

The Reconciliation of *Dharma* and *Mokṣa* in the Experience of Ramakṛṣṇa

Timothy Jensen

Sri Ramakrishna /1/ (1836 - 1886), the Bengali religious teacher and mystic, has been one of the most revered and influential figures in recent Hinduism. The sensitivity and breadth of his teachings, encompassing an appreciation for Christianity and Islam as well as the diverse strands of Hinduism, combined with the intense, compassionate, and playful quality of his life, have prompted many persons to see him as a new *avatāra*, a contemporary incarnation of the divine.

His life and teachings centered on traditional Hindu wisdom, yet he did not simply advocate either of the traditional religious goals (*puruṣārthas*) of *dharma* ("order," "duty") or *mokṣa* ("freedom," "liberation"). Instead, he sought to reconcile these two goals through living playfully within the world, yet apart from worldly demands and anxieties. After looking briefly at sources for the study of Ramakrishna, this paper will examine his attempts during the years before he became a teacher to live in accord with *dharma* and with *mokṣa*, then at how these goals were reconciled in his teaching career, and finally some of the ways even painful experiences were seen as expression of a divine "play" central to the method and goal of his teaching.

As has often been the case with prominent Indian religious personalities, Ramakrishna left no autobiography. His disciples, however,

have written in detail about him, and there have been a number of works by other persons attracted to him and to his teachings /2/. Most of these writings basically recapitulate the facts and arguments of three lengthy hagiographies: *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master* by Swami Saradananda, a disciple's attempt to present a comprehensive interpretation of Ramakrishna as an *avatāra*; *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by Mahendranath Gupta, a householder devotee's ostensibly stenographic record of many of Ramakrishna's conversations with his followers; *Life of Sri Ramakrishna Compiled from Various Authentic Sources*, a comprehensive source of historical facts about Ramakrishna /3/. But despite these efforts, much remains to be done in analyzing the relationships among Ramakrishna's life, his message, and the central elements of Indian culture and religion.

Dharma, traditionally the second highest goal of life, is based on the verbal root, *dhr*, meaning "support," "preserve," "maintain," and thus consists of the attitudes, identities, and vocations through which one participates in the maintenance of the right and just order of the world /4/. Through approximately the first half of his life Ramakrishna spent a good deal of effort trying to live according to a conventional *dharma*, first as a student and then as temple priest. Concern for his family prompted him to go to Calcutta to work as a priest, and to persist in this vocation even when he preferred to spend his time in private meditation. He was troubled, too, about how to perform all his priestly tasks correctly, and uncertain whether his primary responsibility was to feed and clothe his family or to pay careful attention to the rules for caste purity and diet. He nearly refused a job at a temple north of Calcutta because the owner was a *sūdra*, and even after accepting this position he was careful to cook his own food /5/. Thus, within the realm of *dharma* he was unable to find a way of life which did not leave him prey to anxiety and uncertainty.

Other influences also turned him away from the conventional vocation of the priesthood and toward an unconventional one. His hagiographers relate that he was an inveterate prankster who avoided the rigor of study, although his talents blossomed in sculpting, storytelling, and acting. He also had a tendency to go into trance. During childhood these trances were often a trial (particularly to his parents), although they later became understood as his first mystical experiences. Ramakrishna found it very difficult to reconcile these aspects of his life with the demands of the priesthood.

Consequently, the goal of "freedom" or *mokṣa* (from the verbal root, *muc*, "release," "liberate") /6/ came to loom larger. When this goal is attained, a person becomes free from all desires and from the cycle of transmigration (*saṃsāra*). At the age of twenty, after his eldest brother had died and Ramakrishna had become relatively separated from his family in rural Bengal, he abandoned all priestly duties and focussed his energies on a series of meditative disciplines (*sādhanas*).

He experienced the presence of several divinities, particularly Kali, the divine Mother who gives both life and death. He became profoundly devoted to Her, and remained so throughout his life.

