help. These bodily difficulties, however, failed to touch even the fringes of Ramakrishna's God-intoxicated mind. Occasionally,

when he used to be in the normal plane of consciousness, he would become worried like a child.

All along, Ramakrishna had struggled to attain God on his own without any help. He was not aware of the techniques that the scriptures described. His intense longing for God took him through the paths he had walked. He was to adopt a different method now.



In mid-1861, there stepped on the landing near Dakshineswar a lady who was a scholar and a person of illumination. Her name was Yogeswari. She was a *bhairavi*, a woman mendicant, who depended solely on God and moved about everywhere. She was popularly known as Bhairavi Brahmani. Ramakrishna saw this Bhairavi on the bank of the river and sent Hriday to bring her to him. Upon seeing her, he instantly felt that Brahmani was an evolved soul. Natural enough for him, maternal feelings surged in him towards her. So he confided to this new mother his burning sensation, and asked her: 'Mother, is all this some serious disease?' Bhairavi Brahmani crossed it off in one firm, single stroke. She understood that it was something different altogether. She had read about such things

and also had books with her to prove her point. So she said that these were all signs of the highest spiritual experience, called *mahabhava*. Only a few, like Sri Radha, Sri Chaitanya, and one or two other divine souls had attained to such an exalted state. No ordinary mortal could understand the experiences of this state, much less attain it. And when those rare souls attained to such a state, the reactions in the body were exactly the ones Ramakrishna was experiencing, and scriptures have recorded these reactions in Sri Chaitanya.

The malady was known—absolutely spiritual. What was the cure? Again she went to her books. Ramakrishna himself and his doctors had tried everything—Vishnu oil, medications, roots. But Bhairavi Brahmani's solution was simple: she followed the scriptures and said that applying sandal paste all over the body and wearing a fragrant garland would do. That was strange, but people thought there was no harm trying that. Her instructions were followed for just three days and he was free from the burning sensation. The doctors, however, would not accept defeat so soon and said that the medicines had taken effect exactly within those three days, though they had been used for a long time.

One other time, Ramakrishna suddenly experienced insatiable hunger. It was terrible: hungry always, at all times. Once again, some prescriptions for the stomach were experimented. But Bhairavi Brahmani was firm: she said that it had nothing to do with worldly causes or solutions but was the result of an exalted state of spirituality. She asked Mathur to fill a room with all the food items possible. Mathur did that. She asked Ramakrishna to stay in that room and eat as much as he wanted. He stayed there, and moved about, popping to his mouth whatever he wanted, and in three days the so-called disease was gone: coincidence according to doctors, it's all a different science according to Bhairavi Brahmani.

Ramakrishna says:

- God is directly perceived by the mind, but not by this ordinary mind. It is the pure mind that perceives God, and at that time this ordinary mind does not function.⁶³
- Worship Shiva. In order to perform the worship of God you will be preoccupied for a long time with such religious duties as plucking flowers, making sandal-paste, polishing the utensils of worship, and arranging flowers. As you perform these duties your mind will naturally be directed to God.⁶⁴
- God, incarnating Himself as man, behaves exactly like a man. That is why it is difficult to recognize an Incarnation.⁶⁵
- If God can be worshipped through an image, why shouldn't it be possible to worship Him through a living person? It is God Himself who sports in the world as men.⁶⁶

⁶³. Gospel, p. 687

⁶⁴. Gospel, p. 431

⁶⁵. Gospel, p. 361

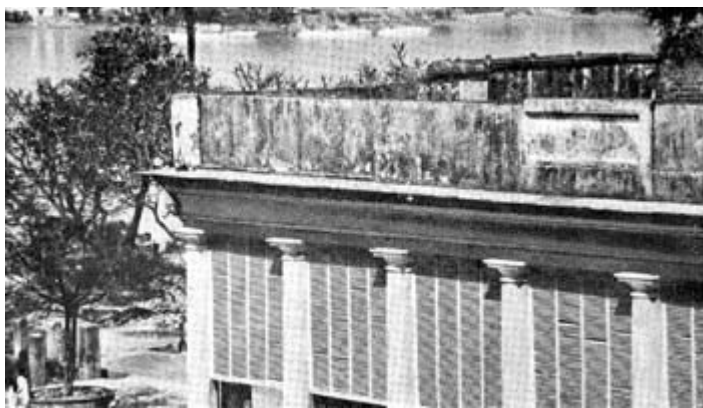
⁶⁶. Gospel, p. 687

Treading the Difficult Path

Bhairavi Brahmani was a master of several disciplines. Towards the end of 1861, she suggested one day that Ramakrishna should practice Tantric disciplines, in which she was an adept. Ramakrishna was of course eager to learn newer things and so he agreed. Practising Tantric disciplines is not easy. Even as there are 64 complex disciplines, there are numerous things to be collected and numerous arrangements to be made. Tantric practices need elaborate preparation. Brahmani knew the art well, and was dedicated. She worked incessantly to gather materials. Further, the aspirant himself has to undergo tremendous struggle. So, it was a strenuous task, but Ramakrishna went through the mill gladly; he practised all the disciplines with enthusiasm and eagerness. The practices were not at all easy and needed extreme caution. Walking constantly on the razor's edge, a little loss of concentration would mean serious error. Nobody perhaps has ventured to practice all the techniques prescribed in the Tantras. Aspirants choose only one or two disciplines and often fail, mostly due to the discipline the techniques call for.

Ramakrishna's very nature was to be concentrated in anything he did and to look upon all women as mothers. And so after months of staggering practice, which required him to do certain virtually impossible things, he attained supreme success in Tantra. This he did to the utmost surprise and joy of Bhairavi Brahmani. Though Bhairavi had known the skills of the Tantras, she had not seen or heard anyone attaining success in all the sixty-four disciplines so quickly—in less than two years. She declared that he had attained the highest goal that the Tantras point to, having seen all his characteristics and compared them with the texts. The uniqueness of Ramakrishna was that he practised all of the disciplines. Now he knew the virtues and pitfalls of the Tantras from personal experience. So he could instruct aspirants about the dangers of Tantra practice and of the fundamental need to consider all women as mothers. When his Tantra spiritual practices were completed in 1863, Ramakrishna was only 27 years old. All the spiritual practices were done in a corner in Dakshineswar.

Despite all precautions to keep himself out of public gaze, somehow people would come to know about Ramakrishna. While the temple staff, who observed his behaviour and found it difficult to understand, were critical, there were seekers who understood his uniqueness. Then there was a third group, people who used to visit Dakshineswar: they would naturally hear about Ramakrishna. The Tagore family, for instance, used to visit Dakshineswar occasionally with the children, spend some time, and go back. So far as spiritual aspirants are concerned, two young men from a locality called Baranagore began frequenting Dakshineswar. One was Gopal Sen, and the other, Govinda Pal—both ardent seekers of God. They knew that Ramakrishna could help them in their spiritual struggles. Ramakrishna spoke about them in later times: ‘They had been devoted to God since boyhood. The very mention of marriage would frighten them. Gopal used to have *bhava samadhi*. He would shrink from worldly people. Gopal went into *samadhi* in the Panchavati. In that state he said to me, touching my feet: “Let me go. I cannot live in this world any more.”’ Ramakrishna heard some days later that Gopal Sen had thrown away his mortal garment.



Mother Chandramani had lived in the village all her life, in difficulty and poverty. She was seventy-two years old now and fervently wished to spend the rest of her life on the banks of the River Ganga. Rameshwar brought her to Calcutta, and perhaps from this period onwards he too began to live in Dakshineswar, worshipping in one of the temples. Thus, all the sons of Kshudiram were priests of Mother Kali. Meanwhile, Mathur had planned to go on a pilgrimage to Prayagraj. He requested Ramakrishna and his mother to accompany his party. Thus, during the first part of 1863, Ramakrishna went on a pilgrimage to Prayag with Mathur, his mother and a

few others. Mathur's arrangements were royal and elaborate. Nobody felt any discomfort during the trip. They bathed in the confluence of the three rivers (Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati) and visited many temples before returning to Calcutta. Soon after their return, Mathur arranged for Chandramani Devi's stay in the first-floor room of the music tower (called Nahabat). Though he tried his utmost to make her comfortable by trying to provide everything she needed, Chandramani Devi did not want anything at all. She lived her simple life. Ramakrishna revered his mother. Despite all his yearning for God and intense spiritual struggles, Ramakrishna always found time to serve his mother. He sometimes spent hours conversing with her.

We have mentioned that Bhairavi Brahmani was an adept in several sciences. One of them was the Vaishnava method of spiritual practice. Ramakrishna had, out of his keen desire to know God through diverse ways, already practised the attitude of the servant of God. Now, after having practised the Tantras successfully, he had a desire to practise the other Vaishnava methods: the attitude of a parent of God (*vatsalya*) and the attitude of God's beloved (*madhura*) specially. The others, like the attitude of being God's friend (*sakhya*), or the peaceful attitude (*shanta*) had all been integral parts of his other spiritual endeavours, but these two moods were independent disciplines. So he decided to follow these paths. These two paths—in which the aspirant becomes God's mother and God's beloved—are special because the aspirant has to either be or live as a woman. In order to do this Ramakrishna began to dress himself like a woman. Mathur arranged for some ornaments and other necessary material. Such was Ramakrishna's dedication to his path that he completely forgot that he had a male body; rather, his mind was in his 'child' or 'beloved' and not in his body. Sri Ramakrishna's involvement in this spiritual path was so perfect that even those who had seen him every day could not recognize him when he was in the woman's dress.

Just when Ramakrishna was about to fling himself into the practice of the parental attitude towards God, there arrived in Dakshineswar an adept in the *vatsalya* way of devotion. He was known as Jatadhari. This saint had an image of child Rama with him, which he carried always and which had transformed itself into a living image for him. It had become a living child for the saint. Ramakrishna now sat in front of Jatadhari for hours

and, with tears running down his cheeks, saw how the saint affectionately fed the image, bathed it, played with it and showered all his love on it.



When Ramakrishna desired to practise this attitude, Jatadhari initiated him into the Rama mantra and, seeing that his little Rama was attracted deeply to Ramakrishna, gave away his beloved Rama image to him and left Dakshineswar. The floodgates of Ramakrishna's love for the child Rama were opened now: he as the mother of Rama deluged him with maternal affection. Within a short time, he had attained perfection in this path.



Ramakrishna says:

➤ My experiences are for others to refer to.⁶⁷

➤ The attitude of looking upon a woman as a mother is very pure. The Tantra mentions the Vamachara ['left'] method also. But that is not a good method; it causes the aspirant's downfall. A devotee keeping an object of enjoyment near him has reason to be afraid.⁶⁸

➤ The whole thing is to love God and taste His sweetness. He is the sweetness and the devotee is its enjoyer. The devotee drinks the sweet Bliss of God. Further, God is the lotus and the devotee the bee. The devotee sips the honey of the lotus. As a devotee cannot live without God, so also God cannot live without His devotee.⁶⁹

➤ Is a mother to be trifled with? Before becoming a monk [sannyasi] Chaitanyadeva worked hard to persuade his mother to let him renounce home... Narada could not go to the forest to practise austerity as long as his mother was alive. After her death he went away to realize God.⁷⁰

⁶⁷. Gospel, p. 747

⁶⁸. Gospel, p. 701

⁶⁹. Gospel, p. 303

⁷⁰. Gospel, p. 573

Scaling the Heights of Spirituality

It was the year 1864. The cold of the winter season was still lingering in Calcutta. Bhairavi Brahmani, who had come to Dakshineswar in the middle of 1861, was still living in Dakshineswar. Having attained perfection in all the other moods of devotion. Ramakrishna now wanted to practice *madhura bhava*, the most difficult attitude, of being the Lord's beloved, under Bhairavi's guidance. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu had practised this method and taught it in the past; this was the attitude Sri Radha had towards Sri Krishna. Both Sri Radha and Sri Chaitanya had attained the highest-ever state of spirituality possible on earth through this path of devotion, the state of *mahabhava*.

Ramakrishna now began practising this final word in devotion. He in women's clothes forgot altogether he was a man. His nature changed totally into that of a forlorn cowherd girl of Vraja, eager to meet Krishna. Days and nights passed in bitter tears for the love of Krishna—the girl's eyes set on the path for Krishna to walk towards her: 'My beloved Krishna, come to me!' The cows would walk by, the dust would settle, the boatmen would stop singing on the Ganga, that evening would pass, and yet Krishna would not come. The intensity of yearning was something beyond imagination. Owing to the mad onrush of emotions, blood began to ooze out of the pores of the body, just like sweat. His body began to experience extreme burning sensation as before. But who cared? Whether his body would remain or fall, whether the world would remain or go, whether people laughed or wept—none of these was Ramakrishna's concern. The charming Gopi wanted her Krishna; that was all. As days rolled by, the cowherd girl that Ramakrishna had now become, understood that Krishna's vision would not be possible without Radha's grace. And so he prayed day and night to Radha to show Krishna. 'O friend, take me to my beloved Krishna and make me your bond slave. I shall be your handmaid forever. O friend, it was you who taught me to love Krishna. O Krishna! O Beloved of my soul!' Not long thereafter, he had the vision of Sri Radha, and she merged into his person. Now love manifested fully in Ramakrishna. This experience was only like adding fuel to fire: the intensity of emotion became virtually unbearable. It was at such an exalted state that he had the vision of Sri Krishna. Krishna merged into Ramakrishna's person.

This ultimate technique of the devotional path demanded all the resources of extreme love, extreme yearning, and extreme attachment to God. Ramakrishna gave himself without reserve. He held nothing back—there was full flow of emotions, sentiments, love, affection—all towards the Beloved. As a result, the body was shattered, as it were. He himself explained how he felt during those days: ‘My joy after that experience [of *mahabhava*] was equal to the pain I suffered before it. It is like a huge elephant entering a small hut. The burning pain that one feels when one is separated from God is not an ordinary feeling. I was unconscious for three days in that state. When I regained consciousness, the Brahmani took me out for a bath. But my skin couldn’t bear the touch of her hand; so my body had to be covered with a heavy sheet. Only then could she hold me with her hand and lead me to the bathing-place. The earth that had stuck to my body while I was lying on the ground had become baked. In that state I felt as if a ploughshare were passing through my backbone. But afterwards I was filled with great joy.’ The burning sensation of the body was cured once again with the application of sandal paste and garland for three days.

Bhairavi Brahmani was the mute, thrilled and astonished spectator of the drama that had been enacted in Dakshineswar during the last four years. Despite all her attainments and scholarship, she could never imagine that she would be blessed to witness what all she had seen, especially the manifestation of *mahabhava*, in front of her very eyes. A few Vaishnava scholars also came there from time to time and they too were dumbfounded.

After such spiritual practices, Ramakrishna’s body began to glow. He was already extremely handsome, supremely attractive, and very sweet in his behaviour. Now, added to this was the unearthly splendour. Ramakrishna had to pray to the Divine Mother to drive this beauty inside.

The year 1864, thus, was an important year in the history of spirituality. Having succeeded in all the Tantric practices, Ramakrishna attained the highest through the path of devotion. A third extraordinary practice was to take place very soon.

