



ProVisions

One who is on the Quest needs provisions for the journey; such are these. We hope some are also visions-forward.

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Lessons from Sri Ramakrishna

*Fr. Francis X. Clooney, S.J., has often spoken before our Vedanta Society audiences around the country, telling of his study of and admiration for Sri Ramakrishna. The following excerpt is from the March 1986 issue of the Catholic periodical **America**.*

What lessons do we learn from Ramakrishna? We have seen that the source of all his experiences was his unqualified, unlimited devotion to the Mother. There is no sign that he ever had doubts in this regard. Ramakrishna discovered in his relation to the Mother the motive and rationale for entering other religious paths; his experiences elsewhere simply enriched his appreciation of the source to whom he always returned.

This is the first lesson. In the face of the many religions of the world - a plurality that is not about to go away - we may wonder if we can remain true to Christ and still learn from non-Christians. Ramakrishna teaches us that the very basis for meeting believers of other faiths is our own Christian faith. Devotion to Christ, not a vague theocentrism, is the motive and stimulus for reverence toward and interest in non-Christian religious experiences. Ramakrishna might say that the deeper we journey into Christ, the more we will understand that He wants us to seek Him beyond the

boundaries of our religion - or, as Gerard Manley Hopkins said, "in ten thousand places,/ Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his..."

Ramakrishna likewise reminds us that our meeting with other religions is not simply a "problem" or a "challenge" or even a "dialogue." It may be these, but it is something more. This joyful and tireless seeker tells us that experiencing other faiths and understanding their words and images illuminates our own faith and deepens our knowledge of the God we already know. In other words, the meeting of religions is itself a religious event, an encounter with God at the boundaries of our tradition.



Father Clooney

Finally we have seen that calling God "Mother" stimulated Ramakrishna to reach out in every

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As we enter the month of Sri Ramakrishna's birth anniversary, we take special note of it by presenting relevant portions of two commentaries – one by a prominent Roman Catholic and one by a Hindu leader.

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direction, peacefully and joyfully, neither tearing other ways down nor forgetting his own way home again. If there is a correlation between his sense of the Mother and his openness to other religions, this should encourage us to reflect on the correlation between our experience of God as Father and the traditional Christian way of meeting other religions, preaching the Gospel to all nations. Is it because God is our Father that we have sent missionaries to believers of other faiths, to convert them?

Whatever our answer to that question, we are encouraged by Ramakrishna to contemplate Mother-images in the Bible, to allow their power to illuminate anew our relation to the world and its people and religions. The fruit of such meditation may be a new sense of being at peace in the world as our home, the graced place where God is always nurturing us. Nor should we forget, it should be added, a vast resource at our disposal, the millions of Hindus whose families have for centuries worshiped God as Mother, Hindus with whom even today we can sit and pray.

A well-informed friend of mine read a draft of this essay and commented that it did not quite capture the joy and childlike attractiveness of Ramakrishna. But some of my readers will wonder, I suspect, why I have not been more skeptical and questioning in my portrayal of him. Both reactions are legitimate, and what is written here is not the "last word" on the man. I have tried simply to say enough about him and reflect on him during [the anniversary year of his passing]: to enter faithfully into the kind of spiritual encounter that Ramakrishna exemplifies. It seems to me that this would be a fruitful spiritual endeavor, whatever judgments one might eventually want to make.

When asked, "Do you think India will be liberated from British rule because of your effort?" Gandhi replied, "That's none of my business. My part is to strive to do this because it is right, not because I think it's going to work."

Ramakrishna – Universalist?

The late Sivaya Subrahmaniyaswami was the founder and editor of Hinduism Today. This excerpt from one of his editorials is as timely today as when written in 1991. The Swami's remarks are challenging to Vedantists. ProVisions welcomes rebuttal or commentary..