These *sādhanas* and his quest for *mokṣa* culminated about ten years later. After becoming a *saṁnyāsin* (“renouncer”), thus formally rejecting any conventional *dharma*, he pursued an *advaita* (“nondual”) Vedānta *sādhana* in which he experienced *nirvikalpa samādhi*. In this higher state of consciousness “free from change or differences” /7/ he became identified with *brahman* in an experience devoid of both forms and formlessness. According to the teachings of *advaita* Vedānta, the most prominent of Indian philosophical traditions, there can be no higher religious experience; its attainment is equivalent to *mokṣa*.

Several months thereafter Ramakrishna became determined to remain “incessantly . . . in the non-dual plane of consciousness” /8/. His motivations for this decision were complex and somewhat obscure, but by seeking this unceasing experience of *brahman* (and thus of *mokṣa*) he was courting physical death. It is said that he survived six months in this state only because a holy man occasionally forced food into his mouth.

Any attainment of *nirvikalpa samādhi* is rare, but what is more surprising, and in the eyes of his followers almost miraculous, is that Ramakrishna returned *from liberation*, just as he had earlier moved away *from a conventional dharma*. Ramakrishna explained this return as a response to the command of Kali (which he “heard” while in *nirvikalpa samādhi*) to “remain in Bhavamukha; for the spiritual enlightenment of the people, remain in Bhavamukha” /9/.

This call to “Bhavamukha” pointed Ramakrishna in the direction of a particular way of life. *Mukha* means literally “face” or “mouth,” and metaphorically “peak” or “summit,” and *bhava* means “being”. Thus, to “remain in Bhavamukha” is to remain on the “pinnacle of being,” the summit of the phenomenal world /10/. The command to live in Bhavamukha was Ramakrishna’s experience of the possibility of a vantage point from which he could reconcile the immanent demands of worldly responsibilities with the transcendent freedom of identity with *brahman*. On the most immediately personal level, that vantage point was a childlike relationship to Kālī. On a broader communal level, it became life with his disciples. Bhavamukha, thus, was a position from which he could participate in this world, but not be contaminated by it.

Consequently, when Ramakrishna came to his teaching vocation thirteen years later he was dissatisfied with both *dharma* and *mokṣa*, yet he envisioned a third way of being in which the limitations of these traditional goals could be overcome and their possibilities fulfilled. He articulated this highest goal not so much through a formal message as through interaction among himself, his followers, and the divine Mother, Kālī. This interaction moved between the poles of order and

freedom to express a life of "devotion" (*bhakti*) and "play" (*īlā*) in which was realized the "pinnacle of being."

There are many paths to the highest goal, Ramakrishna allowed, but the path especially "prescribed for this age" /11/ is *bhakti*, devotion to God. This way is "easy" /12/, yet following it requires the observance of certain rules. *Bhakti*, in other words, must have a foundation in *dharma*. It was essential, Ramakrishna explained, for the *bhakta* to adhere to certain actions and attitudes, but to avoid others - in his words, to "discriminate between holiness and unholiness" /13/.

The necessary distinctions included rules for the maintenance of the body. Ramakrishna followed a diet in accord with the divine Mother's prescriptions /14/. More importantly, during the last months of his life, when he was dying of throat cancer, he had no compunction about asking to be healed so that he might "chant the name and glories of God" /15/. However, when he asked to be healed only for his own sake, he felt "ashamed" /16/. A selfish preoccupation with his own survival ignored the truth that death and life were in the hands of Kali alone. Within the right context, then, *bhakti* required that the body be maintained.

Furthermore, *bhakti* required an "ego", an awareness of being a separate self. There were, he explained, two different kinds of "egos", an "unripe ego" which creates attachment to the world, and a "ripe ego" needed for devotion to God. Any separate identity might be ultimately illusory. Ramakrishna indicated, for example, that "He and the one who dwells in my heart are one and the same Person," yet he added that since "a line divides the two", he could "enjoy divine bliss" /18/.