Ramakrishna says:

➤ The state of samadhi is certainly inspired by love. Once, at Shyambazar, they arranged a *kirtan* at Natavar Goswami's house. There I had a vision of Krishna and the Gopis of Vrindavan. I felt that my subtle body was walking at Krishna's heels.⁷¹

➤ To love an Incarnation of God—that is enough. Ah, what ecstatic love the Gopis had for Krishna!⁷²

➤ Ah! If anyone has but a particle of such supreme love [*prema*]! What yearning! What love! That is what it means to be intoxicated with ecstatic love of God. The sum and substance of the whole matter is that a man must love God, must be restless for Him. It doesn't matter whether you believe in God with form or in God without form. You may or may not believe that God incarnates Himself as man. But you will realize Him if you have that yearning.⁷³

⁷¹. Gospel, p. 348

⁷². Gospel, p. 356

⁷³. Gospel, p. 449

Beyond the World of Illusion

Even as Ramakrishna was still deep in the ocean of the bliss of the *mahabhava* experience, there arrived at Dakshineswar a monk who practised non-duality, the Advaita part of Vedanta philosophy. Totapuri, as he was called, had practised non-dualistic discipline for 40 long years and had attained Brahman, the Absolute Reality.



Ramakrishna practised Advaita here in Dakshineswar

Both Ramakrishna and Totapuri were pleased to see one another as both recognized one another instantly. Totapuri asked Ramakrishna: 'I see that you are a fit aspirant. Will you practise the sadhana of non-duality?' All along, Ramakrishna had concentrated on God with forms—whether it was Mother Kali, Rama, Sita, Krishna, or any other. Now he had to practise something beyond—of the realm of the formless. In order to do that, however, Ramakrishna had to receive the vows of renunciation and become a monk. So Ramakrishna responded that he had to ask his Mother's permission. Totapuri was perplexed, thinking that Ramakrishna still had

such habits as seeking his mother's permission, not knowing who this mother was. But he waited. Ramakrishna returned from the Kali Temple and said that the Mother had permitted him to undertake the spiritual practice of Oneness. One person, however, was sad: that was Bhairavi Brahmani. She was worried that Ramakrishna's devotional mood would go away by his practising the 'dry' Advaita. She didn't know that such a thing could never happen.



Ramakrishna's seat of spiritual practices

On a special day, though a bit apprehensive that his physical mother might be immensely pained by his becoming a monk, Ramakrishna received monastic vows from Totapuri. After becoming a monk (sannyasin), Ramakrishna approached Totapuri for spiritual instructions. Totapuri asked him to dive deep within in search of the Atman, and to meditate on Absolute Consciousness. Ramakrishna sat down to meditate. Though he tried hard, his mind would concentrate on the blissful form of the Divine Mother. Totapuri instructed him to use the sword of discrimination and mentally cut the form, hasten ahead and concentrate on the Formless non-duality. Totapuri indicated a place between his eyebrows using a piece of broken glass to concentrate upon. And in a short time, Ramakrishna merged into the highest state of samadhi, the *nirvikalpa samadhi*. In this supreme state, he realized absolute Oneness and remained virtually dead to the world.

Totapuri waited for three days. When Ramakrishna did not stir, he entered the hut where Ramakrishna sat in samadhi, and was stunned. Ramakrishna's body was virtually lifeless.

Totapuri was dumbfounded. He had never imagined that anybody could attain *nirvikalpa samadhi* in just three days' time. He himself had taken 40 long years. So Totapuri made many tests and found out that Ramakrishna was undeniably in that highest realm, enjoying the supreme bliss of Brahman. Ramakrishna would not come down from this samadhi. Totapuri tried to bring down Ramakrishna's mind using various means. His shouts of the names of God reverberated through the Panchavati. Gradually, after prolonged effort, Ramakrishna opened his eyes and prostrated before his teacher. The teacher embraced him.

Ramakrishna explained the inexplicable state in later times: 'In samadhi I lose outer consciousness completely; but God generally keeps a little trace of ego in me for the enjoyment of divine communion. Enjoyment is possible only when "I" and "you" remain. Again, sometimes God effaces even that trace of "I". Then one experiences *jada samadhi* or *nirvikalpa samadhi*. That experience cannot be described. A salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean, but before it had gone into the water it melted away. It became entirely one with the water of the ocean.'

Totapuri remained in Dakshineswar for almost a year, and left in 1865. However, not before his own spiritual incompleteness was resolved by Ramakrishna's intervention. This was how: Totapuri had all along been a strict advaitin and would not accept God with form. Sri Ramakrishna made him understand that God with form and without form are two aspects of the same Reality.

Ramakrishna says:

- Brahman alone is real and all else is illusory—that is reasoning. And everything but Brahman is like a dream.⁷⁴
- Meditation on the formless God is extremely difficult. In that meditation you must wipe out all that you see or hear. You contemplate only the nature of your inner Self. It is meditation on the nature of one's inner Self after negating the world, following the Vedantic method of 'neti, neti' ['not this, not this.']⁷⁵
- Just see how happy you are, looking at this image of the Deity. But those who always cry after the formless Reality do not get anything. They realize nothing either inside or outside.⁷⁶
- You must practise spiritual discipline a little. It will not do simply to say that milk contains butter. You must let the milk set into curd and then churn it. Only then can you get butter from it. Spiritual aspirants must go into solitude now and then. After acquiring love of God in solitude, they may live in the world. If one is wearing a pair of shoes, one can easily walk over thorns.⁷⁷

⁷⁴. Gospel, p. 355

⁷⁵. Gospel, p. 403

⁷⁶. Gospel, p. 213

⁷⁷. Gospel, p. 241

Giving Oneself Over to Phenomena

Towards the end of 1865, Ramkumar's son, Akshay, now an extremely handsome lad of 16, arrived in Dakshineswar from Kamarpukur. Ramakrishna was pleased to see his nephew, who, like him to some extent, wanted the vision of God. Akshay followed in the footsteps of Ramakrishna. He loved God and did not care much for the world. He straightaway immersed himself in spiritual practices. The troublemaking Haladhari left Dakshineswar for good, and Akshay was made priest of the Radhakanta Temple in his place. Haladhari, like another troublemaker by name Pratap Hazra who was to come some years later, was a peculiar man. There were some who would criticize Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences and Haladhari was one of them. He was Ramakrishna's relative and was worshipping Radhakanta, i.e., Krishna. He being a Vaishnava had much to say against Ramakrishna's apparently strange spiritual practices and realizations. He would say that all the visions of Ramakrishna were due to some disorder of the brain. And he would quote scriptures to support his views too. This would hurt Ramakrishna immensely and he would weep before the Divine Mother in Her temple. The Divine Mother would appear before him, console and reassure him constantly. Once when Ramakrishna's pain was intense,



Mathuranath Biswas

Devendranath Tagore

the Divine Mother ordained that he remain in *bhavamukha*. Remaining in *bhavamukha* has been explained as being in the supremely exalted state of the threshold between the Absolute and the relative, which is possible only after the attainment of the Supreme Reality. Ramakrishna heard the same command, to remain in *bhavamukha*, twice later.

Though Ramakrishna was engrossed in his spiritual struggles and hardly went outside, he would consent to visit one or two places of devotees. Mathur took him in January 1866 to Devendranath Tagore's house. Devendranath was the elderly leader of Brahmo Samaj and a respected personality. Ramakrishna later fondly remembered this visit.

After Totapuri left, Ramakrishna continued in the state of non-duality for a long time. From about February 1866, he once again entered the state of *nirvikalpa samadhi*. This time, he remained for six long months in *nirvikalpa samadhi*. Providence sent a monk to Dakshineswar. That monk, nobody knows from where he arrived, struggled to look after Ramakrishna's body for the good of the world. Ramakrishna reminisced: 'For six months at a stretch I remained in that state whence ordinary men can never return—the body falling off after three weeks like a leaf. I was not conscious of day and night. Flies would enter my mouth and nostrils just as they do in a dead body; but I did not feel them. The hair became matted with accretions of dust. There was no chance for the body to survive, and it would certainly have perished but for the kind ministrations of a monk who was present at Dakshineswar at the time. He realized the state of my mind and also understood that this body must be kept alive at any cost, as it was meant to be of immense good to the world. He, therefore, busily engaged himself in preserving this body. He would bring food regularly to me and try to bring my mind in various ways down to the consciousness of the relative world, even by beating me with a stick. As soon as he found me to be a little conscious, he would press some food into my mouth, only a bit of which reached the stomach; and there were days in which all his efforts would be in vain. Six months passed in this way. At last I received the Mother's command: "Remain in *bhavamukha*." Then I was laid up with a terrible attack of dysentery. An excruciating pain in the stomach tortured me day and night. It went on for six months. Thus only did the mind gradually come down to a lower level and the consciousness of the body.'

As Ramakrishna was recovering from the after effects of such an intense spiritual struggle, his own breakdown in health and other complexities, towards the end of 1866 there came to Dakshineswar a Sufi practitioner, called Govinda Roy. He stayed for some time in Panchavati. Naturally eager to know about different paths and to follow them, Ramakrishna discussed Islam with Govinda Roy, and decided to see what it is. If Ramakrishna took up something, he did it in all earnest. So he now

dressed like them, forgot all about Hindu temples, and repeated the name of Allah. According to Ramakrishna's wishes, Mathur arranged for his food to be prepared by a Brahmin cook as instructed by a Muslim cook. 'I used to repeat the name of Allah, wear my clothes in the fashion of the Mohammedans and recite the namaz regularly. All Hindu ideas being wholly banished from the mind, not only did I not salute the Hindu gods, but I had no inclination even to visit them. After three days I realized the goal of that path.' He had the vision of a being with a long beard and of grave appearance. For all these superhuman struggles and attainment, Ramakrishna was still only thirty years old.

Ramakrishna says:

➤ People talk about leading a religious life in the world. But if they once taste the bliss of God they will not enjoy anything else. Their attachment to worldly duties declines. As their spiritual joy becomes deeper, they simply cannot perform their worldly duties. More and more they seek that joy.⁷⁸

➤ You must know that there are different tastes. There are also different powers of digestion. God has made different religions and creeds to suit different aspirants. By no means all are fit for the knowledge of Brahman. Therefore the worship of God with form has been provided.⁷⁹

➤ Reality is one. People give It various names. Take the case of a lake with four landing-ghats on its four banks. People who draw water at one ghat call it 'jal' and those who draw it at the second ghat call it 'pani'. At the third ghat they call it 'water', and at the fourth, 'aqua'. But it is one and the same thing: water.⁸⁰

➤ There is gold buried in your heart, but you are not yet aware of it. It is covered with a thin layer of clay. Once you are aware of it, all these activities of yours will lessen.⁸¹

⁷⁸. Gospel, p. 756

⁷⁹. Gospel, p. 486

⁸⁰. Gospel, p. 1024

⁸¹. Gospel, p. 108

In the World of the Innocent

Ramakrishna's experience of non-duality deepened in his mind the ideal of the oneness of all existence. On any particular day, as a matter of course he lived in different moods and states of mind, but for sometime, at least, this particular mood oneness seems to have been dominant. The ideal of non-duality says that there is only one undivided absolute Consciousness. It was not mere philosophy for Ramakrishna, but a living truth. Further, his compassion and love added to this state of mind and the least suffering of others would become his own suffering.

When he was passing through such a mood of absolute oneness, one day he saw two boatmen quarrelling at a distance, in a boat on the River Ganga. One of them struck the other on the back, and Ramakrishna cried out in pain. Hriday, who was nearby, heard this loud cry and ran to him. He was shocked to see a big swelling and a red mark on Ramakrishna's back. Hriday cried out in anger: 'Uncle, just tell me who hit you, and I shall chop off his head.' When he heard what had happened, Hriday could not believe it. 'Is this ever possible,' he exclaimed.



One other time, Ramakrishna was in a particular state of mind, experiencing an extraordinary identity with everything. Seeing the green grass, he had become totally identified with it. At such a moment, all of a sudden, somebody walked on the grass, and Ramakrishna cried out in intense pain. It was as if that person was walking on his chest. In later times Ramakrishna commented that though he experienced that particular mood of identification for only a few hours, the experience was intensely painful.

Having had all such experiences, Ramakrishna needed a little change, at least for the sake of his body. So it was suggested that he go to the village. Receiving his mother's blessings, Ramakrishna left for Kamarpukur in March 1867 with Hriday. Bhairavi Brahmani, who was still at Dakshineswar, accompanied him. Kamarpukur itself was changing. Several of his old acquaintances had passed away. Chandramani Devi also was not there because she was in Dakshineswar. Yet, Ramakrishna's days there were spent in peace and joy. As usual, the villagers swarmed to see him and to hear his stories, songs, counsels, words of consolation, etc. And everyone felt immense delight.

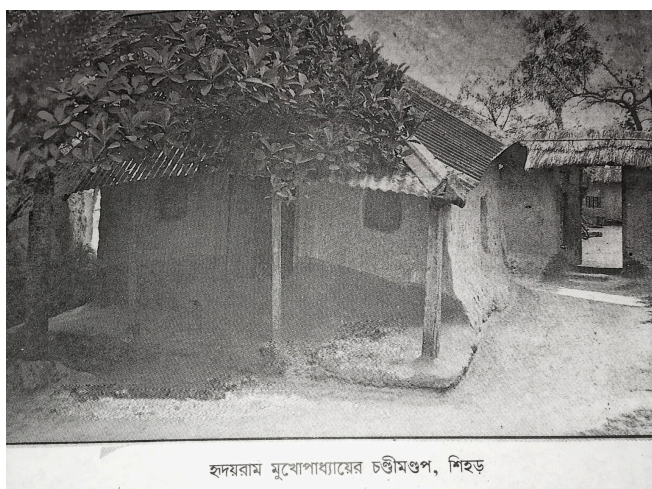
In Kamarpukur, Ramakrishna once again met his consort, Sri Sarada Devi. An embodiment of purity and simplicity, Sarada Devi, now fourteen years old, silently served her husband and Bhairavi Brahmani, looking upon the latter as her mother-in-law. Sarada Devi had heard of some of the apparently strange things that were happening far away in Dakshineswar. She had shed profuse tears in solitude, especially when some ignorant village women made fun of her, saying that her husband had gone 'mad'. Sarada Devi had no way of either knowing the details or communicating with her husband.



Mother Sarada's hut, Jayrambati

She therefore silently waited for some opportunity to see him. For all her anxiety, she was still a child. And her days and nights were spent in intense spiritual practices. In the relationship between Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi, there was an abundance of mutual respect and unearthly love. Bhairavi Brahmani could not understand all this. She ill-treated Sarada Devi, but the latter silently bore everything. Further, new to the ways of the village, Bhairavi created some confusion too. So the time had come for Bhairavi to leave for good. The purpose of her advent had been accomplished. One day she decorated Ramakrishna with flowers like Sri Chaitanya, saluted him, sought his blessings, was blessed profusely, and took leave. She lived in Varanasi later. When Ramakrishna went to Varanasi, he met her there.

Ramakrishna visited Hriday's native place, Sihore, and also Jayrambati. In Jayrambati, the village women spontaneously offered their respects to him by blowing conches as he entered the village. Though nobody knew or understood his spiritual nature, somehow they had been inspired to do so. He returned to Kamarpukur after some days. After a few more days amidst green surroundings, Ramakrishna felt refreshed, and returned to Dakshineswar in October 1867. It was autumn. The trees had been washed well by the God of rains, fresh leaves smiled from them; beautiful birds sang from their midst; and the worship of Mother Durga was about to begin.



