

The following review by G.V. Desani of Christopher Isherwood's 1965 book "Ramakrishna and His Disciples" appeared May 1, 1966 in The Illustrated Weekly of India.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa

by
G.V. Desani

The source books on the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, by his direct disciples, are *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* by M (the pseudonym of Mahendranath Gupta) in five volumes and available in English, translated from the Bengali by Swami Nikhilananda, and *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master*, also in five volumes, by Swami Saradananda, and translated into English from his Bengali by Swami Jagadananda.

Mr. Christopher Isherwood, the novelist, has been attached to the Vedanta Society of Southern California for the last 25 years or so. He has provided a new biography of the master: *Ramakrishna and his Disciples* (Advaita Ashrama, 2001, Calcutta).... The Head of the Ramakrishna Order, the late Swami Madhavananda, had read Mr. Isherwood's book in manuscript and suggested chapter by chapter corrections. Mr. Isherwood also had his guru, the head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Swami Prabhavananda's advice and encouragement throughout the writing. (The book is dedicated to Swami Prabhavananda.)

As an alternative to verbatim quoting, a new biographer so richly endowed – Aldous Huxley – had described M's book as “unique in the literature of hagiography” – must trim and paraphrase. Mr. Isherwood does that skillfully. A biographer, writing for a Western, a non-Hindu audience, moreover, would have the responsibility of explaining and interpreting the basic tenets of Hinduism. Mr. Isherwood ably discharges that responsibility also. And if his explanations and interpretations at times sound like an advocacy of – or an apology for – the Hindu view, that is to be expected from a writer who owes a certain allegiance to Hinduism. Mr. Isherwood accepts Sri Ramakrishna, moreover, as an avatar, an incarnation of Ishvara, who intervenes in earthly affairs. (“I believe,” he says, “or am at least strongly inclined to believe, that he was what his disciples declared that he was: an incarnation of God upon earth.”)

The Order

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-86) was a Bengali Brahmin who, from his youth, spent almost all his days meditating and teaching at the Dakshineswar Kālī Temple, north of Calcutta. Few people in this country had heard of him during his lifetime but after his passing – he died of cancer of the throat – his disciples, led by Narendranath Datta (later known as Swami Vivekananda), founded the Ramakrishna Order and carried his message as far as Europe and America.

Sri Ramakrishna's significance – as a saint and social phenomenon – might be considered under three headings.

First, as an individual, the extraordinary and strange thing about him was his ecstatic love for and his communion with his God. And it can be said of him that he was 'sinless': his character embodying "the twin principle of perfect love of God and perfect love of man" (said by McMaster of Christ). "Chant the name of God, and sing his glories unceasingly.... God alone is real ... everything else is unreal ... as you discriminate, let your mind give up its attachment to the fleeting objects of the world." These words, recorded by M and quoted by Mr. Isherwood, carry an echo of the central theme of his teaching. And these words would be acceptable to those who acquiesce in the personal God concept and a similar detached view of phenomena. The principle of service to God's creatures – arising from the love of God – as assumed by the Ramakrishna Order, would also be found acceptable.

Secondly, as a teacher and inspirer, Sri Ramakrishna's word was not addressed strictly to the Hindus. In spite of Mr. Isherwood's bias for Hinduism – and regardless of the *Gita's* catholic *sama bhava* concept and the great Vedic saying, the *Mahāvākyas*, "All is Brahman" – up to this day, the important Hindu temples are not open to non-Hindus. The leaders of the Hindu religion do not accept converts. Yet, in its long history, Hinduism has now and then gone beyond the confines of the Hindu community to the farthest corners of the earth. The advent of Buddhism is certainly such an event – a protestant move, and apart from the original genius of the founder – the move was possibly a continuation of a movement in which one might include the dribbling of the Vedanta and the *sāṃkhya yoga* traditions. In recent times, the Brahmo Samaj, later the Arya Samaj, and since, the Ramakrishna Order have attempted to reach the world – rather than the strictly Hindu community. Rabindranath Tagore, Ramana Maharshi, Sri Aurobindo, Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave are other, more recent, examples of this tendency.

Thirdly, Sri Ramakrishna might be considered as an exponent of Hinduism, who had to his credit a most arduous *sādhana* – the spiritual discipline; and it was an important phase of his life. The *sādhana* had caused him great suffering leading up to an attempted suicide with the sword of Kālī.