This enjoyment of the divine requires desire, and Ramakrishna pointed out that "so long as a man has even the slightest desire, he must be born again and again. When he gets rid of all desires, then he is liberated." However, he continued, in contrast to other religious aspirants, "bhaktas do not seek liberation" /19/. This statement is consistent with the fact that while *bhakti*, like *karma* and *jñāna*, is generally seen as a way of transcending the cycles of rebirth, some *bhaktas* do seek to remain within the round of *saṃsāra* out of love for God or His creatures.

One's desire must be for God, but it is not sufficient to desire God in general. One must, Ramakrishna exhorted, "be firm in one ideal" /20/. He suggested different objects of devotion for different devotees /21/, emphasizing that the images of God as mother and as child tend to be particularly fruitful /22/.

Next to the desire for God in the form of the divine Mother, Ramakrishna's most acutely felt need was for a community of disciples. In the years after his "Bhavamukha" experience his yearning for disciples grew until he thought he "might go mad." In later years Ramakrishna told his disciples that:

Being restless on account of the anguish of my heart, I called out at the top of my voice and with tears in my eyes, 'where are you, my children? Do come, one and all. I cannot do without seeing you any more,' and filled the quarters with loud cries /24/.

It was not simply people, but a particular kind of community he wanted. This concern is expressed in the definite ideas he had about the kinds of persons he wanted as disciples, what he wanted to teach them, and how he wanted to teach. He divided his followers between married householders and women on the one hand, and unmarried, generally young, men on the other, evaluated each devotee's physical, mental, and spiritual qualities /25/, formally initiated many people (usually by touch and/or by *mantra*) /26/, and sometimes provided individual instruction in meditation /27/. At the same time he approved these structures, he could become "annoyed" at the presence of people with "profane thoughts" /28/, become "sullen" and "fretful" when his devotees did not take care of him /29/, and weep, refusing any comfort, when his favourite disciple, Narendra, was absent /30/.

It was particularly the "vain worldly topics of the worldly people" which were "poison" to him /31/. He usually summed up the worldly "obstacles to the spiritual life" with the phrase "woman and gold" /32/. These problems are equivalent to *kāma* ("sensual desire") and *artha* ("wealth"), traditionally the first two goals of life, for it is craving for sensuality and for possessions which is the "wine" /33/ which distracts a person from devotion to God. Ramakrishna was especially concerned that these emotional obstacles tended to become the even more intransigent social obstacles of marriage and material goods /34/.

Even within the community of disciples there could be obstacles, including the *guru*'s traditionally authoritarian role. Ramakrishna discouraged a preoccupation with instruction in meditation /35/, and refused the formal stance of lecturing, declaring that "I shall eat, drink, and be merry. I shall play and sleep. But I can't give lectures . . . Lecturing is none of my business" /36/.

Instead of an authoritarian father, Ramakrishna stood in the centre of this community more as a loving mother. The hagiographers frequently liken Ramakrishna to "a mother showing her tenderness to her children", that is, to the disciples /37/. At the same time, he continued to be a child before the divine Mother, and the disciples became both his children and, in a sense, his fathers, for they had to care for his physical needs. This community, consequently, became a kind of family.

In each of the structures Ramakrishna sought to maintain two contrasting tendencies can be discerned. He wanted to keep his body rather than have it dissolved in *brahman*, but yet he did not want to

use it in an everyday occupation. He wanted to keep his "ego" in the sense of an awareness of his separate selfhood, but this was an "ego" of one in Bhavamukha, not of one chained by responsibilities. As an "ego" with a physical body he then wanted to keep his desires for the divine and for devotees, but not for "woman and gold". His desire for devotees, furthermore, was specifically for those who would foster this delight and not for those who raised distracting problems of money nor for those who would not properly care for and father him. He also saw the necessity of dietary restrictions which were developed and sanctioned by the divine Mother. It was a very difficult thing Ramakrishna was up to, for if he lived too closely by the rules he would become constricted by the demands of human responsibilities, but if he lived without any rules at all he would be absorbed in *brahman*.