Hriday Mukherji's house in Shihar

Ramakrishna says:

- The point is to love God even as a mother loves her child, the chaste wife, her husband, and the worldly man his wealth. Add together these three forces of love, these three powers of attraction, and give it all to God. Then you will certainly see Him.⁸²
- Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all—with wife and children, father and mother—and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you. A maidservant in the house of a rich man performs all the household duties, but her thoughts are fixed on her own home in her native village.⁸³
- After the birth of one or two children, husband and wife should live as brother and sister and talk only of God. Then both their minds will be drawn to God.⁸⁴

⁸². Gospel, p. 83

⁸³. Gospel, p. 80

⁸⁴. Gospel, p.670

The Ways of an Ideal Pilgrim

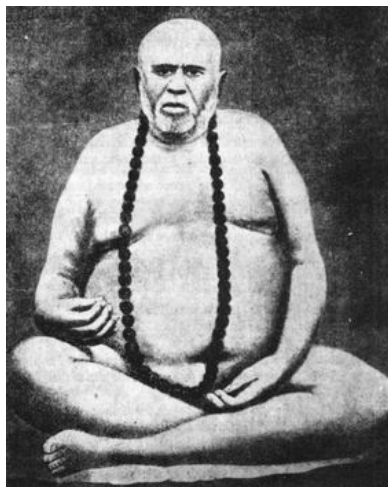
As soon as he returned to Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna participated in the Durga Puja held in Mathur's house. There, he heard that Mathur and his wife, Jagadamba, were making plans to go on a pilgrimage. The couple humbly invited Ramakrishna to accompany them. Ramakrishna agreed. And Hriday agreed to go with him. Mathur made elaborate preparations for the pilgrimage. On 27th January 1868, the party started from Howrah by train. Before going to Varanasi, the party visited Vaidyanath in Deoghar. In Deoghar, seeing the pitiable condition of the villagers, Ramakrishna shed tears. He insisted that Mathur should feed them one day and give them a piece of cloth each. Though Mathur was initially apprehensive, thinking that to do this would cost him much, he arranged for things to be brought from Calcutta and did Ramakrishna's bidding.



Shiva, Varanasi

Mathur and his entourage went to Varanasi. Ramakrishna enjoyed the spiritual vibrations of the 'city made of gold'. He reminisced later: 'One day I was seated in the drawing-room with Mathur Babu, Raja Babu, and

others. Hearing them talk about various worldly things, such as their business losses and so forth, I wept bitterly and said to the Divine Mother: “Mother, where have You brought me? I was much better off in the temple in Dakshineswar.” In Varanasi, Ramakrishna had many extraordinary experiences. He was also pleased to meet Trilinga Swami, whom he considered to be an illumined soul. He also met a rich government official from Nepal, Captain Vishvanath Upadhyay, who would take his mother to Varanasi often. This ‘Captain’, as Ramakrishna would address him, eventually became a dedicated disciple of Ramakrishna.



Trilinga Swami

After some days in Varanasi, the party went to Prayagraj. Ramakrishna says: ‘In Allahabad [former name of Prayagraj] I noticed the same things that I saw elsewhere—the same ponds, the same grass, the same trees, the same tamarind-leaves. But undoubtedly one finds inspiration in a holy place.’

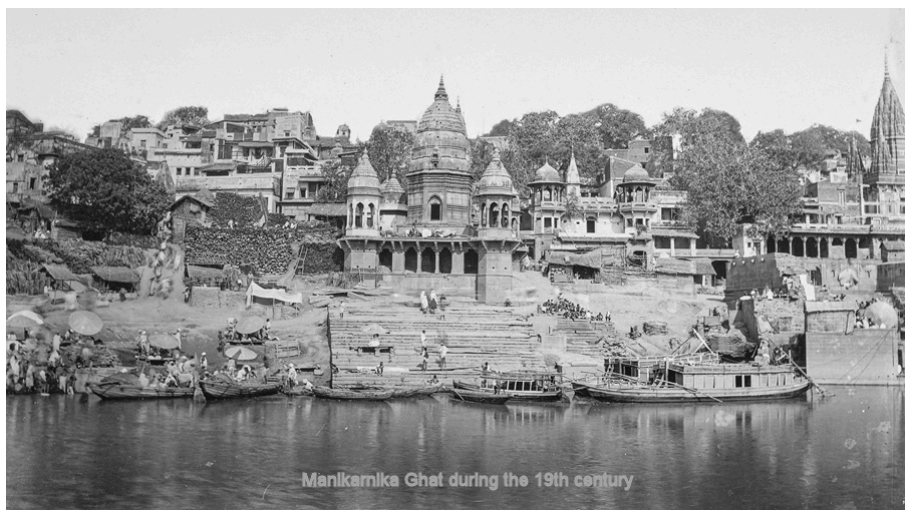
The party next went to Vrindavan. Ramakrishna said about this visit: ‘No sooner did I see the Kaliyadaman Ghat than a divine emotion surged up within me. I was completely overwhelmed. Hriday used to bathe me there as if I were a small child. In the dusk I would walk on the bank of the Jamuna when the cattle returned along the sandy banks from their pastures. At the very sight of those cows the thought of Krishna would flash in my mind. I would run along like a madman, crying: “Oh, where is Krishna? Where is my

Krishna?" I went to Shyama Kunda and Radha Kunda in a palanquin and got out to visit the holy Mount Govardhan. At the very sight of the mount I was overpowered with divine emotion and ran to the top. I lost all consciousness of the world around me. The residents of the place helped to come down. My clothes became wet with tears. Gangamayi became very fond of me in Vrindavan. She was an old woman who lived all alone in a hut near the Nidhuvan. ...I loved the atmosphere of Vrindavan.' The party returned to Calcutta in May 1868. It was a very touching trip for Ramakrishna.

After their return to Calcutta, things began to take a little different shape in Dakshineswar. Hriday, who was Ramakrishna's nephew and who served him for over a decade with sincerity, gradually turned domineering. He began to control Ramakrishna at every turn. Months passed in Ramakrishna's helpless silence and endurance. News came that Hriday's wife had passed away. He was never an ardent spiritual aspirant, but this death made him a bit other-worldly for a few days. But that mood was temporary and he bounced back to his domineering soon. Ramakrishna continued with his spiritual moods, because though Hriday's insults increased every day and hurt Ramakrishna, none could touch even the shadow of the fringes of his inner life in any way. Never did anyone see him unhappy or sad. He would sing melodious songs, visit the temples, offer adoration in his own way, remain in deep meditation for long hours, and would have countless spiritual experiences throughout the day. Hriday had an inspiration suddenly. He declared that this year, he wished to celebrate Durga Puja in his village home. Mathur helped him financially. Hriday invited Ramakrishna, but Ramakrishna declined to go physically. Whether or not Hriday enjoyed the spiritual bliss of Durga Puja, he had achieved one thing: he married for the second time before returning to Calcutta. He now resumed the worship of Mother Kali.



In 1869, Akshay was called to the village for marriage. Ramakrishna sensed that marriage would not do good to that pure boy who wanted God alone. Yet, Akshay had to go. He went there and got married, but soon had health problems. Upon returning to Calcutta, the problems only aggravated. Within a few days, Akshay died in Ramakrishna's presence. Ramakrishna loved this purely spiritual youth. Though he had known the worth of life and death, once or twice Ramakrishna felt 'as if somebody were squeezing my heart like a wet towel! I wondered and thought that Mother was teaching me a lesson. I was not much concerned with the body even—much less with a nephew. But if such was my pain at his bereavement, how much more must be the grief of the householders at the loss of their near and dear ones!'



Ramakrishna says:

- At the beginning of spiritual life the devotee should observe such rites as pilgrimage, putting a string of beads around his neck, and so forth. But outward ceremonies gradually drop off as he attains the goal, the vision of God. Then his only activity is the repetition of God's name, and contemplation and meditation on Him.⁸⁵
- They make so many pilgrimages and repeat the name of God so much, but why do they not realize anything? It is because they have no longing for God. God reveals Himself to the devotee if only he calls upon Him with a longing heart.⁸⁶
- Those who develop dispassion from early youth, those who roam about yearning for God from boyhood, those who refuse all worldly life, belong to a different class. They belong to an unsullied aristocracy.⁸⁷
- Can one find God in the sacred books? By reading the scriptures one may feel at the most that God exists. But God does not reveal Himself to a man unless he himself dives deep. Only after such a plunge, after the revelation of God through His grace, is one's doubt destroyed.⁸⁸

⁸⁵. Gospel, p. 305

⁸⁶. Gospel, p. 306

⁸⁷. Gospel, p. 603

⁸⁸. Gospel, p. 625

Bringing Real Waters to the Mirage

In 1870, Mathur took Ramakrishna to his native place. Even there, as it was in Deoghar, Ramakrishna was distressed to see the sad state of poor people and requested Mathur to help them. Mathur also took Ramakrishna to the newly consecrated Methodist church in Calcutta. Both

of them stood outside and saw the service. Some days later, Ramakrishna went to a Vaishnava religious place called Harisabha at Kalutola in Calcutta. It was celebration time, and reading from the *Bhagavata* was going on. Listening to Krishna's glories and praises, Ramakrishna entered into a very high state of mind. That religious place had the distinction of worshipping a seat, which they considered 'Sri Chaitanya's seat'. In a state of ecstasy, Ramakrishna stood on the seat meant only for Sri Chaitanya and revered by all, and went into deep samadhi. Initially there was commotion. Then there was a

reason. Some of those who were present understood that Ramakrishna was out of the ordinary, and accepted his standing on the holy seat, while others said it was a sacrilege. Ramakrishna then heard the singing of devotional songs, regained his composure, danced with the others in a state of trance and left.



News travelled soon. Bhagavan Das Babaji was the head of the Vaishnavas and had a spiritual centre in Kalna, Burdwan. This Vaishnava teacher was an evolved soul and already had varied spiritual experiences. Babaji heard the news and was incensed. He was angered to know that some unknown person had desecrated the sacred seat meant for Sri Chaitanya. What could he do now?

Meanwhile, during the same year, Ramakrishna and Hriday went on a pilgrimage by boat to the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya in Nadia. On their way, they visited Kalna and entered very monastery in which Bhagavandas Babaji lived. As soon as Ramakrishna entered the monastery full of devotees, Babaji perceived that some spiritual luminary had come there, and he also declared this. Perhaps owing to the hot weather, Ramakrishna had covered himself with a big piece of cloth. Hriday went to Babaji and announced Ramakrishna. But Bhagavandas was busy admonishing some of his followers to the extent of snatching away someone's rosary. Suddenly Ramakrishna went into an ecstatic state, went near Babaji, and asked him who had given him the power to admonish others. A long conversation followed. Seeing Ramakrishna's glowing form and his frequent trances, and listening to his words, Bhagavan Das was convinced that he was extraordinary. Babaji saluted him and surrendered at his feet.



Navadwip

From Kalna Ramakrishna went to Navadwip, the holy land in which Sri Chaitanya was born. Prior to this visit he had his own doubts about Sri Chaitanya's having been an avatar. When he went to Navadwip to ascertain the truth, he was initially dejected to see only wooden images of Sri Chaitanya with raised hands and nothing else. When he was about to return and was entering the boat, he had a beautiful vision of Chaitanya and Nityananda. The two divine, golden beings slowly came through the air with all spiritual glow around them, and entered his body. The joy of Ramakrishna was inexplicable. He was in ecstasy and was about to fall into the river, but Hriday caught him. Ramakrishna remarked that he had never before seen such beauty as it was in Sri Chaitanya. Since then, Ramakrishna was convinced that Sri Chaitanya was indeed an incarnation of God.



Ramakrishna says:

➤ God can be realized through all paths. It is like your coming to Dakshineswar by carriage, by boat, by steamer, or on foot. You have chosen the way according to your convenience and taste; but the destination is the same. Some of you have arrived earlier than others; but all have arrived.⁸⁹

➤ What will a man gain by knowing many scriptures? The one thing needed is to know how to cross the river of the world. God alone is real, and all else is illusory.⁹⁰

➤ What more shall I say to you? My only request is that you do not involve yourself in quarrels and dissensions any more.⁹¹

➤ Why don't you live in the world? There is no harm in that. But always keep your mind on God. Know for certain that house, family, and property are not yours. They are God's. Your real home is in God.⁹²

⁸⁹. Gospel, p. 1010

⁹⁰. Gospel, p. 392

⁹¹. Gospel, p. 457

⁹². Gospel, p. 456

Discovering the Divine Essence

The year 1871 set in. This year had a real tragedy in store for Dakshineswar. In May 1871, Mathur suddenly took ill. The best treatment was provided, but he could not improve. Mathur was a singular sort of a person. Though rich and worldly-minded so far as his estates and other properties went, he was a deeply religious soul. He had seen many spiritual visions by Ramakrishna's blessings, and had firm faith in him. He served Ramakrishna much. We must say a few words about Mathur here.



Mathuranath was not so attached to the world, especially as his last days approached. He had understood the futility of worldly life. Further, he had also understood that Ramakrishna was a unique personality. Bhairavi Brahmani, minutely observing the extraordinary signs in Ramakrishna, would insist that he was an incarnation of God. Her repeated insistence that Ramakrishna was not an ordinary human being but an incarnation of God made Mathur initially quite uneasy. Mathur found it difficult to believe Bhairavi Brahmani, despite the various things he had seen, because his concept of avatar was based on the lives of Rama, Krishna, and so on. Further, nobody would want to enter into such controversies. Yet, he wanted

to find out the truth of Bhairavi's statement. So he had invited renowned pundits to Dakshineswar to know their opinion. These pundits were not just scholars but were adepts in the practice of the spiritual disciplines of their paths. The first to arrive were Vaishnava Charan and Gauri Pandit. Vaishnava Charan was a master of all the Vaishnava scriptures and leader of a Vaishnava sect. He had once seen Ramakrishna in Panihati and had been wonderstruck with the astounding spiritual fervour of the latter. Gauri Pandit was a master of the Tantras. He was a great scholar, and they say the Divine Mother Herself had bestowed some powers on him. He would perform fire sacrifice annually, with the blazing sacrificial altar placed, not on the ground, but on one of his outstretched hands. Such a man was Gauri Pandit.

Vaishnava Charan sat for hours and heard all the experiences of Ramakrishna and declared that the states of *mahabhava* and so on had manifested fully in Ramakrishna, and it was amazing how those exalted states, seen only in Sri Radha and Sri Chaitanya, had been found fully manifested in him. He had no hesitation in declaring that Ramakrishna was an avatar. Then came Gauri. He was stern, disciplined and strict. He heard everything, and said: 'Does Vaishnavcharan call you an avatar? I believe you are He by a fraction of Whose power the avatars come forth to this world in every age and accomplish their mission. I am saying this based on my deep personal experience and the testimony of the scriptures.' Mathur arranged for several more meetings of saints and scholars. He had been convinced, as were those scholars, that Ramakrishna was an incarnation of God. Some called him the Paramahansa—the knower of Brahman belonging to the highest order of sannyasis. All this amounted to Mathur's understanding that God alone was worthy of love.

Ramakrishna cared little what people said: what difference would it make to him if some called him mad and others an incarnation? But he was perturbed about Mathur's illness. Mathur's condition became serious. After about a week's suffering, Mathur left the world on 16 July 1871. He had served Ramakrishna for more than fifteen years with utmost dedication. Whatever Ramakrishna wanted, Mathur provided that with happiness. Ramakrishna, for his part, had shown unlimited love for Mathur. At the time of his death Mathur received an extraordinary benediction from Ramakrishna.