Neo-Hindu, neo-Vedantic universalism is burgeoning these days. It appeals to a growing congregation of seekers who intuit that religious contentions are wrongheaded and dangerous. It appeals also to those who have stopped believing the preacher's sermon or have had uninspiring experiences in a church or group and turn away from anything institutional. If their spiritual aspirations are not entirely dismantled, they often take refuge in universalism, enjoying its vision of the oneness of paths and its avoidance of the dissention and disagreement that religions can indulge in.



Sri Ramakrishna in Ecstasy

For all its merits, Hindu universalism has some serious drawbacks. For one, it is seldom truly universal. I cannot think of a single group that draws equitably from all traditions. What usually happens is that the outer trappings are sanitized, but the inner teachings remain Hindu. Classes are held on the Gita, hatha yoga and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, to guide meditative disciplines. An ayurvedic diet is followed and simple puja offered in the ashram shrine. Satsang is held each evening. Hardly universal.

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Another problem is that universalism can engender a wishy-washy approach to the serious business of seeking the Divine. In trying to be all things, aspirants fail to be of any completely. Traditions which demand much of their followers also give them much by way of spiritual fire, intense commitment, cultural treasures and exacting disciplines. These are essential on the spiritual path. There is something powerful about the devotee who is one-pointed, fervent, standing with all his might upon his small rock. He has a passion and coherence that the universalist wandering his wider sandy beach does not possess.

Another problem with Hindu universalism is its survivability. Can it preserve the very things which gave it life? Like a father who sees his son leave the home and renounce his family, we are pained when Hindu universalists reach the point where they "transcend" Hindu dharma.

Our arrow is two-fold, first groups tend to live only as long as their leaders, and second, followers and their children are denied the richness of culture and lifestyle that nurtured the leader in the first place. It often happens that a Hindu leader of a universalist movement will himself maintain a private Hindu lifestyle sharing it sparingly with disciples, even if they seek it out. Followers sense there is more, and long for the fullness of the master's way, for all that he had on his own sacred journey. But the fear arises, and it is a genuine apprehension, that by bringing Hindu ways into the group those who came for other reasons will be offended and may leave. Ironically, those who desire the undiluted tradition of the master are compelled to seek it elsewhere.

Another difficulty with universalism is that it is frequently reabsorbed into the surrounding religious environment. The followers of Paramahansa Yogananda are a case in point. He taught a broad universalism to many Americans who read *Autobiography of a Yogi* and were enthralled. Yogananda initiated them in the mystical and meditative arts, but not into Hinduism. During his life, things went well. After he passed, however,

many were drawn back into the Christian community from which they had come. Even leaders, initiated swamis, eventually left Yogananda's path, reembracing Christianity. Never having been required to espouse Hinduism, monks took off their robes, replaced bhajans with hymns and allowed their spiritual center of gravity to return to their childhood samskaras.

Sri Ramakrishna is sometimes listed among the universalists, and certainly his disciples were its eloquent spokesmen. But his cosmic vision was inextricably linked to his Hinduism. Similarly the Sai Baba movement, though it bears a cross and crescent among its institutional symbols and propounds a wide universalism, is unabashedly Hindu and those who approach it are taken by the hand and drawn nearer to the Sanatana Dharma, not away from it. This seems to approach an ideal for Hindu groups, a gentle tension between the spirit which must break all the mayic chains and soar sacred winds of consciousness and the body which must have its earthy place and sustenance.

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The Big Bang

*Russell Stannard, emeritus professor of physics at the Open University in London, brought up the following controversy last year in the journal **Science & Theology News** (Feb. 2006). This excerpt is from the relevant portion of his article.*

In Stephen Hawking's *Brief History of Time* the rhetorical question is found on p. 141: "What place then, for a creator?" This remark – widely interpreted as damaging to religious belief – was prompted by Hawking suggesting that as one imagines going back in time toward the big bang, it might be that the character of time changes. It kind of "melts away" to become more like the spatial dimensions – this is the imaginary time notion. If this were the case, then there would be no initial instant, $t=0$, at which the universe began. And if the

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The Big Bang

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universe had no beginning, it would require no cause of the big bang.