From the time of his childhood Ramakrishna had sought a way to live which would fulfil the childlike spontaneity and delight within him. In his twenties the priestly vocation was rejected as a viable option, but this did not mean rejection of the need for order and structure. He came to realize that the life of delight which he sought required a life in relationship with several structures, including body, "ego", desire, diet, and community of devotees.

Just as Ramakrishna recognized many effective ways of devotion to God, so he saw there were several accurate ways of describing this divine reality. He repeatedly told his disciples that "Brahman and Śakti [the feminine creative power manifest as Kālī] are identical. If you accept the one you must accept the other." Other terms for the ultimate were equally applicable. "The Līlā [divine play] and the Nitya [unchanging Absolute]," he said, "belong to the same Reality" /38/. On a metaphysical level, *brahman*, *śakti*, *līlā*, and *nitya* all point to the true nature of the cosmos.

However, these terms do reflect differences in how an individual relates to the one ultimate reality. He told his followers that

At first one discriminates, 'not this, not this,' and feels that God alone is real and all else is illusory. Afterwards the same person finds that it is God himself who has become all this - the universe, *māyā*, and the living beings. First negation and then affirmation /39/.

In *nirvikalpa samādhi* Ramakrishna experienced the phenomenal world as illusory, with *brahman* alone as real, and thus *mokṣa* meant absolute transcendence. In his relationship to Kali he experienced a divinely transformed world, and thus the possibility of being free to play within the phenomenal world.

Ramakrishna explained this insight by distinguishing the *jñāni*, who can "realize Brahman," from the *vijñāni*, who is "more intimately acquainted with Brahman," and thus "realizes something more" /40/.

“The vijñāni sees that the Reality which is nirguna, without attributes, is also saguna, with attributes” /41/. The jñāni may know the illusory character of the world, but it is the vijñāni who realizes that this world is a “mansion of mirth” and who thus “enjoys the Bliss of God in a richer way” /42/.

Ramakrishna’s preference for this latter style was so great that he would even disavow any attraction for ultimate release. He appealed to Kali,

Mother, don’t make me unconscious with the Knowledge of Brahman. Mother, I don’t want Brahmajnana. I want to be merry. I want to play . . . Mother, I don’t know the Vedānta; and Mother, I don’t even care to know. The Vedas and the Vedānta remain so far below when Thou art realized, O Divine Mother /43/.

Brahman could even be unspeakably dull. Ramakrishna asked,

Why should I produce only a monotone when I have an instrument with seven holes [i.e., a human body]? Why should I say nothing but, ‘I am He, I am He’? I want to play various melodies on my instrument with seven holes. Why should I say only, ‘Brahma! Brahma!’? I want to call on God through all the moods - through śānta, dāsya, sakhya, vātsalya, and madhur. I want to make merry with God. I want to sport with God /44/.

Even when he sensed that union with *brahman* was a “higher” truth, Ramakrishna still preferred the play of God, explaining “I never feel like saying ‘I am Brahman.’ . . . I don’t want to go beyond the sixth plane and keep my mind a long time in the seventh. My desire is to sing the name and glories of God” /45/.

Since singing the name and glories of God was best done in a human community, Ramakrishna sought a life of play and devotion not simply with Kālī alone, but also with disciples. Play, consequently, expresses the central element both in the goal and the method of his teaching. Conversations with Ramakrishna were punctuated with laughter, for “to those who became his intimate companions, the Master was a friend, companion and playmate” /46/. Ramakrishna had “great fun with the boys, treating them as if they were his most intimate friends. Peals of side-splitting laughter filled the room, as if it were a mart of joy” /47/. For Mahendranath Gupta, this style of teaching “was a revelation”, and encouraged him to become a most devoted follower. Narendra, Ramakrishna’s most beloved disciple, recalls that “through play, merriment and other ordinary daily activities, he gave us

high exalted spiritual education and moulded our lives without our knowledge" /48/. Insofar as Ramakrishna became seen as an *avatāra*, the play with the devotees may represent the culmination of the religious life in a manner parallel to Krishna's dalliance with the cowgirls (*gopīs*) of Vrindāvana /49/.