Ramakrishna says:

- God is born as man for the purpose of sporting as man. Rama, Krishna and Chaitanya are examples. By meditating on an Incarnation of God one meditates on God Himself.⁹³
- If a householder gives in charity in a spirit of detachment, he is really doing good to himself and not to others. It is God alone that he serves—God, who dwells in all beings, and when he serves God, he is really doing good to himself and not to others.⁹⁴
- To love God is the essence of the whole thing. Bhakti alone is the essence.⁹⁵

⁹³. Gospel, p. 405

⁹⁴. Gospel, p. 671

⁹⁵. Gospel, p. 497

Benediction of the Purity Incarnate

The builders of the Kali Temple, Rani Rasmani and Mathura Nath Biswas, were both gone now. The administration of the temple complex was left in the hands of Rani's grandchildren.

In March 1872, Sarada Devi came to Calcutta for the first time. She came to Dakshineswar to see if the rumours running wild in her village and Kamarpukur, that her husband had lost his mental balance, were true, and also to serve her husband. She reached Dakshineswar after an arduous three-day walk, terrible fever on the way and other inconveniences. Owing to the tremendous intensity of her spiritual practices performed away from public gaze, Sarada Devi had had the vision of Mother Kali even before she came to Dakshineswar. When she arrived at the temple, Ramakrishna became worried and concerned for her health. The nobility and purity of Ramakrishna's concern for her, the purity and holiness in Sarada Devi's approach and their mutual reverence were all otherworldly. It was as if one spiritual giant was showing respect to another. He repeatedly told her that had she come at least a year ago, Mathuranath would have been there and he would have taken good care of her. He felt very bad that he was unable to arrange for suitable things for her to recover soon. Sarada Devi also reassured him repeatedly that she was just fine and happy. Yet Ramakrishna arranged for her treatment.

One day Sarada Devi asked him while serving his feet: 'How do you look upon me?' Ramakrishna replied instantly: 'The same Mother who is in the temple, the same mother who gave birth to this body and is now living in the Nahabat, that same Mother is now massaging my feet. Truly, I always see you as a form of the blissful Divine Mother.' Every moment with her was spent in spiritual discussion, instructions on spiritual disciplines, God-intoxication, etc.

Ramakrishna had attained the highest spiritual goal through several paths, true; yet he wanted to know if his mind really wanted Ishvara alone or the world. So one day Ramakrishna tested his own mind. Showing Sarada Devi, who was lying in a corner of the room, covered by a thick wrapper

from head to foot, he told his mind: 'O my mind, let there be no hypocrisy. Be honest—do you want the woman's body or do you want God?' While he asked his mind in this way and, as if to test himself, stretched his hand to touch Sarada Devi, the mind recoiled instantaneously and merged into such a deep samadhi that he lost all external consciousness the whole night. He was brought back to the normal plane of consciousness the next morning after considerable difficulty and a lot of worry.



Nahabat. Mother Sarada Devi lived here for 15 years

Sarada Devi continued to live in Ramakrishna's room for a few more days and served Ramakrishna and her mother-in-law Chandramani Devi constantly. It was her nature to wake up before 3 A.M. and meditate for long hours. Out of extreme shyness, she would never sleep in his room but somehow manage to rest for some time in a corner, covering herself from head to foot. At night, Ramakrishna would not sleep because he would walk about repeating God's names or would be merged in his spiritual moods and struggles. Sarada Devi would be worried because Ramakrishna would enter into deep states of spiritual ecstasies and she being new there would not

know what to do sometimes—she would not know whether to call others for help, or let him continue in such states. Once, perceiving her difficulty, Ramakrishna taught her some mantras to be repeated if he did not return to normal consciousness for a long time. He also found that while he would be in such spiritual states for several hours, Sarada Devi would be awake, huddled in the corner of a room without sleep. At the same time, she had to work the whole day in that hot climate. Ramakrishna therefore asked her to



shift over to the music tower, Nahabat. Sarada Devi did that, and was to live henceforth in this little 'palace'.

Nahabat is a little six-sided room, with not enough space perhaps to stretch one's body fully, and Sarada Devi lived there for 15 long years. She cooked for several devotees in that hot room, sitting in front of the firewood furnace, and shared the room with the women devotees who would occasionally stay overnight. She reminisced: 'In Dakshineswar I lived very quietly and unobserved by people in general. At that time I would see the Master perhaps once in two months. I used to console my mind by saying, "O mind, are you so fortunate that you can see him every day?" I used to stand behind the screen round the veranda of the Nahabat and hear the Master sing and see him dance in ecstasy through the holes in the screen.'

The manager of the temple complex remarked once: 'We have heard that Ramakrishna's wife lives here. But we have never seen her even once.' Such was the life Mother Sarada led.

We mentioned earlier that Ramakrishna adored meeting spiritually inclined souls. While Mathur was alive he would take him to different places—even on a pleasant boat ride or two. In 1872, Dayananda Saraswati was in Calcutta. He was a religious reformer of some standing. Ramakrishna was ever eager to meet with people who thought of God. So Captain Upadhyaya, whom we have mentioned before, took Ramakrishna and Hriday to meet him. Ramakrishna had heard about the Brahmo Samaj by around 1855 itself and had been to one or two Brahmos. But he had not seen Keshab Chandra Sen before. He was to hear about him at Dayananda's place.

Ramakrishna's practice continued without a break. He had by now walked through many roads that led to Ishvara. Although he never specifically said that he had practised Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, Ramakrishna revered the Buddha and Mahavira regularly. His had contact with Sikh devotees often.. Further, Ramakrishna was not much interested in religious denominations or names which people give to their 'religions' but in the paths to know the Highest Truth. Since the practices of some paths--meditation, repetition of God's names and so on—were similar, he did not go through them individually; as he had practised meditation or repetition of God's names already. Ramakrishna spoke from experience, and when he spoke highly of spiritual Masters, we may understand that probably he had had some experiences related to them.



Sarada Devi's mother Shyamasundari Devi

One experience, however, was still waiting to materialize. That was the practice of Christianity. Ramakrishna had heard about Jesus Christ, and had reverence for him. Once, towards the end of 1872, when he went to the nearby garden house of a gentleman named Jadu Mullick, Ramakrishna saw the painting of Madonna and Christ. As his mind concentrated itself on the life of Christ, the picture appeared to become alive. Rays of light emanated from the persons of Madonna and Christ and entered Ramakrishna's heart. Though he tried to remain normal, somehow he lost outward consciousness and it appeared that new impressions of Christianity were entering his mind. For the next two days his mind and heart had virtually become Christian. He forgot everything else. Now his one aspiration was to realize Jesus Christ. His time was spent in the thought of Christ. On the fourth day, when he was walking in the Panchavati, he saw a handsome person approaching him. Ramakrishna realized that that was Christ, who 'poured out his heart's blood for the redemption of humanity and suffered agonies for its sake.' Jesus came, embraced Ramakrishna and merged into him.

Thus ended the long story of Ramakrishna's spiritual practices. After more than 12 years of the most intense life of aspiration and spiritual struggle, Ramakrishna declared: 'As many faiths, so many paths.' As he himself said, for months at a stretch, he couldn't close his eyes. Days or nights, his life had been one long story of the most intense yearning for Truth.

The reverence of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi for one another reached its culmination when, on 25 May 1873, Ramakrishna placed Sarada Devi on the pedestal of the Divine Mother and worshipped her as the human manifestation of the Divine Mother. It was the day of the worship of Mother Kali, and all were busy with the worship in the temple. Hriday made arrangements for the worship in Ramakrishna's room at his behest and left. Ramakrishna performed this elaborate ritual while the living Mother sat there, and since both the worshipper and the worshipped were in the highest levels of spiritual consciousness then, they both merged into the highest samadhi, Being-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, and remained oblivious of the world for a long time. The worship was over. Ramakrishna offered the fruit of all his spiritual practices at her feet. It was the culmination of all of Ramakrishna's spiritual practices. After a long time, Mother Sarada Devi returned to the normal plane and quietly left for her room. After this

extraordinary worship, Ramakrishna constantly lived in an exalted state of mind and his mind refused to come down to the normal plane.

The rainy season in Calcutta began to tell upon Mother Sarada Devi's health and that was her first experience there. She endured everything quietly, but by October, problems increased. So in October 1873, Mother Sarada decided to visit her village for some days, for three reasons: firstly, she did not want to cause even a moment's worry to Ramakrishna; secondly, to see if her illness could be cured in the village; and thirdly, she heard about her father's ill-health.

Ramakrishna says:

- Even those engaged in worldly activities, such as office work or business, should hold on to truth. Truthfulness alone is the spiritual discipline in the Kaliyuga⁹⁶.
- All women are the embodiments of Shakti. It is the Primal Power that has become women and appears to us in the form of women.⁹⁷
- The Mother has kept me in the state of a devotee [*bhakta*], a *vijnani*. In this state I realize that it is the Mother alone who has become everything. I see Her everywhere. In the Kali temple, I found that Mother Herself had become everything.⁹⁸
- Man cannot really help the world. God alone does that. The man who works for others, without any selfish motive, really does good to himself.⁹⁹

⁹⁶. Gospel, p. 177

⁹⁷. Gospel, p. 336

⁹⁸. Gospel, p. 393

⁹⁹. Gospel, p.108

Viewing from the Summit

In the second week of December 1873, Ramakrishna's last remaining brother, Rameshwar, passed away in Kamarpukur. He was of a mystical type. He knew when and how he would pass away. So he himself had made arrangements for his funeral before his death. When the news reached Ramakrishna, he was worried as to how to pass it on to his old mother. But when he told her, she instead of weeping began to pacify Ramakrishna, and said that the world was transitory, and that all have to pass on some day. Ramakrishna was astounded to see this evolution in his mother. One of Rameshwar's sons, Ramlal, assumed responsibility for the worship of Goddess Kali now.

As the year 1874 set in, Ramakrishna was like the lotus in full bloom. After all his spiritual struggles had been successfully completed, the thirty-eight-year old Ramakrishna, ever so humble and without a trace of ego, had unravelled the secrets of the world of spirituality to humanity. He had successfully walked all the paths to Ishvara, reached all the goals they promised, experienced all the varied states, found them all to be true, and had returned to inform the world about this truth out of love. In an exalted state of spiritual union with the Supreme Being, Ramakrishna understood certain truths. One was that he was not an ordinary human being born because of his past tendencies or karma, but a special personality, who has come to the earth on a mission; he was the Incarnation. The other was that his spiritual practices were all for the good of the world. The third was that his realization that all paths were true was the harbinger of spiritual harmony in the world, and the non-dual experience is the highest experience in spirituality possible on this earth. Ramakrishna now lived in *bhavamukha* as ordained by the Divine Mother, which is the threshold of the human and the Divine, to give his knowledge to the world.

Dakshineswar had always had visitors since the beginning—people visited the temple complex to worship the Divine Mother, mendicants and itinerant monks passed by on their way to Puri or Gangasagar, local people frequented the temple, local youth visited it, and the young had their picnic parties. During Ramakrishna's years of spiritual practice, people from the



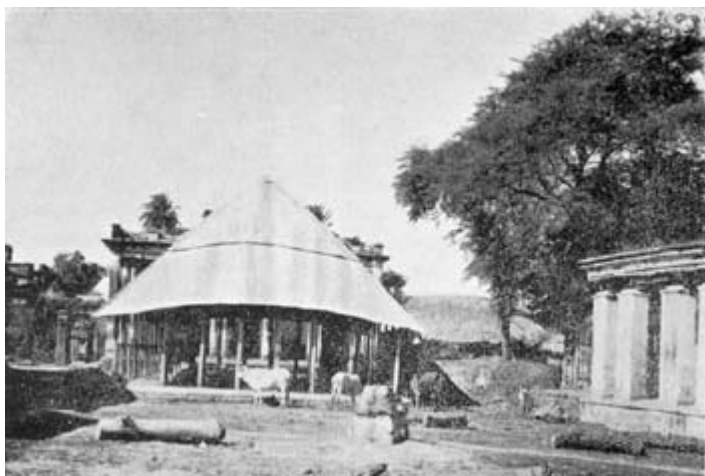
locality, like Jadu Mallick, had heard about him and had become acquainted with him too. But new people, though only a few initially, began to visit the temple after 1870. They sought guidance from Ramakrishna. Of the first of Sri Ramakrishna's admirers, in 1872, Shambhu Charan Mallick came. In him, it was as if Mother Kali had arranged for a provider of Ramakrishna's little necessities since Mathur had passed away. Though a man of a little wealth, Shambhu was generous and had intense dispassion. He ran a charitable dispensary to help the poor in the Dakshineswar area. He would say that he would die soon and that became true.

Mother Sarada, who had gone to the village for a brief visit of a few months, had to witness two bereavements: one of Rameshwar, Ramakrishna's brother, in December 1873, and the other of her dear father. Ramachandra Mukherji, Sarada Devi's father, had not been well since some time. On 26 April 1874, when people were celebrating Ramanavami, the birth anniversary of Rama, he passed away—fortunately in front of his divine daughter. The family in Jayrambati was shattered. There was poverty already, and now it had no one to provide anything. The eldest daughter, Sarada Devi, was twenty-one years old and married, and her brothers were all young. They were brahmins but the boys had very little schooling. So the children were distributed amongst relatives, and Sarada Devi returned to Dakshineswar in May 1874, when some women companions came to Calcutta to bathe in the River Ganga. In passing, we must not forget to mention that Abhay Charan, Mother Sarada's youngest brother, was brilliant, struggled valiantly against destitution and poverty, and entered the Calcutta Medical College to study medicine. He was about to become a doctor when illness took his life.

Though Mother Sarada was quite content to live in the small room in the music tower (Nahabat), the place was uncomfortable for two

people—her mother-in-law and herself. Therefore Shambhu Mallick and Captain Vishvanath provided money and material to build a hut nearby. Captain Vishvanath worked for the timber department of the Government. Sarada Devi began to live there and cook for Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna's days were spent now in singing, prayer, meditation etc. He, however, suffered from stomach ailments. Seeing his state of health, Sarada could not stay in the little hut for long; she shifted over to Nahabat again.

Once Shambhu Mullick offered some medicine to Ramakrishna for his stomach ailment. Ramakrishna went to his dispensary which was nearby and consumed it. Shambhu said that Ramakrishna could keep a little more with him and use it whenever it was needed. Ramakrishna replied that he could not hoard things. If he tried to do so, his limbs would become numb. Though Shambhu tried to explain that it was just medicine, Ramakrishna politely said that he could not carry the medicine back. Shambhu now wanted to test Ramakrishna. He therefore put some medicine in a small leaf packet and placed it in Ramakrishna's pocket. Ramakrishna did not know anything about it. While returning to his room, try as he might, he could not take the right path. He missed the way and began wandering about in the area helplessly. Shambhu, who was watching this from a distance, was amazed to see this phenomenon.



Ramakrishna says:

➤ When you practise discipline in solitude, keep yourself entirely away from your family. While thus practising discipline in solitude, you should think: 'I have no one else in the world. God is my all.' You should also pray to Him, with tears in your eyes, for knowledge and devotion.¹⁰⁰

➤ A man must be true to his word.¹⁰¹

➤ The heart is a splendid place. Meditate on God there.¹⁰²

➤ If you ask me how long you should live in solitude away from your family, I should say that it would be good for you if you could spend even one day in such a manner. Three days at a time are still better. One may live in solitude for twelve days, a month, three months, or a year, according to one's convenience and ability.

¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰. Gospel, p. 313

¹⁰¹. Gospel, p. 264

¹⁰². Gospel, p. 233

¹⁰³. Gospel, p. 313

26. The Monsoon Showers of Heavenly Love

After all his spiritual attainments, after the Divine Mother's words that he must remain in Bhavamukha, Ramakrishna's love for humanity intensified. All his life he had been intensely pained, seeing the suffering of human beings. He was feeling more intensely now, because Ramakrishna knew that human beings are suffering due to ignorance. We human beings have the richest treasure within but are running about everywhere seeking external, silly solutions. Our suffering is endless due to our ignorance of God or our real nature. The treasure within, the Divine Power or Ishvara, is the source of all happiness and everlasting bliss but we are unaware of this. What hurts your well-wisher is to see you holding a bag full of money in your hand and weeping that you are poor and have nothing to eat for days.



Similar was Ramakrishna's situation. He was eager to convey the message of everlasting bliss and peace to everyone. He would stand atop the building in Dakshineswar and cry out, "Oh where are you all? Come!'. He knew that the hidden treasure within is not meant to be accessed only by some particular group, class or race but that it is everyone's right. It is like the uncle moon, who can be everyone's uncle. Everyone can seek God and

the goal of everyone is to know the Truth. An army of saints and scholars have reminded humanity from time to time, in diverse languages, about the confusion of seeking happiness where we should not. They have tried to show ways to Truth according to their capabilities and understanding. Ramakrishna was not like any of them. He had travelled all the paths, attained the highest through every single way and had known everything about spiritual life. Along with knowledge, his love was different.



The manifestation of love is not the same in all beings: it differs according to the spiritual strength of the personality. Ramakrishna used to give the example of an elephant entering a small pond and a huge river or the ocean. If the elephant enters the little pond, the pond will be destroyed, not the ocean. If ordinary people feel love and compassion for their fellow beings and talk big, its reach, scope, strength and effect are all limited. If Ramakrishna shows love and compassion, it is extremely powerful, true, and selfless and revolutionizes humanity. His words and life contain such tremendous power that anyone anywhere, in whatever situation, can be inspired to become free from ignorance.

Ramakrishna knew there were various groups or denominations, trying to teach various forms of instant religion. He knew how some reformers blamed Sanatana Dharma for everything, condemned image worship, and tried to discard everything ancient as bad. He knew the work of reformers and their limitations. He had met the leaders of both the Brahmo Samaj, Devendranath Tagore, and the Arya Samaj, Dayananda Saraswati. One meeting for him was sufficient to measure the depth of such institutions.

He also had met with a few of the important members of the Brahmo Samaj like Shivanath Sastri, Vijay Krishna Goswami and others. He had met Vaishnavas and Shaktas, Shaivas and Yogis, pundits and devotees. All these varied experiences were leading Ramakrishna to begin a new phase of his life: to begin to spread what he had realized. Mother Kali was now preparing his mind—which had been all through concentrated in spiritual struggle—for the dissemination of spirituality.

It was in 1874, probably, that Dakshineswar had an seeker as visitor. A pundit from Rajasthan named Narayan Shastri came to Dakshineswar. He had come to Bengal to study logic and, having visited Dakshineswar and Ramakrishna, loved the place, and stayed there for some time to perform spiritual practices. According to Ramakrishna, Narayan had studied logic for seven years and the other subjects for about twenty-five years. He initially thought Ramakrishna was mad, seeing his outward behaviour, but soon understood the truth. Ramakrishna inspired him in his spiritual struggle and, when Narayan desired to become a monk, Ramakrishna himself initiated him into the vows of monasticism (*sannyasa*).



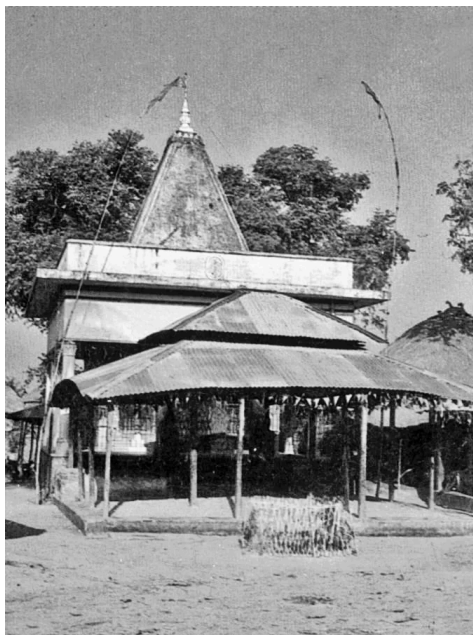
Ramakrishna met Michael Madhusudan Dutta, a renowned literary personality of Bengal of those days, at Dakshineswar. Dwarka, Mathur's son and successor as owner of the Temple, brought him to meet Ramakrishna. Narayan Shastri was there when this meeting took place. He did not like Madhusudan's converting to Christianity because of 'stomach', that is, for worldly benefits, as the latter said. He reacted strongly to this. Soon, Narayan Shastri attained a high state of spirituality under Ramakrishna's training and, having become a monk, left Dakshineswar after some months. He probably went to Vashishta Ashrama in a mood of intense renunciation.

The year 1875 was quite different from the others, as Ramakrishna's Guru attitude began to manifest itself more and more. Providence was making arrangements for his future disciples to arrive from then on. His continued states of intense spiritual ecstasies and visits to certain places in Calcutta marked the year's highlights. Of the most important happenings that year was his coming into contact with Keshab

Chandra Sen. Ramakrishna had heard about the renowned leader of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshab Chandra Sen, and was eager to meet him. On 15 March 1875, Ramakrishna went with Hriday to a locality called Belgharia and met Keshab in his garden house. Just as Ramakrishna was deeply impressed with Keshab, seeing him in meditation, Keshab too was impressed with Ramakrishna and, within a month's time, the Brahmo Samaj mouthpiece, *Indian Mirror*, published an article by Keshab on Ramakrishna. This in a way made Ramakrishna 'public'. From then on aspirants began to visit Ramakrishna, especially the youngsters.



Towards August that year, Mother Sarada became unwell. As days rolled by, her health worsened. So she left for Jayarambati in September



1875. In the village too she continued to suffer, and with time the suffering only increased. Where could a poor family in a remote village find doctors, medicines, good food, diet etc in those days, when even cities had almost

nothing? At such an absolutely helpless situation, the Divine Mother rushed to her help and Mother Sarada miraculously recovered completely. As Mother Sarada said, “I got the medicine, the world also was blessed.”

In January 1876, Ramakrishna visited Kamarpukur. He went to Kamarpukur in order to participate in the sacred-thread ceremony of his nephew, Shivram. He had been concerned about Mother Sarada’s health and saw her well now, recuperating after the terrible illness. He was relieved to see her healthy. Ramakrishna did not stay long this time and returned to Dakshineswar by the second week of February. Though Mother Sarada wanted to come with him, he must have thought it better that she got fully well before returning to Dakshineswar. So she returned one month later.

In 1876, Ramakrishna became unwell. All were worried and native treatments called *kaviraji* were tried. There was some success. But the climate, the unclean drinking water, the effects of spiritual volcanoes that erupted in the person all the time—all told on his health and Ramakrishna would suffer quite frequently. That, however, would never affect his spiritual bliss. Mother Sarada served Ramakrishna and his mother in every way possible. She knew how delicate his digestive system was and would take extraordinary precaution about his food. In November 1876, she went to the village on a visit. While she was away, on 13 February 1877, Chandramani Devi passed away. Until her last, Ramakrishna served her with love and affection. Now Ramakrishna was the only living person in the family. His parents, brothers and sisters, one or two of their children—all had passed away, and Ramakrishna had not even reached the age of forty. For him to have endured so many bereavements one after another so calmly was in itself an austerity. In April 1877, the second person who would provide for Ramakrishna’s necessities, Shambhu Mallick, breathed his last in Calcutta.

Sometime during this period, Ramakrishna, accompanied by Mother Sarada and Hriday, wanted to visit Kamarpukur. Due to rain, they could not go much farther and midway, took shelter in a devotee’s house. Coincidentally, that devotee was praying to God to send him a saint to his house.

Ramakrishna says:

- Chant the name of God, and with it pray to Him that you may have love for Him. Pray to God that your attachment to such transitory things as wealth, name, and creature comforts may become less and less every day.¹⁰⁴
- Those who lead a householder's life should practise spiritual disciplines; they should pray eagerly to God in solitude.¹⁰⁵
- Yes, many need a guru. But a man must have faith in the guru's words. He succeeds in spiritual life by looking on his guru as God Himself.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴. Gospel, p. 190

¹⁰⁵. Gospel, p. 183

¹⁰⁶. Gospel, p. 241

Lighting the Celestial Lamps

It was Ramakrishna's own statement that when the lotus blooms, bees come by themselves. He had told Mathur years ago: 'The Divine Mother has shown me many times that this place (that is, himself) has an inner circle of devotees and that they will come. They will know and hear about God from this place. ...That is why She has not destroyed this body, but has saved it.' So aspirants, young and old, were somehow directed towards Dakshineswar.



Before aspirants came, Ramakrishna helped his own teachers who were still aspirants reach the supreme goal. Bhairavi Brahmani, Totapuri, Gauri Pundit—to mention a few had attained perfection in their respective paths, and had come to teach him. But Ramakrishna observed their incompleteness and corrected them, thus removing the obstacles to their highest attainment. The same thing happened with Chandra and Girija, two other disciples of Bhairavi Brahmani. They came with their occult powers, and Ramakrishna graciously removed them, saying that such powers were nothing but dirt and were obstacles to inner bliss and the

attainment of absolute perfection.

A new phase in Ramakrishna's life began after 1875. Until then he was an aspirant, seeking, struggling and seeing God in various ways, through various paths. Now, he had got the command to remain in *bhavamukha* and was to be the Teacher of teachers, despite his disinterestedness in being called a teacher. Keshab became a frequent visitor to Dakshineswar after Ramakrishna visited him a year or more before. Keshab had a close association with him. This close relationship happened after Keshab's testing Ramakrishna. In Ramakrishna's own words, the method of Keshab's testing him was rather irritating but it happened: 'Keshab sent three members of the Brahmo Samaj to the temple garden at Dakshineswar to test me. They were commissioned to watch me

day and night, and to report to Keshab. They were in my room and intended to spend the night there. They constantly uttered the word "Dayamaya!" ["O Compassionate One!"] and said to me: "Follow Keshab Babu. That will do you good." I said: "I believe in God with form." Still they went on with their exclamations of "Dayamaya!". Then a strange mood came over me. I said to them: "Get out of here!" I didn't allow them to spend the night in my room. So they slept on the veranda.' After all such tests, Ramakrishna impressed Keshab and the latter began to visit him. Though he had been influenced by Western ways of religious thinking, Keshab nevertheless considered Ramakrishna to be a master of spirituality.

Just as any spiritual seeker in Indian cities in those days would be attracted to existing societies like the Brahmo Samaj, somehow many Brahmo Samajists themselves began to get attracted to Ramakrishna, their own philosophy notwithstanding. After Keshab's article in *The Mirror*, it was Pratab Mazumdar's turn to write in the *Sunday Mirror* about Ramakrishna in 1878. He added some of Ramakrishna's words as teachings. These articles gave the educated people of Calcutta some idea about Ramakrishna. Troubles began in Brahmo Samaj in 1878, when the samaj suffered serious setbacks owing to quarrels and dissensions. Eventually, Keshab founded a separate organization. He then published a booklet titled *The Sayings of the Paramahansa* in Bengali. This attracted several people to Ramakrishna. This does not mean, however, that the Brahmos paved the way for spreading Ramakrishna's ideals. No. While a few came to him saying that



they had read an article about him, many came to him who knew nothing about the Brahmo articles or the Brahmos themselves. Ramakrishna also did not like the publication of articles about him, he was averse to being called a guru, he was averse to receiving respect from others, and he was averse even to addressing himself in the first person.

One extraordinary individual to meet Ramakrishna in 1877 was Girish Chandra Ghosh. He was a person made of faith. Though his youth had been spent as a bohemian, his heart was filled with the strong current of faith. His relationship with

Ramakrishna was unusual. Despite all his vagaries, Ramakrishna showered his unconditional love on Girish. To give an example of Ramakrishna's love, on a particular evening in 1885, Girish arrived at Dakshineswar loaded with liquor, and abused Ramakrishna using foul words. The others present there were infuriated. Ramakrishna would not mind at all. He went to Calcutta the next day and knocked at Girish's door. Girish came out, was stupefied to see Ramakrishna and said that since the previous day he had been mad at himself, and had imagined he had been abandoned. However, seeing Ramakrishna at his doorstep and his love, he now considered Ramakrishna in a different light altogether. When Girish came to Ramakrishna, he was in a state of utter desolation internally, having suffered immensely in the world. Ramakrishna saw in that man, with many incurable habits, a sincere soul, but one who had found it impossible to make it a habit of repeating God's names even for a few moments. The negative had taken possession of his life. So Ramakrishna told him to make over to him the 'power of attorney', which meant that Girish had to surrender himself totally and never anymore think of his own life or its future. That done, Girish rose to unthinkable heights in spirituality. Such was the power of the divine guru manifesting in Ramakrishna.

From the year 1878, there began to arrive many aspirants of varied paths: Catholics, Protestants, Evangelists, Quakers, Muslims, Sufis, Vaishnavas, Shaktas, Advaitins, and so on. Everyone received the fullest attention, affection, and love.

As the year 1880 approached, the first of the sixteen disciples came: Latu (Swami Adbhutananda) entered the precincts of Dakshineswar. Latu was an unlettered peasant boy, working as a domestic help. Eventually, he became an attendant of Ramakrishna, and was in time to become one of the most brilliant saints. Ramakrishna was impressed with the utter innocence of the boy, and the boy was deeply attracted to the spiritual eminence of Ramakrishna.

Ramakrishna says:

- God incarnates Himself on earth in a human body. He is, no doubt, present everywhere and in all beings, but man's longing is not satisfied unless he sees God in a human form. Man's need is not satisfied without the Divine Incarnation.¹⁰⁷
- It is not possible to develop ecstatic love of God unless you love Him very deeply and regard Him as your very own.¹⁰⁸
- What need is there even to bother one's head about whether God is formless or has a form? It is enough for a man to pray to Him, alone in solitude, weeping, 'O God, reveal Yourself to me as You are.'¹⁰⁹
- One should constantly repeat the name of God. The name of God is highly effective in the Kaliyuga. The practice of Yoga is not possible in this age, for the life of a man depends on food. Clap your hands while repeating God's name, and the birds of your sins will fly away.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷. Gospel, p. 883

¹⁰⁸. Gospel, p. 229

¹⁰⁹. Gospel, p. 586

¹¹⁰. Gospel, p. 241

Emanating the Soothing Light

Apart from renowned religious leaders of those times, there were spiritual seekers from various disciplines of life who visited him during that period: advocates, magistrates, professors, missionaries, and people from various other exalted sections of society. There were renowned singers like Trailokyanath Sanyal, Nilakantha, and others who were happy to sing before him. There were artists like Vinodini. There were also common people who came to him for diverse reasons—servants, sweepers, farmers, boatmen and others. And then there were those young men—ardent aspirants of God who cared not for anything but God. To all these, there was one thing that Ramakrishna gave without reserve: pure, unadulterated love. His message was his life itself. As days rolled on, Ramakrishna understood that his mission was to be completed soon, for he was not to be there for long. He therefore stood on one of the houses of the temple complex and cried out towards Calcutta: ‘O Young men, where are you? Please come!’