In spite of such able interpreters as Sir John Woodroffe, it is extremely unlikely that a person – other than a Hindu and a sectarian Hindu with a Shakti and Vedantic bias – would accept Kālī, whom Sri Ramakrishna magnified and worshipped as *saguna Brahman* (the Undefinable God with attributes): and as *Adya Śakti* (the Primeval Energy): and as *Bhavatarini*, by whose grace you attained the Highest Spiritual End.

The goddess Kālī, according to her classic *dhyāna*, is youthful; is dark; has a terrible aspect; has four hands; in the upper left she bears a sword, and in the lower left a severed head; with the upper right hand she makes a gesture dispelling fear and with the lower right a gesture granting boons; she stands on the breast of a corpse – her ‘couch’; her throat is adorned with a garland of severed heads; she is naked but for a girdle made up of the severed arms of dead men; two streams of blood trickle from her mouth and she is found in the cremation-ground, which is strewn with funeral pyres, corpses, skulls, bones, and haunted by jackals who howl fearfully.

Attributes of Kālī

The original texts concerned with Kālī have been freely interpreted. The commentator Vimalananda Swami, collaborating with Sir John Woodroffe, for instance, interprets Kālī’s sword as symbolizing knowledge (*jnāna, gnosis*); the severed head as indicating “the seat of *tatvajnana*” (the seat of true knowledge, the Truth, signifying that Kālī is “free of attachment”); the corpse pointing to “Nirguna Brahma,” the Absolute, the substratum of all attributes and actions yet without any); the garland of severed heads symbolizing the *mātrikā* (the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet); the girdle of severed arms of dead men as symbolizing “their principal instruments for doing work (*karma*)” “until they are liberated at some future time”; the streams of blood as *rajas guṇa* (her passionate, emotional aspect, the goddess being “without that”); the cremation ground as symbolizing the great ether (the *Mahākāsha*); the corpses, skulls, bones, “being of white color” indicating the goddess’s *sattva guṇa* (highest purity); and the jackals symbolizing the primal elements (the *pancha mahābhūta*), etc.

It is as well to point out that not all *Śāktas*, and the worshippers of *Kālī*, accept such free interpretations. The very substantial group, the *vāmamārga* – the followers of the so-called left path – worship *Kālī*, on the authority of scriptures, with a ritual which includes sexual intercourse. (Mr. Isherwood, possibly without knowing it, aspires to be a free interpreter himself. It surprised me to learn from him that the erotic carvings found in some Hindu temples including the ‘postures’ – not excluding the *Venus Aversa* – “are set there to create a deliberately violent contrast to the mood of indrawn meditateness which is expressed by the shrine.” And I have failed to verify, from the resources at my disposal, his “*Durgā* ... literally the name means she who protects us from danger.”)

However, of the Kālī image at the Dakshineswar temple, which Sri Ramakrishna worshiped, Mr. Isherwood says, “... The symbolism here is shockingly explicit, and it is certain to repel those who have embraced the curious Western heresy which declares that the pretty and pleasant are more ‘real’ than the ugly and the unpleasant.” Sri Ramakrishna himself described Kālī as being “with every attribute – and yet she is nothing but pure love”: (that being so, he sang to her, joked with her, danced for her, was naked before her, wept to her, and followed her will). (Speaking of Swami Vivekananda) Mr. Isherwood adds, “He was experienced enough to know that the concept of Mother Kālī is one which the majority of potential devotees in the West will always find hard to accept; and he seldom mentioned her in his American and British lectures.”

God-Realization

As regards Sri Ramakrishna’s *sādhana* – and particularly its Hindu *Śākta*-Vedantic character – a feature of it which a non-Hindu, a Westerner, would find equally hard to accept, however eloquent the rationalization, is that his God-realization and *samādhi* attainment included such preliminary practice as living like the revered ideal-devotee Hanuman, the king of monkeys. (“I tied my *dhoti* around the waist,” the Master said, “to make it look like a tail, and I moved about in jumps. I ate nothing but fruits and nuts. I spent a lot of time in trees and I kept crying ‘Rama!’”) He also identified himself with Radha, the beloved of Krishna, actually wearing women’s dress and imitating feminine behavior. He spent as long as six months in more or less an unconscious state and practiced the Muslim *sādhana*, according to the strict Muslim custom, eating Muslim food, and he exalted and offered worship to Sri Sarada Devi, his wife, as the Divine Mother incarnate. And he invoked his God, sitting on the *panchamundi*: an *asana* (a seat) set upon the buried skulls of five creatures (a jackal, a snake, a dog, a bull, a man).

