

States of Consciousness According to Ramakrishna Pramahansa

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1. Introduction

Aldus Huxley has said in the Foreword of 'The Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna' about the writing of it, that "the casual and unstudied utterances of a great religious teacher" (GSR: v-vi), it was needed to present the utterances of Ramakrishna in a systematic form. Therefore, here, this attempt has been made to systematize Ramakrishna's utterances regarding the stages of consciousness which in their own are logically very consistent and coherent.

What Dr. J.A. Yajnik said about the Vachanamrita of Swaminarayana, is very much true for Kathamrita of Ramakrishna also. It is said about The Vachanamrita that "the simplest would not find the book difficult to understand, not the wisest too simple". Using Dr. J.A. Yajnik's words, "The reason why the wisest does not find the book simple consists in the fact that most of the important topics of Metaphysics, Epistemology, Religion, Ethics are included among the various questions raised in The Gospel. In spite of the scattered character of the discussions in The Gospel, the clarity and consistency of Ramakrishna's vision pervades the whole collection. This however, cannot be revealed unless a careful analysis is made. Therefore, an humble attempt is made here to find Ramakrishna's concept of self in the light of the stages of Consciousness with reference to His Gospel.

2. States of Consciousness

Unlike Christian and other theologians and like major Indian traditions, Ramakrishna believes that the self is not a created thing. It is a subtle spiritual substance existing form eternity. As the self is never created, it is never going to be destroyed. He points out, "The body was born and it will die. But for the soul, there is no death." (GSR: 319) Thus, the self is not annihilated with the annihilation of the body. Without studying any scriptures, he proclaimed the Indian scriptural truth, 'Ajonitya Shashvatoyampurano...' Thus, Ramakrishna clearly believes in the immortality of soul.

According to Ramakrishna, to achieve this highest state, ourself is passing through different states of consciousness. Ramakrishna has explained the states of consciousness of self with reference to three approaches,

- (1) Different stages of consciousness (conscious, semi-conscious and inmost state),
- (2) Three types of body (Gross body, subtle body and causal body) and
- (3) The theory of five sheaths. (Panchakosha) as under:

(i) Regarding the three states of consciousness, Ramakrishna says that, "Through the individual soul one can reach the supreme soul." (GSR: 404) In the journey from individual soul (jiva) to the supreme soul,

mind passes through the different states of consciousness. There are three states of consciousness - conscious, semi-conscious and the inmost state as put by Ramakrishna. These states of consciousness are different from that of three states of consciousness accepted in psychology. In psychology, all states are just the states of mind, while in Ramakrishna there is a journey from empirical self (jiva) to the transcendental self. Again, in psychology, in the states of mind, there is no hierarchy between them, while in Ramakrishna all the three states are in hierarchy and the culmination or the highest state is the state of liberation where the very mind is merged in the soul.

(ii) Secondly, regarding the three types of body, Ramakrishna believes that in all the three states, mind dwells either in gross or subtle body, or in causal body or goes beyond. He explains these different states of consciousness and the position of mind on different types of body, through the example of Shri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. He says, "Caitanya experienced three states of mind. First, the conscious state, when his mind dwelt on the gross and the subtle. Second, the semi-conscious state, when his mind entered the causal body and was absorbed in the bliss of divine intoxication. Third, the inmost state, when his mind was merged in the Great Cause." (GSR: 330)

Here, it is apparent that Ramakrishna's views regarding Bliss is distinctly different from that of the views of Bliss in Upanishadic tradition. In Indian tradition in general and Upanishada in particular, believe Bliss as the highest state of consciousness. It is defined as Satchidananda. While in Ramakrishna, there is the state beyond the state when Bliss is experienced and that state is, where mind merged in the The Great Cause.