We shall use the words ‘disciple’ or ‘devotee’ henceforth to indicate those who came seeking God or spirituality from Ramakrishna. Some received mantra from him, some received liberation by sight or touch or word, some others saw their spiritual consciousness awakening, yet others received his blessings in diverse ways. By the end of the year 1878, several of the important householder disciples had arrived.

Ramakrishna’s sole driving motive was intense compassion and love—to help others out of the clutches of *maya*, to help some overcome suffering and to show to everyone the path to Light and Bliss according to their standing. And the wonderful teaching method he used! He made complex ideas of Vedanta simple and easy through analogies, parables and stories. His corner room in Dakshineswar became the centre of spirituality. He was a singer beyond compare. His songs melted stony hearts. He danced as he sang and the dance was divine. Everything about Ramakrishna was divine and special.

The year 1879 was important. It was the year when the Divine Mother virtually ‘brought’ him out of the enclosure, one may say. Ramakrishna participated in several events of the Brahmos and other groups during that year. And his first photograph was taken. Somewhere



Surendranath Mitra

during the year, he had an extraordinary boat trip with many Brahmos along the River Ganga. During this trip everyone present saw his states of samadhi, heard his extraordinary words, and were deeply inspired. That year, a few people, who were to be in the inner circle, arrived: Ramachandra Dutta, Kedar Chatterji, Surendra Mitra, Manamohan Mitra and a few others were important. Yet, Ramakrishna's chosen disciples were yet to arrive.

Of late, Ramakrishna's routine was one of spiritual variety. In a very general way, this was his 'routine': he would get up quite early, if at all he slept. Better to say he would not sleep at all except for one or two hours' rest. The famous description of the room is that there are two cots: one big, one small. But he hardly slept. He sat on one of them to discuss Ishvara with devotees. In the morning, he would salute the deities in his room, repeat the Lord's names clapping his hands and then meditate. He would visit the temples and worship the deities in his own way—sometimes offering flowers, sometimes singing, sometimes meditating, sometimes conversing affectionately. In his own room, his day would be spent in varied ways. But one thing was certain: the room was the supermarket of bliss and joy. Singing kirtanas, devotional songs on Mother Kali, dancing, constant conversations on Ishvara, and so on continued through the day until late night. Every word he said was vital for humanity, coming from the deepest experiences of the spiritual universe. However, Providence had not yet arranged for a scribe to note down these precious statements for posterity. Mother Sarada would stand behind a wooden curtain and watch all that happened in his room. Ramakrishna had a few books in his room and he would ask one of his disciples or devotees to read from them. Occasionally, he also heard readings from religious 'new arrivals'.

Hriday had served Ramakrishna for a long time. Gradually, he began to dominate and 'control' Ramakrishna. He used to boast in the village that it was due to him that Ramakrishna was what he was. Back in Dakshineswar, his domination increased. Ramakrishna bore everything silently, remembering the good things Hriday had done. The situation came

to a peak when Sarada Devi returned to Dakshineswar with her mother Shyamasundari Devi in March 1880. Her mother was coming to Calcutta for the first time, just to accompany her daughter. When they arrived at night after a long, gruelling walk of two days, Hriday shouted at Shyamasundari and Sarada Devi for no reason and asked them to go away. Ramakrishna could not say anything for fear of Hriday, as the latter was very rude. Not

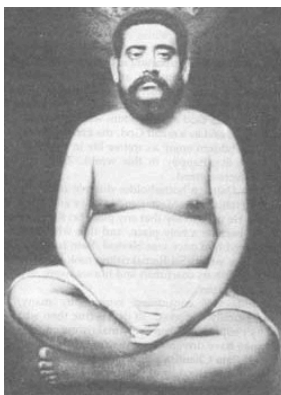


knowing where to go, the mother and daughter somehow managed to stay in some distant relative's house for the night, and returned to the village the next day, walking all the way back. This was too much. This was Hriday's pegging the last nail into his coffin. One month after this incident, he committed a blunder, of worshipping the temple-owner's little daughter, and the temple authorities threw him out. The arrogance in him had made him pay the price. Subsequently, he tried to enter Dakshineswar once again, wept much, but he could not. Ramakrishna's love and affection for him remained unaltered. In fact, when Hriday was weeping, Ramakrishna too wept bitterly.

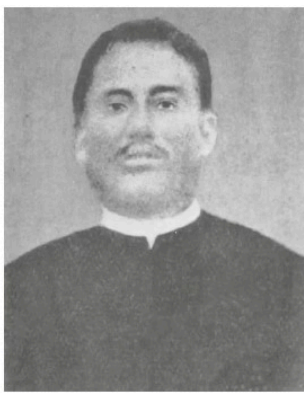
In April 1880, Ramakrishna paid his final visit to his native village. He had not been there for almost four years: further, Kamarpukur had changed totally. Neither were there his brothers, sisters or mother nor many of his old acquaintances anymore. All had passed on. So he went for a purpose. Though a monk now, though he had attained Brahman and was in the Vijnana state and unaware of the ways of the world, Ramakrishna as the only living member of Kshudiram's descendents had to arrange for a piece of land for the worship of the family deities. He went to his little hut in Kamarpukur, organised worship of the deities, and was ready to return. He was free of responsibilities now. Not so free, though. In the village, people flocked to see him. He tried to avoid them, but who would listen? He knew that this was to be his final visit to his village. So there was a bit of sadness. The beautiful village that had seen his childhood sport, his sadhanas, his prayers, must have wept as he said goodbye. Ramakrishna returned to Dakshineswar. Mother Sarada, on her part, had gone to the village and she returned to Dakshineswar in 1882.

Ramakrishna says:

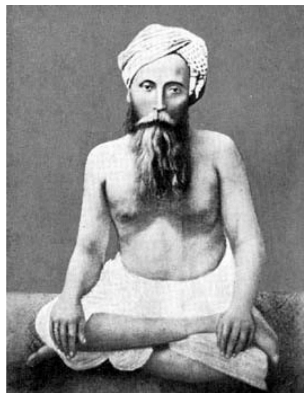
- A man cannot realize his true Self unless his heart is pure.¹¹¹
- You may raise an objection and say: 'We have not seen God. How can we feel attracted to Him as the Gopis felt attracted to Krishna?' But it is possible. 'I do not know Him. I have only heard His name, and that has fixed my mind upon Him.'¹¹²
- Devotion (Bhakti Yoga) is the religion of this age. By realizing the Divine Mother of the universe, you will get knowledge as well as devotion.¹¹³
- It is just for the love of the devotees that God contracts Himself into a human form and descends on the earth to play His divine sport (*lila*).¹¹⁴



Ram Chandra Dutta



Adhar Lal Sen



Balaram Bose

¹¹¹. Gospel, p. 381

¹¹². Gospel, p. 533

¹¹³. Gospel, p. 468

¹¹⁴. Gospel, p. 382

Adventurers On the Path of Bliss

Ramakrishna knew that he had a lot to accomplish but there was little time left. So he began to work extremely hard from then on. The intensity of his activities during this period of his life was just as it was during the period of his spiritual struggle. As Sri Ramakrishna used to say, before the railroad was laid in that region, numerous seekers, holy persons, mendicants etc frequented Dakshineswar, especially those on their way to the annual Ganga-Sagar festival. Numerous monks, yogis and seekers would stay for extended periods in tents in Dakshineswar. They would be fed well by the temple authorities and thus pilgrims had no difficulties in continuing their journey. There were also countless local devotees visiting the temple from time to time.

One day Kedar Chatterji brought a Protestant minister, Reverend Williams. Ramakrishna's mind suddenly lifted itself into an extraordinary mood and a deep transformation took place in him. He went into samadhi. Williams was moved to tears and he touched Ramakrishna's feet. When asked what he felt, Rev. Williams exclaimed that in Ramakrishna he saw Christ.

Among these devotees who frequented Dakshineswar was one who was eventually to be the apostles of Ramakrishna. His name was Gopal Chandra Ghosh. He visited Dakshineswar around 1875, saw Ramakrishna at other places twice or thrice, but the time hadn't come. It took some more years for him to finally come to Dakshineswar, seeking spiritual solace. He eventually dedicated himself to monastic life. Gopal was one of the first of the sixteen direct disciples to have met Sri Ramakrishna. One more future disciple of Ramakrishna's saw him long before he was to come seeking God. That was a seven-year old boy. He saw Ramakrishna in Keshab Chandra Sen's residence in Belgharia, Calcutta in 1875. This boy



Rakhal

Swami Brahmananda

was one of the chosen disciples, to eventually become Swami Vijnanananda.

We have stated before that since Rani Rasmani constructed the Kali Temple, sadhus, mendicants, pilgrims and so on had found a place to rest for a few days before continuing their pilgrimage to Puri, Ganga Sagar and so on. However, since the creation of the railroad in those parts, the numbers of visiting mendicants, yogis etc had dwindled considerably. A new type of visitors frequented Dakshineswar now. At the right time, Divine Mother Herself had ordained that Her divine child should remain at the “threshold” of the Absolute and the Temporal, the most exalted bhavamukha state, for the good of humanity, Thus the new visitors found in Ramakrishna the source and end of all spirituality, the last word in spirituality, ready to teach, remove obstacles, inspire and guide.

Ramakrishna now began teaching and training disciples. He frequented a few houses of devotees and admirers, participation in religious festivals at a few holy places made him known and thus his future apostles came in contact with him one by one. Bright college students from Calcutta, who had come under the influence of the Brahmo Samaj, began frequenting him. With the arrival of these young students, his teacher attitude manifested itself to its fullest. Ramakrishna showered immaculate motherly love and affection on everyone, distributing spirituality to all and awakening everyone’s spiritual consciousness. His love and care for the young spiritual aspirants, specially, and his eagerness to see them attain the highest goal motivated them to do intense spiritual practices under his watchful guidance.



We have mentioned Gopal, known subsequently as Gopal-da, who had met Ramakrishna as early as in 1875. The next of the disciples to meet Sri Ramakrishna were Gangadhar and Harinath. In 1877 these two young men saw Ramakrishna entering into exalted spiritual states while visiting a devotee in Baghbazar. They were amazed. After some years, they began frequenting Dakshineswar and eventually became Swamis Akhandananda and Turiyananda. People had heard of Samadhi as if it was some strange, unique experience of yogis. The general idea was that it was a once-in-a-life-time transformation,

leading to the yogis becoming stones as it were. There were strange notions about spiritual experiences. Very few had heard or seen Samadhi or mystical trances before until Ramakrishna experienced them so frequently. Seeing Ramakrishna, aspirants began to understand gradually that spiritual experiences are not fairy tales but actual, real things. What was more, from Ramakrishna, they heard repeatedly that everyone can experience them.

In 1881, Hari and Tarak, two youth, who later became Swamis Turiyananda and Shivananda respectively, came in search of God and found their spiritual master in Ramakrishna. In 1881, Rakhal (Swami Brahmananda) came to Dakshineswar with his relative in search of God. Ramakrishna instantly recognized him as his own. Rakhal became like Ramakrishna's own spiritual son. With the passing of time, other young men arrived. The last of the direct disciples of Ramakrishna to meet him was perhaps Subodh, who met Ramakrishna for the first time in 1885. The greatest of the disciples, Narendranath Dutta [Narendra] was also to meet Ramakrishna in 1881.

Narendra (who became Swami Vivekananda) saw Ramakrishna for the first time in a devotee's house. In November 1881, Ramakrishna was invited to participate in a festival in Surendra Mitra's house. There he saw this young man singing soul-stirring songs. Since his boyhood, Narendra was seeking God. He wanted to know if this idea of God was being used to mesmerize the world, or if there was God, really. His ardent but rational seeking took him to various religious leaders and to various religious groups, but none could give him a straight and satisfactory answer. Once, Narendra heard from his English professor, Reverend William Hastie, who was also the principal of the General Assembly's Institution [Scottish Church College], about Ramakrishna. While discussing Emerson's *The Excursion*, Hastie remarked that he knew someone who had the experience of transcendental states described in the poem. And Hastie mentioned Ramakrishna. This opened the floodgates of future developments. In December 1881, Narendra came to Dakshineswar, asked the same question about the existence of God to Ramakrishna, and received *the* positive answer. Ramakrishna did not merely say that he had seen God. He said that Narendra also could see Him. Ramakrishna was happy to see the young man. In Narendra he saw a person of supreme potential. In Narendra he saw one of the Seven Sages, who was to come to the earth. In

Narendra, again, Ramakrishna saw that unique personality, who had taken birth by the grace of Shiva of Varanasi.

Ramakrishna began to train Narendra to be the prophet of love and peace to the world. There is a paper available even today, in which Ramakrishna gave a written declaration that 'Naren will teach others'. Narendra began his intense austerities and spiritual struggle since his first meeting with Ramakrishna. For one thing, he was rational and was never a person to believe in things just because others said so or believed in them. He no doubt respected Ramakrishna, but wanted to test him before accepting him. In all his tests, however, Ramakrishna passed successfully.

One particular simple test should be mentioned here. Let alone during his life on earth, during the course of any day, Ramakrishna lived in various moods and bhavas. Sometimes a few attitudes would become permanent and stay for long. One of the states of his mind was concerning metal or money. Ramakrishna could not touch metal or money. As he himself remarked: 'My hand gets all twisted up if I hold money in it; my breathing stops.' Narendra heard this and doubted the veracity of this statement. How could a person not touch metal? So one day, when Ramakrishna was in some other part of the city, Narendra came to Dakshineswar. He removed Ramakrishna's bed and placed a coin on the cot. He then rearranged the bed as it was before and went to meditate in the

Panchavati. Ramakrishna returned to the room. The moment he touched the bed he cried out in pain. The companions were taken aback. They searched the bed to see if there was some insect but found the coin. Narendra returned and said that he had put the coin there. Ramakrishna was pleased with Narendra's testing him.



Only on one or two occasions Ramakrishna would become intensely worried due to Narendra's remarks. Narendra once remarked that perhaps Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences were imaginations of his own brain. If Narendra, who had a pure

mind and bright intellect, said something, it must indeed be true. So Ramakrishna went to the Divine Mother and wept before Her. The Divine

Mother assured him repeatedly that he need not at all worry and that Narendra would one day accept all such experiences as true. Terrible upheavals in his family notwithstanding, Narendra continued his practices and, by 1886, attained the highest, *nirvikalpa samadhi*, by his master's grace. The love that Ramakrishna showered on Narendra specially and on all the other disciples in general, was exemplary.

Narendra was honest and sincere to the bone. He would not accept anything just because it was well-known, others recommended it, or was popular. He tested and studied thoroughly before accepting something. Speaking about atheism, Swamiji stated years later that a true atheist is an open-minded person. He or she is ready to give up all pet notions when facts contrary to their beliefs are presented. Narendra was no atheist ever but a brilliant seeker, devoted to the core. Narendra continued his contemplation on Ramakrishna for decades from then on. Finally, he had several revelations about his guru. Narendra's words about Ramakrishna, written two or three years after Ramakrishna's passing, are worth quoting here: 'So now the great conclusion is that Ramakrishna has no peer; nowhere else in this world exists that unprecedented perfection, that wonderful kindness for all that does not stop to justify itself, such intense sympathy for person in bondage. Either he must be the Avatara [Incarnation] as he himself used to say, or else the ever-perfect divine man, whom the Vedanta speaks of as the free one, who assumes a body for the good of humanity. This is my conviction, sure and certain; and the worship of such a divine man has been referred to by Patanjali in the aphorism, "Or the goal may be attained by meditating on the pure heart of a saint". Never during his life did he refuse a single prayer of mine. Millions of offences has he forgiven me. Such great love even my parents never had for me. There is no poetry, no exaggeration in all this. It is the bare truth and every disciple of his knows it. In times of great danger, great temptation, I have wept in extreme agony with the prayer, "O God, save me", and no response has come; but this wonderful saint, or Avatara or whatever you may wish to call him, knew, through his power of insight into the human heart, of all my afflictions and removed them, in spite of myself.'