Indeed one does not need to invoke Hawking's imaginary time to see there is something wrong with the idea of a creator God who at first exists alone and then decides to create a universe and lights the fuse. There is a bang and we are on our way.

The "traditional" big-bang theory itself is held to mark not only the coming into existence of the contents of the universe but also of space and time. That being so, there was no time before the big bang and hence no preexisting cause of the big bang, be it a god or any other agency.

* * *

Modern Science & Vedanta

In browsing the web I happened to come across a link that depicts Swami Vivekananda's ideas influencing that of Nicola Tesla regarding the conception of Supreme Cosmic Energy. The article written by Mr. Toby Grotz, President, Wireless Engineering who is an electrical engineer and has 16 years experience in the field of geophysics, aerospace and industrial research and design, expresses how respectful are some of the great minds of Modern Science of the West towards the unique findings of Vedanta, even in today's age. This article also tells us how Nicola Tesla was influenced by the Swami's ideas of the Vedanta.

This equally points out the fact that there are still some great thinkers, be it West or East, who spontaneously discover the marvels of the Vedanta and assimilate the contents more than we do.

It is only we, who show the least or no regard for our own scriptures. We have already omitted Conception of Vedanta from the school books and thus feel proud of relieving the little minds from the clutches of "Ancient Indian Superstitions". I was educated in Bengal and I am pained to see the pathetic ignorance of parents and even school teachers towards Upanishads and Vedanta. In recent days, the present Chief Minister of West Bengal retorted to the question of need of learning Sanskrit by saying, "What will the students do after learning Sanskrit? Would they resort to priestcraft and start worshipping?" The tendency of us, who stayed slaves for centuries, is to rebuke our own cultures and we have been proved to be good imitators. It is a fact that if you mention some quotes from the Gita or Vedanta in a gathering of friends or relations, you might run a high risk of being mocked as they can say "Are you willing to become a Sadhu (monk)?"

But sometimes when we come across certain facts that cause the great minds of the West too to bow down their heads with reverence towards our ancient sages and their ideas, then we sit and think, "Well, does it mean once upon a time we were great as well?"

As Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen said once "I consider myself fortunate for I happened to learn Sanskrit. So now I reap the fruits of my knowing that great language and relishing the joys of that ancient literature."

– Satrajit Gupta

One day a group of scientists got together and decided that man had come a long way and no longer needed God. So they picked one scientist to tell Him that they were done with Him. The scientist spoke to God saying, "God, we're to the point that we can clone people and do many miraculous things. So we've decided that we no longer need you." God listened very patiently and kindly. After the scientist was done talking, God said, "Very well, how about this, let's have a man making contest." To which the scientist replied, "OK, great!" But God added, "Now, we're going to do this just like I did back in the old days with Adam." The scientist said, "Sure, no problem!" and bent down and picked up a handful of dirt. God looked at him and said, "No, no, no. You get your own dirt!" – Reprinted by permission.

REGULARLY SCHEDULED EVENTS

| | | |
|-------------|----------------------|---|
| Sunday | 10:30 AM 11:00 AM | Chant Service. Discourse. |
| Tuesday | 8 PM | Reading: <i>A Bridge to Eternity</i> , reactions to the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna, is the text for this one-hour class, which is followed by a half-hour of meditation. |
| Thursday | 8 PM | Reading: The <i>Textbook of Yoga Psychology</i> by Swami Brahmananda Sarasvati is the new text. The book is out of print, and students are provided with photocopies of the lessons. It is a highly regarded work on Samkhya and Yoga by a monk who was also a medical doctor. The meeting begins with a ten-minute meditation. |
| 3rd Fridays | 7:30 PM | RAM NAM will be held at the Center on Feb. 16. Location for March 16 Ram Nam t/b/a. |
| Daily** | 6 PM | Vespers/Arati - A short period of prayer is followed by silent meditation. ** <i>Except Sundays.</i> |