(iii) Again using the example of Shri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, Ramakrishna describes the states of consciousness upto Samadhi, in the terms of five sheaths described in the Taittiriya Upanishad, Brahmanandavalli, Anuvak-1 to 5. Ramakrishna explains the process of gradual upliftment of the self. In His words, "Man, looking outward, sees the gross; at that time his mind dwells in the annamayakosha, the gross body. Next is the subtle body. Functioning through the subtle body, the mind dwells in the manomayakosha and the vijnanamayakosha. Next is the causal body. Functioning through the causal body the mind enjoys bliss; it dwells in the

Anandamayakosha. This corresponds to the semi-conscious state experienced by Caitanya. Last of all, the mind loses itself in the Great Cause. It disappears. It merges in the great cause.” (GSR: 330,604)

3. The Highest State of Consciousness

According to Ramakrishna The mahakarana, the Great Cause, is beyond the five sheaths. When Caitanya’s mind merged in that, he would go into Samadhi. This is called Nirvikalpa or Jada Samadhi.” (GSR: 330) He clearly defines the nature of all the four states of consciousness, the gross body, subtle body, causal body and Cause of cause, thereby clarifies the real nature of self. He says, “That which is Pure Atman is the Great Cause, the cause of the cause. The Gross, the subtle, the causal and the Great Cause. The five elements are gross. Mind, buddhi and ego are subtle. Prakriti, the Primal Energy is the cause of all these. Brahman, Pure Atman, is the Cause of the cause... This Pure Atman alone is our real nature. What is jnana? It is to know one’s own self and keep the mind in It. It is to know the Pure Atman.” (GSR: 582) This classification is explained differently at another place. As he says, “The body consisting of the five gross elements is called the gross body. The subtle body is made up of the mind, the ego, the discriminating faculty, and the mind-stuff. There is also a causal body, by means of which one enjoys the Bliss of God and holds communion with Him. The Tantra calls it the BhagavatiTanu, the Divine Body.” (GSR: 902)

The highest state of consciousness is also described by Ramakrishna when he says, “Pure mind, pure buddhi and pure atman are one and the same thing.” (GSR: 697)

4. Self is Beyond attributes

Ramakrishna says, “what you call ‘I’ is really nothing but Atman. Reason it out. Are you the body or the flesh or something else? At the end you will know that you are none of these. You are free from attributes.” (GSR: 208) The satcidjnanda is beyond all the attributes of m̐y̐j̐. It is not known through senses or mind. “One can neither comprehend nor touch the Atman. It is without qualities or attributes.” (GSR: 180) “That which is Pure Atman is unattached, Maya or avidya, is in It. In maya there are three gunas: sattva, rajas and tamas. These three gunas also exists in the Pure Atman. But Atman Itself is unattached...and one cannot see It.” But when man forgets his real nature, he becomes the slave of maya and gets the attributes of sattva, rajas and tamas. They steal away from self its real nature. Simultaneously, one of them, the sattva, is helping in nature. It helps a person to achieve the destination. But as the real self is beyond attributes, the sattva will all disappear at the time of realization.” (GSR: 582) “Under the spell of God’s maya man forgets his true nature. He forgets that he is heir to the infinite glories of his Father. This divine maya made up of three gunas. And all three are robbers; for they rob man of all his treasures and make him forget his true nature. The three gunas are sattva, rajas and tamas. Of these sattva alone points the way to God. But even sattva cannot take a man to God.” (GSR: 218)

(i) Traits of people having prominence of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas

The soul having forgotten its real nature, it is under the spell of maya. All the three attributes are there in the man, who is under the control of maya. But one or the other attribute is prominent in a particular man. Ramakrishna has described the characteristics of people having the prominence of the one or the other attribute. It is narrated here through different quotations from Gospel. “The characteristics of sattva, rajas and tamas are very different. Egotism, sleep, gluttony, lust, anger and the like, are the traits of people with tamas. Men with rajas entangle themselves in many activities...But a man endowed with sattva is quiet and peaceful.” (GSR: 630) “That is the characteristic of rajas. It stimulates the desire to ‘Lecture’ and to show off one’s scholarship But Sattva makes one introspective. It makes one hide one’s virtues.” (GSR: 413)

Further he says, “Do you know a worldly person endowed with Sattva is like? Perhaps his house is in a dilapidated condition here and there. He doesn’t care to repair it. The worship hall may be strewn with pigeon droppings and the courtyard covered with moss, but he pays no attention to these things. The furniture of the house may be old; he doesn’t think of polishing it and making it look neat. He doesn’t care for dress at all; anything is good enough for him. But the man himself is very gentle, quiet, kind and humble; he doesn’t injure anyone...Again, among the worldly (persons) there are people with the traits of rajas. Such a man has a watch and chain, and two or three rings on his fingers. The furniture of his house is all spick and span. One the walls hand portraits of the queen, the Prince of Wales, and other prominent people; the building is white washed and spotlessly clean. His wardrobe is filled with a large assortment of clothes; even the servants have their livery and all that...The traits of a worldly man endowed with tamas are sleep, lust, anger, egotism and the like.” (GSR: 146)