An important devotee to arrive in 1881 was Balaram Basu. Balaram Basu came to know about Ramakrishna from the article Keshab Chandra Sen had written about him. Balaram wanted to meet him since quite some time but somehow could not. Finally the opportunity came and

he came to Dakshineswar. Seeing him, Ramakrishna lovingly enquired if he wanted to ask something. Balaram asked him if there was indeed God. Ramakrishna replied that it is not just that God is there, but you can see Him if you call on Him. This convinced Balaram, and he began frequenting more and more and practised various spiritual practices. Balaram stood like a pillar and for generations, their family served Ramakrishna and his spiritual descendents. The initial history of the Ramakrishna movement is replete with stories of how Balaram and his family helped the movement in diverse ways. Among the other devotees and admirers to come to the Source, Ramakrishna, during this period were Manomohan, Ramchandra Dutta, Nityagopal, and others.



The year 1882 has its great importance. This is why. The author of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Mahendra Nath Gupta or 'M', arrived in Dakshineswar. Mahendra Nath hid his name and popularised himself just as "M" in his immortal work. Though the popular headmaster of a renowned institution, Mahendra lived a sad life. The cause of his sadness was his family circumstances. In March 1882, the situation became so unbearable that he thought of committing suicide and left home. Wandering a while, he came to his sister's house and spent the night there. The next morning, his

nephew, Siddheswar, took him to Dakshineswar. The rest is history. In a divine mood, Ramakrishna understood what was going on in Mahendra's mind and remarked: "God forbid ! Why should you take leave of this world?



Mahendra Nath Gupta "M"

Do you not feel blessed by discovering your Guru? By His grace, what is beyond all imagination or dreams can be easily achieved !" Ramakrishna also told him that Mahendra had a mission in life. And it was due to him that we could have numerous teachings of Ramakrishna. Though 'M' could not visit Ramakrishna much, he would come on holidays and note down everything that Ramakrishna did or said. Not just that. Mahendra was perhaps one of the first to visit Kamarpukur while Ramakrishna was in the physical world. His intention was to feel the birthplace as it was then to write the book. What he experienced in Kamarpukur is unbelievable. Mahendra saw every inch of

Kamarpukur vibrating with divine effulgence.

In March 1882, Ramakrishna visited Balaram's house and participated in the Dol Yatra festival. One other disciple to visit Dakshineswar in April 1882 was Baburam, who was to become Swami Premananda. Baburam had already met Ramakrishna in Harisabha at Jorosanko, Calcutta. Ramakrishna had to make more visits to different parts of Calcutta in 1882. He visited the houses of several devotees and influenced numerous people to take to the spiritual path. Occasionally, he had to visit three houses the same day because devotees wanted him to visit them. They would arrange for singing and discussions. Ramakrishna would create a bazaar of joy and bliss wherever he went. This year, the devotees took him to a few places in Calcutta which he had not seen: the Monument, the six-armed image of Sri Chaitanya, etc. In August 1882, an interesting event took place. Ishvara Chandra Vidyasagar was a famous scholar, philanthropist and statesman, famous not only in Bengal but the

whole of India. Ramakrishna went to visit him and their conversation marks one of the beautiful discussions about the need of spiritual discipline and experience.

Days rolled by quickly. Amongst the sixteen disciples, Niranjan (Swami Niranjanananda) and Gangadhar (Swami Akhandananda) came seeking God this year, though Gangadhar had seen Sri Ramakrishna as a boy several years ago. The disciples received constant guidance and performed intense sadhana. Many would have repeated visions, divine experiences, Samadhi etc. Many disciples have commented that Ramakrishna's love and affection for them was hundreds of times greater than that of their own parents. In his love, there was no desire for anything in return, and the only thing Ramakrishna wanted was their spiritual welfare. Whenever devotees visited him, they used to watch him deep in conversation with the Divine Mother, singing soul stirring songs, talking about God, explaining his own experiences, narrating the stories of his years of sadhana, and so on. Every word of his increased their aspiration for God more and more. There was the other side too, sort of an interlude to the strenuous spiritual struggles. There were different people like Hazra. These were troublemakers. Pratap Hazra, would misinterpret Ramakrishna's statements, try to instil wrong ideas in young men, and create confusion. He used to tell people that he was better than Ramakrishna.

We have mentioned his boat trip with Brahmos in 1879. Keshab Chandra Sen arranged for a similar boat ride on 27 October 1882. This time, among the other Brahmo Samaj members like Vijay Krishna Goswami was Reverend Cook, a protestant minister. Ramakrishna spoke at length about the different aspects of Reality. In the course of his conversation, he said: "He who is called Brahman by the jnanis is known as Atman by the yogis and as Bhagavan by the bhaktas. The same brahmin is called priest, when worshipping in the temple, and cook, when preparing a meal in the kitchen. The jnani, sticking to the path of knowledge, always reasons about the Reality, saying, ' Not this, not this '. Brahman is neither ' this ' nor ' that ' ; It is neither the universe nor its living beings. Reasoning in this way, the mind becomes steady. Then it disappears and the aspirant goes into samadhi. This is the Knowledge of Brahman." Ramakrishna impressed Reverend Cook, who was surprised to see Ramakrishna's ecstatic states.

In November 1882, Ramakrishna was taken to witness Wilson Circus. He enjoyed the circus. Everything he saw taught him something.

Seeing the lady standing on one leg on a galloping horse, Ramakrishna was impressed and commented several times subsequently that it was the result of long practice. He used to give this example to teach that living in the world was as difficult as that.

In the year 1883, Ramakrishna received more and more aspirants and discussed the principles of Vedanta with them. Such discussions, singing and dancing went on daily, day and night, in his room as well as in the houses of devotees who invited him. On 25 February 1883, Ramakrishna had a very distinguished visitor. To earn degrees in those British days wasn't easy but one Mr Choudhury had four degrees to his credit, and he held an important position in the British Government. Ramakrishna welcomed him and, as was usual for him, continued his talks on Ishvara, Brahman, unreality of the world and so on. The gentleman, Choudhury, asked him: "How can one see God?" Ramakrishna replied: "Not with these eyes. God gives one divine eyes; and only then can one behold Him. God gave Arjuna divine eyes so that he might see His Universal Form. Your philosophy is mere speculation. It only reasons. God cannot be realized that way. God cannot remain unmoved if you have raga-bhakti, that is, love of God with passionate attachment to Him."

For the first time in his extraordinary life, Ramakrishna's birthday was celebrated on 11 March 1883. It was of course a surprise for him, as many devotees, disciples and admirers planned to celebrate the event. Ramakrishna stood with folded hands while Bhavanath and his friend, Kalikrishna, sang this touching song in Bengali [*dhanya dhanya dhanya âji dina ânandakâri, sobe mile tobo satyodharmo bharote prochâri.*]

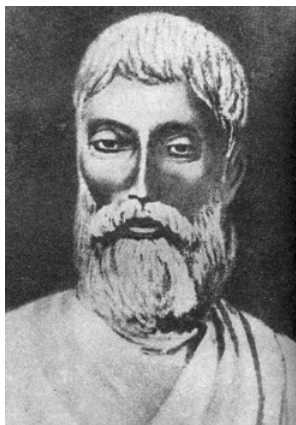
Thrice blessed is this day of joy !
May all of us unite, O Lord,
To preach Thy true religion here
In India's holy land !
Thou dwellest in each human heart ;
Thy name, resounding everywhere.
Fills the four corners of the sky.
Today Thy devotees proclaim
Thy boundless majesty.

That was a glorious day for the devotees. Ramakrishna blessed everyone and showered his love and grace on all.

Ramakrishna participated in the anniversary of Hari-Bhakti Pradayini Sabha, a religious society in Calcutta, on 13 May. The joy that he brought in the heart of everyone was not of this world. Singing, discourses, questions and answers, everything touched every heart. Sometimes Ramakrishna was taken to such places where the organisers would forget their guest in the commotion. Once, when Ramakrishna attended a festival where Rabindranath Tagore was also present, those who had invited him forgot him in the end, busy with other guests. Ramakrishna jokingly recounted how the young disciples who had gone with him managed to get the carriage fare for Ramakrishna from the hosts.

This year, there arrived the following disciples: Sharat (Swami Saradananda), Shashi (Swami Ramakrishnananda), Gopal Senior (Swami Advaitananda), Kali (Swami Abhedananda), and Sarada Prasanna (Swami Trigunatitananda), and Hari Prasanna (Swami Vijnanananda). Subodh (Swami Subodhananda) came towards the beginning of 1885. Hari Prasanna had already met Ramakrishna as a child, and so had Gopal senior. Now they came to him finally.

An embodiment of devotion, a personification of renunciation and devotion to the guru came from what is now Bangladesh. He was Durga Charan Nag, popularly known as Nag Mahashay.



Nag Mahashay

Ramakrishna says:

➤ I love only those [youngsters] who are born with good tendencies, pure souls with longing for God, who do not pay any attention to money, creature comforts, and such things.¹¹⁵

➤ Youngsters like Narendra and Rakhal are ever-perfect. Every time they are born they are devoted to God. An ordinary man acquires a little devotion after austerities and a hard struggle. But these boys have love of God from the very moment of their birth.¹¹⁶

➤ If a man repeats the name of God, his body, mind, and everything become pure. Why should one talk only about sin and hell, and such things? Say but once, 'O Lord, I have undoubtedly done wicked things, but I won't repeat them.' And have faith in His name.¹¹⁷

➤ God dwells in all beings. He is the gold in all. In some places it is more clearly manifest than in others. God dwells in the worldly-minded, no doubt, but He is hidden there, like gold under deep layers of clay.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵. Gospel, p. 586

¹¹⁶. Gospel, p. 192

¹¹⁷. Gospel, p. 138

¹¹⁸. Gospel, p. 342

All Roads Lead to the Sanctuary of Sweetness

Amongst those young disciples who could not become monks but remained exemplary householders, Purna should be mentioned. Purna was one of Mahendra's students in the school. Mahendra ['M' of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*] used to inspire many students to visit Ramakrishna. Of them, the deeply spiritual Purna was one. Purna came to Ramakrishna in 1884 and became very dear to him. Ramakrishna loved Purna deeply owing to his deeply spiritual traits and considered the boy to be a highly evolved spiritual soul.

Each one of these disciples was different in temperament and character, and Ramakrishna moulded them according to their spiritual inclination. Day and night, there used to be singing, ecstatic dance, meditation, conversations about God, and so on. Ramakrishna would take his disciples to the Panchavati and meditate with them there. He would instruct his disciples individually about how to meditate, how to pray, and how to weep for God. He would solve their spiritual problems continually. He would suddenly appear near a disciple who would have perhaps found it difficult to concentrate his mind and change the course of his mind; he would bring down by a word or a call the mind of some disciple who sat deep in samadhi at the Panchavati for several hours. Devotees would see Ramakrishna often merge into ecstatic states, samadhi, and also be in conversation with the Divine Mother. All these were new to them. None of them had seen a saint enter into trances. Mother Sarada, who was then living in the Nahabat, would provide food not only to Ramakrishna but to many of his disciples.

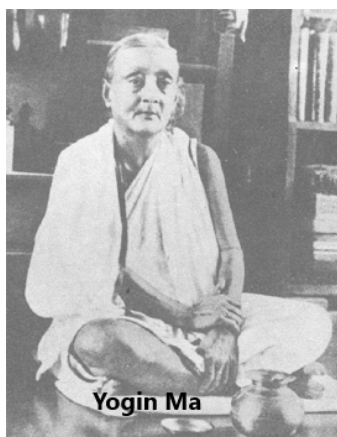
It was the cold month of January, 1884 Calcutta was especially cold. Ramakrishna would wear a long coat and cap occasionally. Though peace reigned all over, Ramakrishna was sad. He would pray to his Divine Mother fervently for his friend. That friend was Keshab Chandra Sen and he was ill. Ramakrishna had visited Keshab's house several times and had developed a deep spiritual bond. Despite all efforts, Keshab passed away in January

itself. Ramakrishna felt that in Keshab he had lost a genuine soul with whom he conversed about God. Unfortunately, during the last week of January this year, Ramakrishna fell down and broke his left arm. He had a fall during one of his intense spiritual moods, when he was not aware of the external world. There was a dislocation and it took some time to set it right. It had to be bandaged for more than four months, for up to the end of May 1884, his arm hurt.

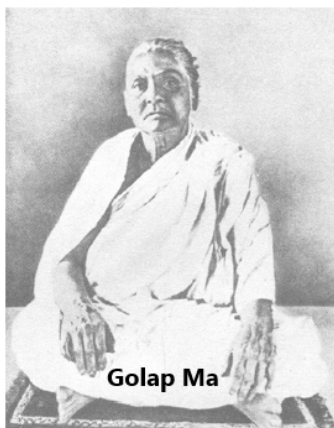


Troubles did not end there. There was another matter for concern: Ramakrishna began to sense throat pain. Initially not much attention was paid to it. But the pain persisted. Various types of treatment began to be tried. Ramakrishna, however, did not stop meeting devotees nor going to different parts of the city. When Girish Chandra Ghosh would invite him to see a drama, he would go. To him, the actors were as real as the personalities they represented. Thus on 21 September 1884, Ramakrishna witnessed the famous drama, *Sri Chaitanya Lila*, at Girish Chandra's Star Theatre in Calcutta. He was so pleased that he blessed the actors and actresses that their spiritual consciousness be awakened. He also saw the dramas on the life of Prahlada in November 1884 and the drama on the renunciation of Sri Chaitanya.

Apart from those young disciples who came seeking God alone and renounced the world in time, there came great devotees who knew nothing but God. One of them was Aghormani Devi. Aghoramani was a widow, living in a small temple in Kamarhati, to the north of Dakshineswar. All her life was spent on a little rosary. She understood nothing else. Her belongings were few, her food was simple, her life was simple, and her only longing had been for her dear Child, Gopal (Child Krishna). And she had become illumined. Years of repetition of the mantra gave her many visions of Gopal, and Gopal began to virtually live with her. So she was called Gopal's Mother [Gopaler Ma]. Having heard about Ramakrishna, she began to visit him. In time, she understood that her Gopal and Ramakrishna were non-different.



Yogin Ma



Golap Ma

The next was Yogindra Mohini Biswas or Yogin Ma, who had suffered much in life and heard about Ramakrishna from Balaram Basu. There was Golap Sundari Devi who lost her only daughter. She heard about Ramakrishna from Yogin Ma, and arrived at Dakshineswar to become permanent members of the vast Ramakrishna spiritual family. Yogin Ma and Golap Ma were to become the intimate and life-long companions of Mother Sarada. Gauri Devi, who had left her home in search of God when she was a young girl, found her chosen ideal in Ramakrishna. Manamohan Mitra, Surendra Nath Mitra and Suresh Chandra Dutta came under different circumstances and found their ideals in Ramakrishna. Adhar Lal Sen was a magistrate. He not only frequented Dakshineswar, but would also invite Ramakrishna to his house. Upendra Nath Mukherjee was a poor boy who

would visit Ramakrishna. In time, through Ramakrishna's blessings, he became a rich businessman, publishing books, periodicals and newspapers. During the Durga Puja festival of 1884, Ramakrishna was invited to Adhar Lal's house and everyone felt that his presence had manifested the divine presence of Mother Durga.