It is tempting to idealize this community. However, during his teaching career there were times when the community was not in any obvious way playful. Narendra's reluctance to commit himself wholeheartedly to Ramakrishna, and his persistent scepticism about the validity of Ramakrishna's teachings repeatedly made Ramakrishna anxious about the value of his message /50/ and the security of his relationship with Narendra /51/. Furthermore, there was sorrow when Ramakrishna was dying.

Nevertheless, there are repeated efforts to reinterpret these events also as expressions of play. Saradananda describes Ramakrishna's complaints about loneliness not as sorrow but as "jest" /52/, and his yearning for Narendra not as selfishness but as "love" /53/. Ramakrishna even jested about his terminal illness /54/.

His disciples tend to argue that Ramakrishna's doubts and anxieties occurred only when he was in "the normal plane of consciousness" /55/ and/or when he was "childlike" /56/. The ordinary level of awareness suggests that doubt and anxiety do not express the essential Ramakrishna, as he was often seen to be in more exalted states of consciousness. Comparisons to a child suggest that doubting is not a serious dilemma, but part of the delightful and unexpected antics of a child's play. Thus, there is a consistent tendency by Ramakrishna and his devotees to transform what was dark and difficult in their experience together into the love and play of the divine. The yearning and doubt become a measure of Ramakrishna's greatness. They become expressions of the qualities which put him at ease with his disciples and made him such an effective teacher.

In this playful community Ramakrishna was largely free from many of the cares which can plague a conventional family, including the responsibilities of money and sexuality. (Since he was a renouncer, he could be free from worries about maintaining ritual purity and caste restrictions.) In this condition he was able to pursue relationships of unusual depth and intensity, but he was still dependent upon the cooperation of his disciples for the fulfillment of the life he desired. Consequently, he was not free from anxiety that he might be separated from them. Narendra's criticisms repeatedly reanimated Ramakrishna's fears that he might be set apart from his beloved disciples, or that his relationship with them might not grow into the intimacy he wanted. In this situation of dependence the community of Ramakrishna and his disciples replicated conventional society, for to be independent is not a normal and expected goal for most Indians. Maturity instead has to do with growth into a variety of relationships of mutual dependence

/57/. Perhaps partly because of the value Indian culture has placed upon dependence the disciples did not view Ramakrishna's anxiety as a limitation, but instead understood his yearning for their presence as an expression of love.

The final, idealized portrait of Ramakrishna's interaction with his disciples is *līlā*, divine play. That their relationship can be one of play overrides the incompleteness of particular events, and the delight of the community thereby becomes an expression of the delight of the cosmos. It is an expression of the "pinnacle of being".

Endnotes

1. The correct Sanskrit spelling is Rāmākṛṣṇa, but for typographical reasons we employ the simplified spelling, Ramakrishna.
2. See particularly R. R. Diwaker, *Paramahansa Sri Ramakrishna*, Bhavan's Book University, No. 41, 2nd rev. ed. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964); Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965); Romain Rolland, *Ramakrishna the Man-Gods and the Universal Gospel of Vivekananda (A Study of Mysticism and Action in Living India)*, Vol. 1: *The Life of Ramakrishna*, trans. E. F. Malcolm-Smith, 7th ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965); Claude Alan Stark, *God of All: Sri Ramakrishna's Approach to Religious Plurality* (Cape Cod, Mass.: Claude Stark, 1974).
3. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagananda, 3rd ed. (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952): [Mahendranath Gupta], *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. with an Introduction by Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942); *Life of Sri Ramakrishna Compiled from Various Authentic Sources*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1928).
4. See Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*, new ed. [1899], s.v. "1. Dhárma," and s.v. "dhṛi."
5. *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 54; Saradananda, pp. 122-23.
6. See Monier-Williams, s.v. "2. muc," and s.v. "Moksha."
7. *Ibid.*, s.v. "Nir-vikalpa."
8. Saradananda, p. 253.
9. Ramakrishna quoted in Saradananda, p. 359.

10. Monier-Williams, s.v. "bhava," "bhāva," and "mukha." See also Isherwood, p. 123 and Saradananda, pp. 327-49.
11. Ramakrishna quoted in Gupta, p. 468 (25 June 1884).
12. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 482 (30 June 1884).
13. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 782 (13 June 1885).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 867 (22 October 1885).
16. Ramakrishna quoted in *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 577; see also Swami Nikhilananda, Introduction to Gupta, pp. 69-70.
17. Ramakrishna quoted in Gupta, p. 790 (13 June 1885).
18. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 949 (9 April 1886).
19. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 940 (11 March 1886). On occasion Ramakrishna reflected as to whether because of his own desires he might have to be born again.
20. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, pp. 243-44 (10 June 1883).
21. See *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 421, 529, 624.
22. See Gupta, pp. 389-90, 421, 511, 579.
23. Ramakrishna quoted in Saradananda, p. 706.
24. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 303.
25. Saradananda, pp. 770, 773, 779.
26. *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 432, 471, 491, 520; Saradananda, pp. 733, 811-12.
27. *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 391, 526; Saradananda, pp. 199, 800-801, 815.
28. Saradananda, pp. 824-29.
29. *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, pp. 546-47.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 338-39; Saradananda, pp. 744-45.
31. Ramakrishna quoted in Saradananda, p. 302.
32. See, for example, Ramakrishna quoted in Gupta, p. 247 (15 June 1883).
33. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 819 (28 July 1885).
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 166 (14 December 1882), 438 (25 May 1884), 670 (6 December 1884).
35. See Ramakrishna's comments on *haṭha yoga* in Saradananda, p. 159.
36. Ramakrishna quoted in Gupta, p. 1022 (no date given).
37. *Ibid.*, p. 942 (15 March 1886).
38. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, pp. 134 (27 October 1882), 779 (23 May 1885), 801 (14 July 1885).
39. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 395 (2 March 1884).
40. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 103 (5 August 1882).
41. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 104 (5 August 1882).
42. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 478 (30 June 1884).

43. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, pp. 373-74 (31 December 1883).
44. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 1010 (1 January 1881). In *śānta* the worshipper related to God as to the supreme Lord; in *dāsyā* the worshipper looks to God as a servant looks to his master; in *sākhya* the worshipper looks to God as his friend; in *vātsālyā* the worshipper considers himself the parent of God; in *mādhuryā* the worshipper looks upon God as his lover. See Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava-sahajiyā Cult of Bengal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 22-23, for an analysis of these moods; see also the analysis of Ramakrishna in David R. Kinsley, "The Divine Player: A Study of Kṛṣṇa-Līlā" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1970).
45. Ramakrishna quoted *ibid.*, p. 172 (14 December 1882).
46. Nikhilananda, Introduction, p. 47.
47. Gupta, p. 90 (March 1882).
48. Narendra quoted in Saradananda, p. 800.
49. See, for example, W.G. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry* (New York: Grove Press, paperback, n.d.); see also Dimock.
50. See Saradananda, pp. 754-55, 789.
51. See *ibid.*, pp. 755-57.
52. Saradananda, pp. 741-42.
53. *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 339; Saradananda, p. 745.
54. See, for example, his teasing of Mahendranath in Gupta, p. 932 (23 December 1885) and the comments of Isherwood in Isherwood, p. 295.
55. Saradananda, p. 754.
56. *Ibid.*
57. Interview with Prakash Desai, Illinois State Psychiatric Institute, Chicago, Illinois, 11 April 1972.