FEBRUARY 2007 DISCOURSE TOPICS & SPECIAL EVENTS

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|----|----------|---|
| 4 | 10:30 AM | ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – Luncheon to follow* |
| 11 | 11 AM | OUR UNIQUENESS AS INDIVIDUALS - Talk followed by discussion. |
| 18 | 11 AM | SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND HIS “BOYS” - Talk followed by discussion. |
| 25 | 10:30 AM | BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION FOR SRI RAMAKRISHNA† |

MARCH 2007 DISCOURSE TOPICS & SPECIAL EVENTS

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|----|-------|--|
| 4 | 11 AM | FROM SCHOLAR TO ECSTATIC: SRI CHAITANYA - Talk followed by discussion. |
| 11 | 11 AM | OPEN FORUM: "Prayer"‡ |
| 18 | 11 AM | SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI - Talk followed by discussion. |
| 25 | 11 AM | MEDITATION WORKSHOP. |

ANNOUNCEMENTS

* Members of the Center are highly encouraged to attend the Annual Meeting on Sunday February 4, if they are able. Friends are also welcome to come. We will discuss the past year and the year to come, and elect members of the Board of Directors. This will be the first Annual Meeting to be held in our Chapel. The Center will provide lunch in our Dining Room following the meeting.

† Sri Ramakrishna's Birthday will be observed on Sunday February 25, as usual with puja, program and pot luck prasad. We are fortunate to be able to honor him now in his own "temple."

‡ The topic of the March 11, 2007, Open Forum is "Prayer." Please consider the topic in advance and bring your thoughts, questions, and concerns. Our Open Forums are most stimulating when there is lively discussion and full participation.

For the young ones....

ALL ABOUT GOD

What would you think if your teacher asked you to write a letter to God?
Would you think that was reasonable?



Someone gave me a little book of letters kids had written to God. It was a class assignment. Some of the letters were pretty good, but most of them were not. I was awfully surprised to see what some American children are thinking about that Great Being we call God!

Some wrote to God as if he were Santa Claus – mentioning what they wanted next Christmas or for their birthday – as if God was just waiting to hear the requests of each child. Some thought of him as living in a human-type body, on the moon, or out in space, playing with the planets or pouring down the sunshine or the rain. A few thought of him as a sports coach, or a kind of cosmic engineer; one even asked for his autograph. Another asked if God had a huge computer, and several wanted him to do more miracles. A few requested him to stop all violence and war. Of course, many of the children located him in Heaven, somewhere.

What do you think of all that? Do you think God has a post office box? Is he really out in the sky or in the space between stars and planets and galaxies? Those are such great spaces, maybe it is kind of natural to think that that is where he might be. Of course, because he is everywhere, he must be up there too, but we in Vedanta do not care to think of him in such a gross way.

Besides, here I am all the time calling God "him" or "he"; our great founder, Sri Ramakrishna, did that, too, but most of the time he called God "her", because he felt that God was his Mother, his Divine Mother. Is that a new idea to you? Think about what it means to women and girls; it isn't a "Mrs. God", as a few of the letter-writers made out: it is calling the Divine by what it truly is – both male and female and beyond male and female, too.

Suppose you think of it in this way: one vast ocean of Existence, each of us is a wave, every separate thing in the universe is a wave of that Ocean, and the Ocean is conscious. The waves are formed in the ocean, and after a little while sink back into it again. Such is our life. When you study science in school you will learn that everything is made of waves of energy – in us, through us, all around us, though we see only the play of that energy, not the raw energy itself. This is one way we think of God in Vedanta.

Another way is what you already know about light. Light, too, moves in waves. When daylight shines through colored glass it looks as if the light were green, or blue, red and so on. But you know that the light itself is white, and the colors are just ways of seeing it. Just so, God, being all around us, is overlooked. We think he has to come in colors! All this is about God as the One Beyond; another time we'll talk about God in colored form – Personal God.