(ii) Utility of Even Tamas in Sadhana

Though the self is beyond attributes, the sattva can help man to reach the destination. In the same way, tamas can also be utilized for the cause. “If you can give a spiritual turn to your tamas, you can realize God with its help. Force your demand on God. He is by no means a stranger to you. He is indeed your very own...Again, you see, the quality of tamas can be used for the welfare of others.” (GSR: 147) Ramakrishna’s thinking is positive, wide and all-inclusive. So, he advises to take positive advantage of tamas too. In another context also he shows his attitude of taking everything as positive. As everything is created by God, everything can be made meaning. As he has said that, “In His maya there exists avidya as well as vidya. Darkness is needed too. It reveals all the more the glory of light. There is no doubt that anger, lust and greed are evil. Why, then, has God created them? In order to create saints. A man becomes a Saint by conquering the senses.” (GSR: 97) In this way he also takes tamas as the means to achieve the state of the real self which is beyond attributes. Still other characteristics of a attributes person he narrated. “In some people spiritual consciousness has already been awakened but they have special mark. They do not enjoy hearing or talking about anything but God.” (GSR: 205)

5. Ramakrishna on the Kundalini Yoga

Ramakrishna has tried to explain the spiritual development of man through the Kundalini yoga’s concept of six centers and

the three principle nerves. Its narration in his own words is as under:

“The Vedas speak of seven planes where the mind dwells. When the mind is immersed in worldliness it dwells in the three lower planes – at the navel, the organ of generation and the organ of evacuation. In that state the mind loses all its higher visions—it broods only on ‘woman and gold’. The fourth plane of the kind is at the heart. When the mind dwells there, one has first glimpse of spiritual consciousness. One sees light all around. Such a man, perceiving the divine light, becomes speechless with wonder” (GSR: 150)

Further regarding the nature of consciousness when it is at the seventh plane, he explains that, “There is much similarity between the seven ‘planes’ described in the Vedanta and the six ‘centers’ of Yoga. The first three planes of the Vedas may be compared to the first three Yogic centers, namely Muladhara, Svadhishtana and Manipura. With ordinary people the mind dwells in these three planes, at the organs of evacuation and generation, and at the navel. When mind ascends to the fourth plane, the centre designated in Yoga as Anahata, it sees the individual soul as a flame. Besides, it sees light...When the mind rises to the fifth plane, the aspirant wants to hear only about God. This is the Vishuddha centre of Yoga. The sixth plane and the centre known by the yogi as ajna are one and the same. When the mind rises there, the aspirant sees God. But still there is a barrier between God and the devotee...

...After passing the six centers the aspirant arrives at the seventh plane. Reaching it, the mind merges in Brahman. The individual soul and the Supreme Soul become one. The aspirant goes into Samadhi. His consciousness of the body disappears. He loses the knowledge of the outer world. He does not see the manifold any more. His reasoning comes to a stop. (GSR: 245)

Further regarding the three nerves like Ida, Pingla and Sushuma as the forms of consciousness, he says that, Ida, Pingla and Sushumna are the three principle nerves. All the lotuses are located in the Sushumna. They are the forms of consciousness. The Kundalini lies in the lotus of the Muladhara. That lotus has fourteen petals. The Primordial Energy resides in all bodies as the Kundalini...The Kundalini is speedily awakened if one follows the path of bhakti. God cannot be seen unless She is awakened.” (GSR: 362-363)

6. Conclusion

Thus, it is seen that because Ramakrishna had not studied scriptures, his thoughts are somewhat different from Indian upanishadic philosophy about the nature and stages of consciousness. His own interpretation is very unique and logically consistent with his other philosophical assumption. He is different in telling the state of Vijnani, as a state of liberated consciousness, which goes beyond the blissful consciousness - state of Brahman of Shankara. Thus, it is proved that the ‘casual utterances’ during discussion are consistent and coherent may be because of the Vision which Ramakrishna had.

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