It is in this particular *sādhana*, it follows, that Sri Ramakrishna reveals his singularity (as far as the world religious community is concerned): and, at the same time, he reveals his identity as an exceptional *sādhaka*, and as an imposing *siddha* (adept) in the Hindu tradition. The bulk of his *sādhana*, furthermore, is the *kundalinī yoga* (and its correlative, the *mantra yoga*.) The basis of this *yoga* is to activate (‘awaken’) the dormant (‘sleeping’) *Kundalinī*: a form of the Mother (the Cosmic Energy in living creatures) by meditation (*dhyāna*) and *mantra* (a sound that is not yet ‘awakened’ and which must be, by *sādhana*, ‘awakened’.)

It is here indeed – in this particular *sādhana* and not in his generality, as it were – that a writer, venturing upon yet another assessment of Sri Ramakrishna, has the opportunity to prove himself; if he is not merely being a competent paraphraser, restating the known facts about the life and background of his subject and interpreting the Hindu view, being common property, and very much written about, among others by our own Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.

It is here – lacking the grasp and understanding of this vital particular – that Mr. Isherwood fails.

We have Sri Ramakrishna testimony and, that of some of the disciples closest to him of certain *lakṣaṇas* – signs, features – the things that happened to them in the course of their *sādhana*. An unbearable burning sensation in the body, inability to blink the eyes – the technical term for this phenomenon is the *shambhavi mudra* – inability to sleep (“I had no sleep at all for six years,” Sri Ramakrishna had said, but for – one assumes – brief periods of unconsciousness), abnormal hunger the like of which one does not meet in known pathological conditions, etc., etc., and we read of the Master’s touch which produced, for instance, in Hari Prasanna Chatterji (later known as Swami Vijnanananda) a spell of intoxication (of which he said, “I realized that he had transmitted spiritual power to me”), and the Master’s own words, “Awake, Mother! Awake!” (spoken when he touched him), etc. are entirely consonant with the phenomena of *Kundalinī yoga*, and of *Śaktipāta* – the transference of power from a guru to a disciple. Mr. Isherwood’s statement that the Master’s “power of transmitting enlightenment to another person by simply touching him,” was “the avatar’s (God’s) peculiar power” (the other being “to remain for long periods in the state of *samādhi*....”) might be passed over as naïve. These phenomena, as a matter of fact, are exhibited to this day by the gurus of this wonderful *yoga* and are called variously the *Shambhavi*, the *Shakti*, the *Nanavati*, the *Vedha*, *dikshas*, and are affected by the guru’s glance (*dṛṣṭi*), touch (*sparśa*), intention (*chints*), or word (“Awake, Mother! Awake!” would be the traditional invocation). References to these forms of *dikshas* (initiations) would be found in the *Yogasikopanisada*, the *Vayaviya Samhita*, the *Pranatosini Tantra*, the *Kulārnavā Tantra*, and the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*. (The Sage *Vasiṣṭha* caused his *śakti* – spiritual power – to fall upon Sri Ramakrishna).

Mr. Isherwood’s judgments on *mantra yoga*, however, are extremely intemperate and would disqualify him from being taken seriously. Of *Om* – the great Vedic *bija mantra*, adopted by the Tantric, the Jain, and the Mahayana Buddhist *sādhakas* – he has this to say, “God is most comprehensible of mankind’s ideas: It must therefore be represented by the most comprehensive word. What is the most comprehensive word? The one which combines all possible positions of the throat and mouth and tongue in word-utterance. You start with *ah*, the root sound ... the *ou* ... finally *mm* ... and you have *Ah-ou-mm*, which is approximately how *Om* should be pronounced.” Mr. Isherwood’s grasp of the Indian *sādhana* inheritance – in spite of his eloquence about the trivialities – is poor enough not only to cause him to so pronounce himself on the *pranava* – the *mantra Om* – but be unmindful of the references to it in *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, in the *Upanishads*, and the *sādhana paramparā* (tradition) connected with it; both with the sound (the *dhvani*), and the accompanying meditation (*dhyāna*), which promises *amṛta* (immortality) to the practitioner. And he is entirely unaware of the tremendous promise contained in the fourth *pada* of *Om* – Mr. Isherwood has a clumsy paraphrase of the *triaksharamaya pranava a-u-m* – namely the *virana*: the silence (following the *m* in *Om*): which rest, or silence, is without a sound, a movement, or thought: and Mr. Isherwood does not know of the

testimony of innumerable *sādhakas* in which, as a *Kundalinī* ‘awakening’ sign, the sound (*Om*) arises spontaneously (the so-called *svāhā pranava*).

‘Awakening’

Curiously, although willing to accept a brahman from Bengal as an incarnation of *Īśvara*, the Overlord of Hinduism, resembling God the Father of the Christian theology, Mr. Isherwood has difficulty in accepting the ‘awakening’ (*jāgarana*) of a *mantra*, and making it ‘conscious’ (*chaitanya*), by *sādhana, yoga*, whereby a mere sound becomes power (the carrier of *mantra śakti*), by the same token that a stone image becomes ‘conscious’, as Sri Ramakrishna had witnessed his Kālī image to be. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna’s *sādhana* – all the years of suffering culminating in *siddhi*, his access to his god – was a process of *Kundalinī jāgarana* (awakening), and *mantra jāgarana*, and *pratīma* (image) *jāgarana*.

Mr. Isherwood – on his own power, so to speak, and no longer the storyteller and paraphraser – has this to say concerning the *mantra śakti*: “In these days of commercial and political propaganda which makes use of subliminal indoctrination and hypnotic repetition of slogans, it should no longer be necessary to prove, even to an atheist, that *japa* (repetition of a *mantra*) is effective.” To accept Mr. Isherwood’s view – however plausible to himself – would amount to a denial of the most solemn assertions of the *sādhakas* – from the pre-Vedic days to Sri Ramakrishna’s day to this – that the traditional Indian *mantras* are inspired, and divined by some blessed individuals (the *rishis*, and hence every *mantra*, in the preliminary practice, has the name of its *rishi* appended to it), and altogether to assume, on the assurance of an amateur, a dabbler, that they are rather a trick of auto-suggestion (and sloganeering).

Mr. Isherwood’s paraphrase of *Kundalinī yoga* does not merit a comment. His insularity from the *sādhana* tradition is further revealed by his reference to *jnāna* and *bhakti yogas* (the so-called paths of discrimination and love): “It is the nature of some people to arrive at truth by intellect, and others to arrive at it by means of love,” he says, reasonably enough. “Both these paths have led countless men and women to union with Reality. This unitive experience has been the goal of every true mystic. The Buddhists call it Nirvana, the Christians the mystic union, the Hindus *Samadhi*.”

Although it is almost a fashion these days for all sorts of persons – not excluding the aspiring and the confirmed drug-addicts – to lay claims to “mystic experience”, “introvertive mystic consciousness”, “the living present”, etc., Nirvana, the mystic union, and *Samadhi*, certainly, are not synonymous; and “countless men and women” attaining these is news. The connotation of Nirvana – in both its mundane and the super-mundane aspects – would not agree with the state of being or feeling or experience called the mystic union of Christianity, as described, for instance, by

Meister Eckhart, John of Ruusbroec, or St. Theresa, and certainly not with the stages *dharna*, *dhyāna*, culminating in *Samadhi* of the *Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali*. (The term *Samadhi* would have different meanings and connotations in the Buddhist works, the early Theravada writings (the *Abhidhamma*, the *Visuddhimagga*), the Mahayana [texts], and the Chinese and the Japanese Mahayana texts.)

Mr. Isherwood's apology, "It is impossible for me to say anything very explicit about it" – about Nirvana, the mystic union, *Samadhi* – does not help; nor does the admission "like all but the merest handful of people alive in the world today, I have never come anywhere near experiencing it." Mr. Isherwood should remedy this defect by undertaking a *sādhana*.

The experience might confirm that the difference between the attainments – Nirvana, the mystic union and *Samadhi* – is not etymological, or an argument over an archaic terminology, or titles, but rather that it is concerned with the aims and purposes, involving the founders' view of this and the other worlds: the *sādhana*s being merely the steps leading to a confirmation or a refutation of those views. The differences between the Buddha's view, Christ's view, and the Vedānta-*Sāṃkhya-Yoga* view are not merely a matter linguistics.

It would be fitting to add that the simple words of the Master – unaided by intellectual constructions or exegeses – are quite satisfactory and self-explanatory.

In addition to minor editing, spelling and punctuation have been Americanized.

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