Our Swami Vivekananda was a monk, so he didn't have children. But he played with children and loved them. One time he said that if he had a child, he wouldn't teach him or her any religion: he would teach them about meditation - how to concentrate the mind and make it do what we want it to do. – S.Y.

*Who are you, blessed one, that when I see your face
within me unfolds the True?*

*Who are you, heroic one, that when I hear your voice,
my fear is gone?*

*O the manifold forms your spirit takes, at times so hard
to understand;
So pure, so divine, yet you remain my blissful and
gentle friend.*

*O what a wonder, roaring with the highest Truth
lion-like;
Yet weeping, as a child, at others' plight.
Wherefrom do you come, unbound one?*

*Though my mind cannot grasp you, and if my heart
will never hold you; at least this much I know:
You are my guide, my hero, and where you will lead me,
there will I follow.*

*Poem by Swami Bhaktimayananda
Published here for the first time.*

MARCH A garden is a dialog with place –
a space of time
to trace the sun and shade,
the pace of seasons.
and the intricate response
of all that grows
to this controlled complexity of grace.

APRIL Contention builds upon itself.
Mistrust, suspicion at its start;
aggression joins the fateful fray:
sharp-tongued language,
nightmare art.
Oh, let there be enough of us
who stand from bitterness apart
to lay a gentle, healing word
against a wounded heart.

MAY As if my thread of golden words
could free you from the maze
of sorrow's labyrinth
I write and pray
The nights and days
all carry the refrain,
the longing,
the unspoken wish
to stem your pain.

– Ruth Rains



Never forget that those who bring happiness to the
lives of others cannot keep it from themselves.

– Maurice Maeterlinck

V. Subrahmanya Iyer's Dictionary

continued from previous issues

NIRVIKALPA - without ideas.

KALPANA - idea.

VEDANTA - end of Vedas, i.e., after man has gone through all scriptures, he starts the ultimate path to truth at the end.

AVIDYA - to know by analysis that the whole world is Mind. Not to know this is Avidya.

PARAMATMAN - that self which is everywhere.

SANKHYA has two meanings (a) The Sankhya system of metaphysics. (b) speculative inquiry into various metaphysics.

PRAKRITI - matter.

MAYA - appearance.

DRSYAM - object. Indian philosophy sets up two classes of objects: (a) objects of the senses and (b) objects of mind. The first are called external and the second internal.

SHRADDHA - desire to seek truth.

SAT - "existence" or "reality". Both of these lead to confusion in translations. In the snake-rope story, a thing may be perceived and yet not exist.

ASAT - "mirage" [misperception] or "barren woman's son" [self-contradiction]: two different meanings but translated by the one English word "illusion."

VEDANTA - Veda originally meant knowledge; hence Vedanta means end of knowledge. What is that? To live a perfect life in this world.

BRAHMAN - The English use the word "real" as applied to the material world, whereas we Indians use it as applied to unseen Brahman. Hence, many errors have arisen in translations from the Sanskrit. The word "Brahman" or "Sat" has no proper equivalent in English. The nearest is "ultimate reality." The Europeans, however, apply reality to individual objects or to the multiplicity of them all, whereas we apply it to the non-duality. Brahman is called "That" because it is something not known yet by the seeker.

DRIK - The perceiving mind; something which knows, which says there is or is not consciousness; so long as you think, there must be a thinker; something which is aware.

AJNANA is "doubt" in the sense of "I do not know the meaning of this world." and "I wonder at the grandeur of Nature." The primitive removal of doubt is either by superstition or faith. How did this world, sun, and moon come? Through spirits or God? How did small-pox come? Through a goddess or God?

Note: V.S. Iyer often discovered new ways to define the same word. Every one of them is worth thinking about.