Around this time, a rich man visited Dakshineswar. His name was Lakshmi Narayan Marvari and he had respect for Ramakrishna. Seeing Ramakrishna's life in poverty, the rich man offered to deposit ten thousand rupees in Ramakrishna's name: his idea was that Ramakrishna could live on the interest of that deposit. The very proposal was extremely painful to Ramakrishna and he begged the rich man never to raise the topic again. When that man proposed to Hriday that at least Mother Sarada could accept it, she also flatly refused to have anything to do with it.

Numerous householders received his grace and instructions. The wonderful Ghosh family, Navagopal and Nistarini Ghosh, were exemplary in their devotion. They left a lasting impression and became the source of inspiration for generations to come. The catholicity of Ramakrishna was unparalleled. He accepted all, embraced all and nobody felt rejected. Almost on the last day of the year 1884, Ramakrishna heard the reading of selections from Bankim Chandra Chatterji's book, *Devi Chaudharani*.



Ramakrishna says:

➤ I keep men's own ideals intact. I ask a Vaishnava to hold to his Vaishnava attitude and a Shakta to his. But this also I say to them: 'Never feel that your path alone is right and that the path of others is wrong and full of errors.' Hindus, Mussalmans and Christians are going to the same destination by different paths. A man can realize God following his own path if his prayer is sincere.¹¹⁹

➤ If a householder is a genuine devotee he performs his duties without attachment; he surrenders the fruit of his work to God—his gain or loss, his pleasure or pain—and day and night he prays for devotion and for nothing else. This is called motiveless work, the performance of duty without attachment.¹²⁰

➤ Therefore I say, he who works in such a detached spirit—who is kind and charitable—benefits only himself. Helping others, doing good to others—this is the work of God alone, who for men has created the sun and moon, father and mother, fruits, flowers and corn. Whether you are charitable or not, He will have His work done somehow or other. Nothing can stop His work. What then is man's duty? What else can it be? It is just to take refuge in God and to pray to Him with a yearning heart for His vision.¹²¹

➤ Is there, then, no hope for householders ? Certainly there is. They must practise spiritual discipline in solitude for some days. Thus they will acquire knowledge and devotion. Then it will not hurt them to lead the life of the world.

¹¹⁹. Gospel, p. 596

¹²⁰. Gospel, p. 670

¹²¹. Gospel, p. 671

The Never-Drying River of Bliss

By the year 1885, all the sixteen apostles, the future monastic disciples of Ramakrishna, had arrived, had attained divine visions and experiences and had continued their intense spiritual practices. Narendra's training continued. Along with the training of disciples, Ramakrishna visited various quarters of Calcutta as before. Wherever Ramakrishna went, there used to be constant singing, prayers, meditation, and so on. His concern for those in the clutches of 'sensuality and greed' [*kamini-kanchana*] was enormous. He spared no pains to awaken everyone to the truth that God alone was real and everything else was transitory. He repeated endless times that God-realization alone was the goal of life.

By August 1885 the ever-cheerful and infectiously happy Ramakrishna began to show signs of ill-health. Ramakrishna's throat problem, initially judged as the clergyman's throat, began to take a serious turn. Doctors were consulted. Several doctors came and went. Nobody could clearly say anything. Mother Sarada saw everything from a distance and was extremely worried. She did not know what to do. Her only solace was the Divine. Therefore she decided to do something. She who never stirred outside, and never all by herself, went all the way to a distant pilgrim place, Tarakeshwar. Tarakeshwar is Shiva's abode. There, Mother Sarada lay down fasting and keeping vigils for some days. It was extreme austerity. One day, she had a vision. She heard the sound of some clay pots breaking. She understood the inevitable and, having completed the austerities, Sarada Devi returned to Dakshineswar.

On 11 August 1885, everyone found Ramakrishna silent. He would not speak. This alarmed Mother Sarada and the others. Everyone began to weep as they couldn't understand the reason. Fortunately a young man came towards evening and Ramakrishna asked him about his welfare. That news spread in Dakshineswar and all were relieved. One other day, in September 1885, something interesting happened. A doctor, who was treating Ramakrishna, was surprised to hear from the latter that he could not

touch metal, especially coins and his body would react. To demonstrate this fact, Ramakrishna had a coin brought and placed on his hand. The next moment he felt intense pain and his breathing stopped. The doctor was amazed at this. Some devotees used to feel that Ramakrishna was feigning his illness and that he could be cured if he wished. A devotee said to him: "You will soon be cured if only you say to the Divine Mother, 'Mother, please make me well.'" Ramakrishna replied: "I cannot ask God to cure my disease. The attitude of the servant-master relationship is nowadays less strong in me. Once in a while I say, 'O Mother, please mend the sheath' of the sword a little.' But such prayers are also becoming less frequent. Nowadays I do not find my 'I'. I see that it is God alone who resides in this sheath." Ramakrishna was of course not feigning and he would also not bring his mind down to his body.

September went by and the doctors treating Ramakrishna were now sure that it was throat cancer. In those days there was no treatment. Yet, in order to facilitate treatment, Ramakrishna was told to shift over to some other part of Calcutta. Thus devotees initially arranged for his stay at Balam's house until they could find a suitable rented house. Thus after 30 long years of his stay in Dakshineswar Temple, after 30 years of being with his dear Divine Mother Kali, after three decades of intense yearning, sadhana, realisations, visions, samadhis, music, dance to please Mother and so on, Ramakrishna left Dakshineswar on 26 September for good. Every inch of Dakshineswar should have felt the pangs of separation, as the Light was going away. We have mentioned before how Mahendra Nath Gupta visited Kamarpukur and saw it illuminated...every tree, every leaf, every blade of grass brimming with luminescence. This was exactly Dakshineswar.

After some days' stay in Balam Basu's house, he shifted over to a rented house in a busy locality called Shyampukur. Dr Mahendra Lal Sarkar, a well-known homeopath, began treating Ramakrishna. He declared that it was cancer. There was no way to treat cancer in those days. The young men were extremely distressed to see their master in such a situation. They decided to dedicate themselves for his service. Mother Sarada, who remained in Nahabhat, veiled always and serving day and night, followed him to Shyampukur. Her extreme difficulties notwithstanding, she continued to serve Ramakrishna and the devotees, totally hidden from public view.

At the Shyampukur house as in the next place where Ramakrishna stayed, there was no end to spiritual discussions, songs, inspiring aspirants and so on. Doctors, who came to treat him, too, were inspired by the glorious spiritual ideas, to which they were apparently new. Those doctors discussed Vedanta, Ishvara, liberation and so on in Ramakrishna's presence, to everyone's astonishment. Ramakrishna wanted them to become truth seekers. On 6 November 1885, the last Kali Puja day for Ramakrishna in his physical presence on earth, he would go into deep Samadhi every often. His identity with the Divine Mother was palpable to one and all. On that day, he also asked Mahendra to present two devotional song books by Kamalakanta and Ramprasad to one of the doctors, Dr Sarkar. Ramakrishna commented: 'Force songs like these on the doctor: How are you trying, O my mind, to know the nature of God ? . . .Who is there that can understand what Mother Kali is?' They were trying to treat his physical ailment but Ramakrishna was treating their spiritual ailment, that ailment which brings us to this terrible world repeatedly.



Having stayed in Shyampukur for three months, Ramakrishna was shifted to a spacious garden house in Cossipore on 11 December 1885. Ramakrishna continued helping aspirants, talking to devotees, and so on. He now felt that he had to disclose everything, organize things and train Narendra, since the time was up. Within three weeks of his arrival at Cossipore Garden House, Ramakrishna did something which moved the world. As Mahendra Gupta wrote in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, "At Cossipore he set himself with redoubled energy to the completion of the work of spiritual ministration he had begun long before at Dakshineswar. Realizing that the end of his physical life was approaching, he gave away his spiritual treasures without stint to one and all."

On the afternoon of 1 January 1886, Ramakrishna came out of his room, walked in the spacious garden, and suddenly showered his blessings on all the householder disciples present there. Many had visions, ecstatic experiences, trances, and so on. He was said to have become the wish-fulfilling tree (*Kalpataru*) that afternoon. He was freely giving away spirituality, knowing that the body would not remain longer. A few days later, Gopal Senior, one of the sixteen disciples, had brought some ochre clothes to distribute amongst the monks who visited Gangasagar. Ramakrishna said that he would not find better monks than the young men immersed in spiritual struggles and himself handed over the robes to his direct disciples—the future monastics. Thus, he himself had founded the monastic system of the future. His everlasting benediction, the promise and assurance to save one and all, came in December 1885 when he said: “Whoever has sincerely called on God or performed his daily religious devotions will certainly come here.”

Ramakrishna's chief concern now was Narendra. He transformed Narendra into believing in all aspects of God—God with form and without form. He had trained him to attain the highest. Narendra now had intense dispassion and had gone to Buddha Gaya in the mood of an all-renouncing young man. After he returned, Ramakrishna began to further train him and ordained that he was to shoulder the responsibility of the work of the future. Narendra was feeling extremely restless to have the highest spiritual experience. Observing this, Ramakrishna remarked: “How wonderful Narendra's state of mind is ! You see, this very Narendra did not believe in the forms of God. And now you see how his soul is panting for God !” Narendra indeed attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the highest, and wished to remain in that supremely exalted state forever. But Ramakrishna admonished him and said that Narendra would be a huge tree under whose shelter millions of tired souls would seek rest and comfort.

One day, having called Narendra to his room, he bestowed all his spiritual power on him and said that he himself had become a fakir. The ultimate sacrifice for the good of the world had been done. As days passed by, Ramakrishna began to feel that the days of his being a teacher were drawing to a close. He used to see now that everything with form was passing into the formless absolute. Preparations were going on for the Great Departure. On 15 March 1886, Ramakrishna told the devotees: “If the body were to be preserved a few days more, many people would have their

spirituality awakened. But this is not to be. This time the body will not be preserved." Rakhal said: "Please speak to God that He may preserve your body some more." Ramakrishna replied: "That depends on God's will." Narendra: "Your will and God's will have become one." Sri Ramakrishna (to Narendra, Rakhal, and the others): "And nothing will happen if I speak to God. Now I see that I and the Mother have become one."

Before his passing, Ramakrishna handed over the spiritual responsibility to Mother Sarada Devi, saying that she would have to do much for the spiritual well-being of all. Mother Sarada Devi, who had remained veiled all these years, assumed this responsibility and not only guided numerous aspirants spiritually, but also lived as a guiding force to the monks of the monastic Order, helping her spiritual children in every way.

As days passed, that very strong physique which had endured thousands of spiritual experiences and hundreds of types of austerities became weak. It had grown thin and could not endure the suffering. Further, Ramakrishna's mind constantly soared into the realm of the Absolute, and he would remain in samadhi despite all caution—for the doctor felt that such exalted states would affect his failing health.

The young men served him day and night. They had given up their homes and had decided to live the lives of monks (sannyasins). Narendra led the group. Despite all efforts, on 16 August 1886, at 1 am, the ultimate sacrifice had taken place. Ramakrishna entered into *mahasamadhi*, that is, he threw away his physical garment.

The next morning, his body was consigned to flames at the Cossipore cremation ground.

Thus ended the story of the physical presence of the unique being. This is the story of a one who knew nothing but God. Until he came, perhaps nobody in the history of the world had practised so many paths and had realized God through so many ways. Nobody until he came had perhaps endured such hardships for the sake of God. Nobody had experienced the highest samadhi for six long months. Nobody had perhaps experienced such a flood of spiritual experience every hour of life as he had. As Swami Vivekananda wrote after intense study of Ramakrishna's life: 'The life of Shri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu

religion. He was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Shastras (scriptures). He showed by his life what the Rishis and Avataras really wanted to teach. The books were theories, he was the realisation. This man had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life and so raised himself to be an object-lesson for future generations. The Vedas can only be explained and the Shastras reconciled by his theory of Avastha or stages--that we must not only tolerate others, but positively embrace them, and that truth is the basis of all religions.'

Once, when a disciple of his wrote to him mentioning Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda replied to him: 'You have touched another chord in my heart, the deepest of all, and that is the mention of my teacher, my master, my hero, my ideal, my God in life -- Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. If there has been anything achieved by me, by thoughts, or words, or deeds, if from my lips has ever fallen one word that has helped any one in the world, I lay no claim to it, it was his. But if there have been curses falling from my lips, if there has been hatred coming out of me, it is all mine and not his. All that has been weak has been mine, and all that has been life-giving, strengthening, pure, and holy, has been his inspiration, his words, and he himself. Yes, my friends, the world has yet to know that man. We read in the history of the world about prophets and their lives, and these come down to us through centuries of writings and workings by their disciples. Through thousands of years of chiselling and modelling, the lives of the great prophets of yore come down to us; and yet, in my opinion, not one stands so high in brilliance as that life which I saw with my own eyes, under whose shadow I have lived, at whose feet I have learnt everything--the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.'



Ramakrishna says:

➤ Do you know what I see right now? I see that it is God Himself who has become all this. It seems to me that men and other living beings are made of leather, and that it is God Himself who, dwelling inside these leather cases, moves the hands, the feet, the heads. I had a similar vision once before, when I saw houses, gardens, roads, men, cattle – all made of One Substance; it was as if they were all made of wax.¹²²

➤ The Indivisible Satchidananda—I see it both inside and outside. It has merely assumed this sheath [meaning his body] for a support and exists both inside and outside. I notice that when my mind is united with God the suffering of the body is left aside.¹²³

➤ I see that it is God Himself who has become the block, the executioner, and the victim for the sacrifice.¹²⁴

➤ I see that I and my Mother have become one.¹²⁵

¹²². Gospel, p. 941

¹²³. Gospel, p. 969

¹²⁴. Gospel, p. 942

¹²⁵. Gospel, p. 942

Further Reading

1. *The Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, published by Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata (with a foreword by Mahatma Gandhi). [www.advaitaashrama.org]
2. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, a translation of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (Bengali) by Swami Nikhilananda. Published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai. [www.chennaiamath.org]
3. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, a translation of *Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prasanga* (Bengali) by Swami Saradananda. It's translated into English by Swami Chetanananda and published by Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata.
4. *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, yet another translation of *Sri Ramakrishna Lila Prasanga* by Swami Saradananda. This translation into English is by Swami Tapasyananda, and published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.
5. *More About Sri Ramakrishna*, by Swami Prabhananda, published by Advaita Ashrama.
6. *A Portrait of Sri Ramakrishna*, an English prose rendering of the long poem *Sri Ramakrishna Punthi* by Akshay Kumar Sen,. Translated from Bengali Satchidananda Dhar, by Amrita Salm and Prasun Kumar De.

References

Note: While narrating Ramakrishna's life, we have used his own words as well as Swami Vivekananda's words occasionally. We have not provided references to these quotations for the obvious reason that the narrative should read smoothly. All these quotes are from the first three books mentioned in the list of books for further reading and from *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. The following references are to the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna.