

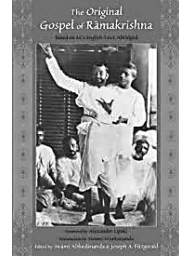
The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna: Based on M.'s English Text, Abridged

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“God is Truth, the world is untruth; this is discrimination. Truth means that which is unchangeable and permanent, and untruth is that which is changeable and transitory. He who has right discrimination knows that God alone is the Reality; all other things are unreal.”¹

- Śrī Rāmakrishna

Amidst the spiritual confusion that besieges the contemporary world, and its accompanying spiritual counterfeits, Śrī Rāmakrishna is an authentic spiritual luminary of a forgotten era, who brings crystalline clarity to the modern and postmodern malaise, reminding the sincere wayfarer of what is required for those on the path of Self-Realization. Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836-1886), the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar, is the living embodiment of the perennial philosophy, the *sanātana dharma* or “eternal religion”, as he not only emphasized the transcendent unity of

¹ *The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna: Based on M.'s English Text, Abridged*, eds. Swāmī Abhedānanda and Joseph A. Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2011), p. 33.

religions in its theoretical tenets, but lived and experienced its pluralism directly and as a personification of its universality. Reductionist attempts to psychologize the saints and sages, such as Rāmakrishna, cannot by their very nature yield insights into their inner lives due to their profane point of view. Due to the rise in secularism, some have considered the saints and sages to be suffering from mental illnesses or psychopathologies, as illustrated in the following excerpt from Stanislav Grof:

Psychiatric literature contains numerous articles and books that discuss what would be the most appropriate clinical diagnoses for many of the great figures of spiritual history. St. John of the Cross has been called “hereditary degenerate,” St. Teresa of Avila dismissed as a severe hysterical psychotic, and [Prophet] Mohammed’s mystical experiences have been attributed to epilepsy. Many other religious and spiritual personages, such as the Buddha, Jesus, Ramakrishna, and Shri Ramana Maharshi have been seen as suffering from psychoses, because of their visionary experiences and “delusions.”²

Because the domain of the human psyche or psychology is always subordinate to the spiritual domain and not the other way around, so reductionism in whatever form can never transcend beyond its own limits, just as the human psyche cannot leap beyond itself.

Interest in neo-Advaita and in the doctrine of “non-duality” is proliferating in the present-day, especially in its commonality with modern science. Neo-Advaita, while appearing to be legitimate expressions of *Advaita Vedānta*, has more in common with New Age spirituality, having largely departed from the traditional understanding of Hindu spirituality.³ Select-

² Stanislav Grof, “Spirituality and Religion,” in *Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 215. “Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa [of Avila] as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate.” (William James, “Religion and Neurology,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985], p. 13).

³ See René Guénon, “Vedānta Westernized,” in *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, trans. Marco Pallis (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 232-235; Frithjof Schuon, “Vedānta,” in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Letters*, trans. Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge and James C. Cutsinger, ed. James C. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), pp. 99-129; Rama P. Coomaraswamy, “The Desacralization of Hinduism for Western Consumption,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 194-219; Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2004).

ing doctrines and practices based on personal preferences contradicts all true forms of religion and spirituality. It is not for human beings to decide these things, but the Divine. This phenomenon of subjectivized religiosity is indicative of a fundamental misunderstanding of what religion and spirituality are in their truest sense.

In the same way, there have been a rise of false spiritual masters who attract seekers by the manifestation of certain psychic powers, but such powers have been illustrated by numerous spiritual authorities to have nothing to do with the realization of the Absolute (*Brahman*): “The realization of God is not the same as psychic power.” (p. 147) In fact, psychic powers are inferior and even dangerous for those traveling the spiritual path and should be avoided, “There is, indeed, great danger in possessing psychic powers.” (p. 147) There have also been attempts by contemporary *gurus* or so-called spiritual masters to forge a spiritual lineage that links directly back to Śrī Rāmakrishna or another spiritual giant Śrī Ramana Maharshi in order to obtain legitimacy, when there was no authenticated lineage to be had or recognized.

With the death of great masters like these and others, their legacy is vulnerable to being coopted and rewritten to benefit the agenda of New Age counterfeits. There is the case of a so-called American-born *avatāra* who asserts that he is the incarnation of both Swāmī Vivekānanda and Rāmakrishna in the modern West. The impostor seized on the following statements by Rāmakrishna—“Today I have given you my all and I am now only a poor fakir, possessing nothing.”⁴ and “My Divine Mother has also shown me that I shall have to come back again and that my next incarnation will be in the West.” (p. 199)—and erroneously interpreted them to substantiate his own claim to be the incarnation of both Vivekānanda and Rāmakrishna. This was further complicated by the fact that the *avataric* manifestation would not be recognized by the masses, as stated by Rāmakrishna himself: “When an avatar comes, an ordinary man cannot recognize him—he comes as if in secret.”⁵ This phenomenon suggests that any *avataric* manifestation in theory could

⁴ Śrī Rāmakrishna, quoted in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 72.

⁵ Śrī Rāmakrishna, “March 11, 1883 - Section 2, Chapter 3,” in Mehendranāth Gupta, *Śrī Śrī Rāmakrishna Katbāmrita, Volume 2*, trans. Dharm Pal Gupta (Chandigarh, India: Sri Ma Trust, 2002), p. 28.

be utilized by the less scrupulous to abusively claim spiritual authority. It goes without saying that such assertions need to be approached with a large dose of skepticism, mindful that religion and spirituality in the *Kali-Yuga* take on innumerable abnormalities as exemplified by the New Ageists and spiritual-counterfeits.

Rāmakrishna was aware of these dangers and wrote the following regarding the inability of false teachers to adequately provide spiritual guidance to the seeker, as well as the possible harm that could occur:

He cannot get realization himself and he tries to show the way to others. It is like the blind leading the blind. In this way more harm is done than good. When God is realized the inner spiritual sight opens and it is then that the true teacher can perceive the sickness of the soul and can prescribe the proper remedy. (p. 75)

Śrī Rāmakrishna in large part became known in the West through the book, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, that was translated by Swāmī Nikhilananda (1895-1973). What is generally unknown is that there was an earlier version of the *Gospel* that predates the better-known 1942 translation by Nikhilananda, yet it does not help that the earlier edition was published under the same title as the later edition, however, the earlier edition published in 1907 is considered to be the “Authorized Edition”. Both these editions stem from the Bengālī work entitled *Śrī Śrī Rāmakrishna Kathāmrita* or “Words of Nectar of Śrī Rāmakrishna” recorded by householder disciple “M.” or Mehendranāth Gupta (1854-1932). From its inception, the *Kathāmrita* continued to expand during “M.’s” life and in its final version consisted of five volumes. What makes this new volume of *The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna* unique and important is that it was translated from Bengālī into English in part by Mehendranāth Gupta himself who gave Swāmī Abhedānanda, also a direct disciple of Rāmakrishna, permission to edit it and translate some parts from the original Bengālī. Hence, this volume is an edited and abridged version of the original 1907 English edition. Until recently the “Authorized Edition” of 1907 was difficult to obtain, but is now after more than sixty years made available again.

Rāmakrishna was born as Gadādhara (a name of Vishnu) in the village of Kāmārpukur, in the Hooghly District of West Bengal, India, into an orthodox Brahmin family. Before his birth his parents experienced signs

about the significance of his birth. From an early age people were drawn to him and wanted to spend time in his presence. At the age of six, he was well-versed in the sacred Hindu scriptures such as the *Purānas*, the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata*. As the pilgrim route to Purī was near his village he came into contact with ascetics and wandering monks whom he spent time with, discussing facets of the Hindu dharma and listening to tales of their journeys. The following captures an early glimpse into Rāmākrishna’s inner world through an ecstatic experience he had as a young boy:

At the age of six or seven Gadadhar had his first experience of spiritual ecstasy. One day in June or July, when he was walking along a narrow path between paddy-fields, eating the puffed rice that he carried in a basket, he looked up at the sky and saw a beautiful, dark thunder-cloud. As it spread, rapidly enveloping the whole sky, a flight of snow-white cranes passed in front of it. The beauty of the contrast overwhelmed the boy. He fell to the ground, unconscious, and the puffed rice went in all directions. Some villagers found him and carried him home in their arms. Gadadhar said later that in that state he had experienced an indescribable joy.⁶

Rāmākrishna’s universal outlook on the religions of the world was a striking and extraordinary dimension of his teaching: “all religions are like paths which lead to the same common goal” (p. 201). And yet traditional paths, while essential, must not be mistaken for the goal; he states: “all religions are paths, but the paths are not God.” (p. 6) In fact arguments about religion and spirituality were discouraged: “As long as a man argues about God, he has not realized Him.”⁷

The tale commonly known as “The Elephant in the Dark”, known in various religious traditions, is a fitting example of mistaking the part for the whole and is especially significant regarding the theme of religious pluralism and what has been termed the transcendent unity of religions. Rāmākrishna retells this tale entitled “Parable of the Elephant and the Blind Men”:

⁶ Swami Nikhilananda, “Introduction,” to *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 4.

⁷ Śrī Rāmākrishna, “With the Devotees in Calcutta,” in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 735.

“Four blind men went to see an elephant. One touched a leg of the elephant and said: ‘The elephant is like a pillar.’ The second touched the trunk and said: ‘The elephant is like a thick club.’ The third touched the belly and said: ‘The elephant is like a huge jar.’ The fourth touched the ears and said: ‘The elephant is like a big winnowing-basket.’ Then they began to dispute among themselves as to the figure of the elephant. A passer-by, seeing them thus quarreling, asked them what it was about. They told him everything and begged him to settle the dispute. The man replied: ‘None of you has seen the elephant. The elephant is not like a pillar, its legs are like pillars. It is not like a big water-jar, its belly is like a water-jar. It is not like a winnowing-basket, its ears are like winnowing-baskets. It is not like a stout club, its trunk is like a club. The elephant is like the combination of all these.’ In the same manner do those sectarians quarrel who have seen only one aspect of the Deity. He alone who has seen God in all His aspects can settle all disputes.” (p. 7)

Similarly, all the Divine Names are distinct ways of expressing the underlying Reality. Rāmakrishna affirms this point: “Vaishnavas, Mohammedans, Christians, and Hindus are all longing for the same God; but they do not know that He who is Krishna is also Shiva, Divine Mother, Christ, and Allah. God is one, but He has many names.” (p. 5)

The ability of Rāmakrishna to remain firmly rooted within a single religion, that of the Hinduism, and at the same time remain universal in his orientation that allowed him to travel other spiritual paths, is illustrated here:

There is something in Ramakrishna that seems to defy every category: he was like the living symbol of the inward unity of religions; he was in fact the first saint to wish to enter into foreign spiritual forms, and in this consisted his exceptional and in a sense universal mission—something allying him to the prophets without making him a prophet in the strict sense of the word; in our times of confusion, distress, and doubt, he was the saintly “verifier” of forms and the “revealer” as it were of their single truth.... [His] spiritual plasticity was of a miraculous order.⁸

⁸ Frithjof Schuon, “Vedānta,” in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Letters*, trans. Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge and James C. Cutsinger, ed. James C. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), pp. 122, 127. “To be sure, there have been rare individuals such as Ramakrishna, who lived in the nineteenth century in India, who have actually tried to climb the different paths to give experiential proof of these paths leading to the same summit, but even in such cases there has been an a priori intellectual certitude that the paths did actually do so.” (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Reply to Huston Smith,” in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian W. Stone, Jr. [Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2001], p. 160).

A further elaboration of Rāmakrishna’s “spiritual plasticity” or universality is provided in the following excerpt:

Nothing, perhaps, so strangely impresses or bewilders a Christian student of Saint Ramakrishna’s life as the fact that this Hindu of the Hindus, without in any way repudiating his Hinduism, but for the moment forgetting it, about 1866 completely surrendered himself to the Islamic way, repeated the name of Allah, wore the costume, and ate the food of a Muslim. This self-surrender to what we should call in India the waters of another current of the single river of truth resulted only in a direct experience of the beatific vision, not less authentic than before. Seven years later, Ramakrishna in the same way proved experimentally the truth of Christianity. He was now for a time completely absorbed in the idea of Christ, and had no room for any other thought. You might have supposed him a convert. What really resulted was that he could now affirm on the basis of personal experience,⁹ “I have practiced all religions—Hinduism, Islām, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects.... A lake has several ghāts. At one the Hindus take water in pitchers and call it ‘jal’; at another the [Muslim] take water in leather bags and call it ‘pāni’. At a third the Christians call it ‘water’.”¹⁰

Rāmakrishna again in no way repudiates or brings into question his participation in Hinduism, but affirms the universality of all sapiential traditions, while abiding within the fold of his own faith tradition.

Given the modern loss of receptivity to the sacred, the forms of spiritual practice (*sādhana*) of previous ages where the felt sense of the sacred dominated, have not been as accessible as they once were for the common person. In addressing the connection between the *Kali Yuga* or “Dark Age” and the changes in the human receptivity to the Divine, he stated: “Truthfulness in speech is the tapasyā of the Kaliyuga.... By adhering to truth one attains God.”¹¹ “The fact is that in the Kaliyuga one cannot wholly follow the path laid down in the Vedas.”¹² The most

⁹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “Śrī Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance,” in *Coomaraswamy, Vol. 2: Selected Papers, Metaphysics*, ed. Roger Lipsey (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 34.

¹⁰ Śrī Rāmakrishna, quoted in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 35.

¹¹ Śrī Rāmakrishna, “The Master’s Reminiscences,” in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 749.

¹² Śrī Rāmakrishna, “Instruction to Vaishnavas and Brāhmos,” in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 297.

effective spiritual practice in the *Kali Yuga*, Rāmakrishna unequivocally affirms, is the Invocation of the Divine Name, or *japa yoga* as it is known in Hinduism:

[T]he holy name has saving powers, but there must be earnest longing with it. Without earnest longing of the heart no one can see God by mere repetition of His name. One may repeat His name, but if one's mind be attached to lust and wealth, that will not help much. When a man is bitten by a scorpion or a tarantula, mere repetition of a *mantram* will not do; a special remedy is necessary. (p. 4)

Far from being empty phrases, the distinct names of the Divine are synonymous with the Divine, as Rāmakrishna himself affirms, “God and His name are identical”.¹³ The practice of *japa yoga* is found in both *jnāna* and *bhakti*, as Shankara affirmed in one of his hymns: “Control thy soul, restrain thy breathing, distinguish the transitory from the True, repeat the holy Name of God, and thus calm the agitated mind. To this universal rule apply thyself with all thy heart and all thy soul.”¹⁴ The Invocation is not to be undertaken with blind adherence but with the fullness of our hearts and minds: “It is necessary to have absolute faith in the name of the Lord.” (p. 70)

While this spiritual practice is intended to be accessible to all in an age where authentic spiritual forms are increasingly more difficult to access, for it to be effective the seeker must have a sincere longing for the Divine.

In this age (*Kali yuga*) the path of devotion and love (*bhakti yoga*) is easy for all. The practice of...*bhakti* is better adapted to this *yuga*. One should repeat the holy name of the Lord and chant His praises and with earnest and sincere heart, pray to Him, saying: ‘O Lord, grant me Thy divine wisdom, Thy divine love. Do Thou open my eyes and make me realize Thee.’ (p. 108)

The futility of solely relying on human effort to attain liberation (*moksha*) or realization of the Self (*Ātmā*) overlooks the true enactor of all activity in the phenomenal world. All sapiential traditions challenge

¹³ Śrī Rāmakrishna, “The Master with the Brāhmo Devotees,” in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 222.

¹⁴ Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, quoted in *Pray Without Ceasing: The Way of the Invocation in World Religions*, ed. Patrick Laude (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006), p. 69.

the notion that the empirical ego is the enactor of all activity, “I am the doer.” (Bhagavad-Gītā 3:27) The empirical ego is in fact not the doer. Due to the misidentification with the empirical ego, the human being wrongly attributes him or herself to be the enactor, forgetting that “God is the real Actor, others are actors in name only.” (p. 106) “A man may make thousands of attempts, but nothing can be accomplished without the mercy of the Lord.” (p. 23) Likewise, “Everything depends upon His grace.” (p. 36) In the Christian tradition this same truth is recognized: “with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 10:27) And similarly within Islamic spirituality: “In His hands is to be found the dominion (*malakūt*) of all things” (Qur’ān 26:83). When seekers came to Rāmakrishna to ask him how to help the world, he recommended that they first help themselves by confronting the disorder within before attempting to help others. As long as the self identifies with, and is consumed by, the empirical ego, the possibilities of selfless service are challenged: “You talk glibly of doing good to the world...who are you to do good to the world? First practice devotional exercises and realize God. Attain to Him. If He graciously gives you His powers (*śhakti*), then you can help others, and not till then.” (p. 75)

It is not through book-learning alone that the seeker can realize the Absolute (*Brahman*), in fact, nothing short of inner longing and abiding in the Divine alone will grant the seeker the Real: “You may read thousands of volumes, you may repeat verses and hymns by hundreds, but if you cannot dive into the ocean of Divinity with extreme longing of the soul, you cannot reach God.” (p. 151) or “One cannot realize Divinity by reading books.” (p. 35)

Divine transcendence is beyond all things contained in the phenomenal world, yet Divine immanence is contained within all things in the phenomenal world. Thus, the Divine is also to be found within the human body: “The Lord dwells in the temple of the human body.” (p. 26) or “Thou appearest as a human being, but in reality Thou art the Lord of the universe.” (p. 193) True human identity is inseparable from the Divine, but due to forgetfulness, our psyche remains deluded by the world of appearances: “The soul in its true nature is Absolute Existence, Intelligence, and Bliss, but on account of *māyā* or the sense of ‘I,’ it has forgotten its real Self and has become entangled in the meshes of the various limitations of mind and body.” (p. 19) This immanent Self is

expressed in Islamic spirituality in the following terms, “We are nearer to him than the jugular vein” (Qur’ān 50:16), and again, “He is with you wherever you are” (Qur’ān 57:4). When responding to a devotee’s questions about how to meditate on God, Rāmakrishna responds: “The heart is the best place. Meditate on Him in your heart.” (p. 89) This is also confirmed within the broader Hindu tradition: “I am seated in the hearts of all.” (Bhagavad-Gītā 15:15) Similarly Divine immanence is expressed in the Christian tradition as: “The kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21)

Through right discrimination both the uniqueness and similarity of human diversity becomes evident, as well as its essential core, its transpersonal nature: “You should love everyone; no one is a stranger; God dwells in all beings” (p. 11). However, this prescription does not therefore mean that we should dispense with discernment (*viveka*) for “although God resides in all human beings, still there are good men and bad men, there are lovers of God and those who do not love God.” (pp. 12-13); nonetheless, one must remember that “God is walking in every human form and manifesting Himself alike through the sage and the sinner, the virtuous and the vicious.” (p. 37) With this said, even with the best intentions to help others, some attempts can be futile when hearts have become hardened and unresponsive to the influence of the Divine: “Those who are thus caught in the net of the world are the *baddhas*, or bound souls. No one can awaken them. They do not come to their senses even after receiving blow upon blow of misery, sorrow, and indescribable suffering.” (p. 16)

Rāmakrishna also affirms that the Divine is not to be found in the hereafter, but where we are, in this very moment, in the world: “this world is the kingdom of God.” (p. 37) Rāmakrishna makes no distinction between householder and non-householder, both can equally realize the Divine given their different circumstances: “He who has found God here has also found Him there.... He can then live both in God and in the world equally well.” (p. 40) Likewise, “Whether you live in the world or renounce it, everything depends upon the will of Rāma. Throwing your whole responsibility upon God, do your work in the world.” (p. 39) The spiritual seeker can realize the Divine within the busy-ness of contemporary life. The seeker does not need to flee the responsibilities of the world in order to fulfil ones spiritual obligations: “You can attain

to God while living in the world” (p. 152) for “God can be realized even at home.” (p. 153) For Rāmakrishna, like other saints and sages, the Divine is to be found everywhere. We recall the oft-quoted words of the Qur’ān, “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.” (2:115), and also, “Everything is perishing but His face.” (28:88) Likewise for Rāmakrishna, the Divine is clothed in the world of phenomena:

I saw a woman wearing a blue garment under a tree. She was a harlot. As I looked at her, instantly the ideal of Sītā appeared before me! I forgot the existence of the harlot, but saw before me pure and spotless Sītā, approaching Rāma, the Incarnation of Divinity, and for a long time I remained motionless. I worshipped all women as representatives of the Divine Mother. I realized the Mother of the universe in every woman’s form. (p. 92)

God, the object of his contemplation, was so utterly fused in his mind with the object of his vision, that in a state of ecstasy or God-consciousness (*samādhi*), Rāmakrishna transcended the normal subject-object relations, even the ordinary dichotomies of male and female as is conveyed here: “At that time I felt so strongly that I was the maid-servant of my Divine Mother that I thought of myself as a woman.... My mind was above the consciousness of sex.” (p. 93) To the ill-informed such experiences may initially appear to be signs of mental illness, when they are quite the opposite, being gifts of a Realized soul: “At one-time I had this madness. I used to walk like a madman, seeing the same Spirit everywhere and recognizing neither high nor low in caste or creed. I could eat even with a *pariāb*. I had the constant realization that *Brahman* is Truth and the world is unreal like a dream.” (p. 103) Rāmakrishna makes an important point on God-intoxicated states: “These states are not for those who are living in the world and performing the duties of the world, but for those who have absolutely renounced internally and externally.” (p. 103) It is also important to clarify that no amount of authentic spiritual practice will lead the psychologically balanced seeker to be unbalanced: “He who is mad after God can never become unbalanced or insane.” (p. 112)

While Rāmakrishna regarded himself as a *bhakta*, he also understood the disposition of the *jnāni*: “There are various paths which lead to the realization of the Absolute *Brahman*. The path of a *jnāni* is as good as that of a *bhakta*. *Jnāna yoga* is true; so is *bhakti yoga*.” (p. 50) Again,

Rāmakrishna asserts that all paths lead to the Divine: “Innumerable are the paths. *Jnāna*, *karma*, *bhakti* are all paths which lead to the same goal.” (p. 123) He recognized that the transpersonal dimension of the Intellect (*buddhi*) “can be realized by the purified intellect (*buddhi*).” (p. 172) The ordinary mind or reason is not synonymous with *buddhi* as is often assumed, but transcends normal boundaries of cognition: “The small intellect of a man cannot grasp the whole nature of God.” (p. 159) Rāmakrishna thus illustrates the vantage point between both *bhakta* and *jnāni*: “A *bhakta* wishes to enjoy communion with his Lord and not to become one with Him. His desire is not to become sugar, but to taste of it.” (p. 66)

While yoga has become a popular commodity for mass consumption in the contemporary West, it is important to contextualize it within the broader scope of Hindu spirituality in order to understand that, though it can bring about certain physical and psychological benefits, for its full benefits to be experienced yoga needs to be connected to the spiritual practice of the Hindu *dharma*. The limitations of yoga to transcend the psychophysical domain are presented here by Rāmakrishna:

Hatha yoga deals entirely with the physical body. It describes the methods by which the internal organs can be purified and perfect health can be acquired... these powers are only the manifestations of physical *prāna*. So the practice of *hatha yoga* will bring one control over the body, but it will carry one only so far. (p. 125)

Hindu metaphysics takes into consideration both the manifest and the unmanifest domains of Reality, which speaks to the relative and Absolute: “to think of Him as the formless Being [*Brahma nirguna* or “unqualified”] is quite right. But do not go away with the idea that that alone is true and that all else is false. Meditating upon Him as a Being with form [*Brahma saguna* or “qualified”] is equally right.” (p. 25) On qualified non-dualism, Rāmakrishna emphasizes:

No doubt we reason at the outset that the all-important thing is the kernel—not either the shell or the seeds. In the next place, we go on reasoning that the shell and the seeds belong to the same substance to which the kernel belongs. At the first stage of the reasoning we say, ‘Not this, not this.’ Thus the Absolute (*Brahman*) is not the individual soul. Again, it is not the phenomenal world. The Absolute (*Brahman*) is the only Reality; all else is unreal. At the next stage

we go a little father. We see that the kernel belongs to the same substance as that to which the shell and the seeds belong; hence the substance from which we derive our negative conception of the Absolute *Brahman* is the identical substance from which we derive our negative conceptions of the finite soul and the phenomenal world. Our relative phenomena (*līlā*) must be traced to that Eternal Being which is also called the Absolute. (pp. 173-174)

Hindu metaphysics teaches that manifestation or *prakṛiti* is made up of qualities or *gunas*. Rāmakrishna explains how each human being is composed in varying degrees of the three *gunas*: “All men look alike, but they differ in their nature. In some the *sattva* quality is predominant, in others *rajas*, and in the rest *tamas*” (p. 74), likewise, “People’s character can be divided into three classes—*tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*.” (p. 157) The quality which dominates will determine the nature of the person:

Those who belong to the first class [*tamas*] are egotistic; they sleep too much, eat too much, and passion and anger prevail in them. Those who belong to the second class [*rajas*] are too much attached to work.... Those who belong to the third class [*sattva*] are very quiet, peaceful, and unostentatious; they are not particular about their dress; they lead a simple life and earn a modest living, because their needs are small; they do not flatter for selfish ends; their dwelling is modest (p. 157)

Identification with the empirical ego remains until the soul is reabsorbed into the Divine: “Egoism does not leave until one has realized God.” (p. 107) or “When ‘I’ is dead, all troubles cease.” (p. 19) This mistaken identification with the empirical ego is perpetuated by the dominant *tamasic* quality; “Egotism is the quality of *tamas* arising from ignorance.” (p. 157) The Divine cannot be realized until the qualities of *rajas* and *tamas* are reintegrated into the Spirit: “God cannot be realized until the *sattva* qualities, such as devotion, right discrimination, dispassion, and compassion for all, prevail.” (p. 108) Ultimately, Spirit transcends *prakṛiti* and the three *gunas*: “God is beyond the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.”¹⁵

Because of the inverted nature of today’s world in the *Kali-Yuga*, seekers need to remember that while the traditional adage has been said to be that, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that

¹⁵ Śrī Rāmakrishna, “The Master and Vijay Goswami,” in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 176.

proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4) In the *Kali-Yuga*, this looks strikingly different from the earlier temporal conditions due to it being more removed from the spiritual domain. Paradoxically, in the present-day: “In this age [*Kali-Yuga*] our life depends upon material food; if you cannot get anything to eat for a day, your mind will be turned away from God.” (p. 153)

[I]n the Kaliyuga the life of a man depends entirely on food. How can he have the consciousness that Brahman [the Absolute] alone is real and the world illusory? In the Kaliyuga it is difficult to have the feeling, ‘I am not the body, I am not the mind, I am not the twenty-four cosmic principles; I am beyond pleasure and pain, I am above disease and grief, old age and death.’¹⁶

While there remains a spiritual void within the contemporary world, there are endless attempts made to fill it with everything under the sun except what can bestow ultimate peace and contentment to the soul. The one thing needful according to all sapiential traditions is to: “Perform all your duties with your mind always fixed on God.” (p. 28); “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” (Matthew 22:37)

The Original Gospel of Rāmakrishna is essential reading for those interested in the world’s religions, especially Hindu spirituality. It reflects the teachings of one of India’s greatest saints, who embodies the *sanātana dharma*. This volume, deemed the “Authorized Edition”, contains a text which has been virtually unavailable for more than sixty years. Through stories, parables, conversations and teachings offered during the last four years of his life readers can capture the fragrance of what it was like to sit at the feet of one of India’s great spiritual masters, the Paramahansa of Dakshineswar, Śrī Rāmakrishna. At a time when meaningful and integral forms of ecumenical dialogue or religious pluralism are evermore necessary Śrī Rāmakrishna is a quintessential testament of how to be firmly rooted in one’s own faith tradition, while simultaneously upholding the legitimacy and truth of other faiths. It is through Rāmakrishna’s example that an integral and universal understanding of what religion and spirituality are may be

¹⁶ Śrī Rāmakrishna, “The Master and Vijay Goswami,” in *The Gospel of Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York, NY: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1977), p. 172.

realized without erring in either New Age syncretism or exclusivist claims that only one's own religion is true. The remarkable nature of Rāmakrishna's spiritual realization becomes known through his own self-disclosure of the One manifesting in all the distinct forms: "He who was Rāma, who was Krishna, Buddha, Christ, and Chaitanya, has now become Rāmakrishna." (p. 198)