

Teachings & Parables of Sri Ramakrishna

a listen-along guide · 24 entries

AI retellings of parables from The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. Read the full Gospel (belurmath.org).

LONGING FOR GOD

Crying for the Mother

A little child is playing happily with his toys. He forgets even his mother. But when the play is over, when the toys no longer please him, then he throws them down and cries, "Mother! Mother!" And the mother, who has been busy in the house, drops her work and comes running to him, for she cannot bear his tears. So it is with God. You may pass your days in the play of the world, with your money and your name and your pleasures. But God does not come to you then. Only when you have grown weary of the toys, when you throw them aside and cry to Him with a longing heart, does the Divine Mother come. So cry to Him. Cry as a child cries for its mother, and be restless for Him. That yearning, that longing, is itself the beginning of His grace. Weep for God, and you will surely see Him.

A Breath of Air

A disciple once asked the Master, "How long before a man realizes God? When does He come?" The Master smiled and said, I will tell you. Suppose a man is held under the water. He struggles and struggles for a single breath of air. His chest is bursting, his whole being cries out for that one breath, and nothing else in the world matters to him then, not his wealth, not his family, not his good name, only air, only that. When you long for God like that, when your soul pants for Him as a drowning man pants for breath, then you shall know that He is near. People shed jugs of tears for their wife and children, for money and possessions. But who weeps for God? Who is restless for Him? If a man would weep for the Lord with even a fraction of such longing, he would surely see Him. Long for God with that whole-hearted thirst, and He will not keep you waiting.

The Three Attractions

The Master used to speak of three great pulls of the heart. There is the love the worldly man feels for his riches, how he guards them, how his mind runs to them day and night. There is the love a mother feels for her child, how her heart is always with her little one, wherever she goes. And there is the love of a chaste wife for her husband, steady and deep and true. These three loves are very strong. Now, he would say, if a man could bring these three loves together, and turn them all upon God, if he could love God with the miser's attachment to his gold, the mother's tenderness for her child, and the wife's devotion to her husband, all at once, then he would realize the Lord that very moment. Such is the power of a longing heart. Gather up all the love that leaks away into the things of the world, and pour it upon God alone. Then He cannot stay hidden from you.

Tears That Are Never Wasted

Men weep rivers of tears in this world. They weep because they have lost money, because a dear one has died, because they cannot get the things they crave. But how many weep because they have not seen God? The Master said, whoever weeps for the Lord shall surely find Him. The tears you shed for Him are never wasted. He himself, in the days of his own longing, wept and wept for the Divine Mother. He would rub his face on the ground and cry, "Mother, another day is gone, and still I have not seen Thee!" His chest would grow red with weeping. And the Mother, seeing such longing, could not keep herself away. So he taught his disciples, do not be ashamed of your tears for God. Let the heart melt. God is not far from the one whose eyes are wet for Him. Yearning is the whole secret. Cry to Him with a sincere heart, and you will not cry in vain.

The Restless Heart

The Master often said, the thing needful is restlessness, a burning restlessness for God. Do you know how it should be? Like the restlessness of a man with a high fever, who is parched with thirst and whose throat is dry, and who longs and longs for water. Nothing will satisfy him but water. So must the soul long for God. It is no use to say your prayers by rote and then go about your business with a calm and easy mind. You must feel that without Him you cannot live for a moment. He gave the example of the guru who pushed his pupil's head under the water. When the boy could bear no more, when he thirsted for breath alone, then the guru said, that is the longing you must have for God. As long as the heart is content with the world, He remains far off. But grow restless for Him, cry for Him with a pining soul, and He will reveal Himself. Longing is the price of His vision.

EGO AND SURRENDER

The Salt Doll

Sri Ramakrishna loved to tell this little story. A salt doll once went to measure the depth of the ocean. It wanted to tell others just how deep the water was. But it could never come back to say a word, because the moment it stepped in, it began to dissolve. As it walked deeper and deeper, it melted away, and at last it became one with the sea. Now who was left to bring back the report? Who could say how deep the ocean is? He would say the ego is like that salt doll. As long as a little of it remains, there is someone to think, someone to speak, someone to stand apart. But when a man goes deep into God, the sense of "I" melts, and only God remains. The knower and the known become one. That, he said, is the highest knowledge: to lose the small self in the great ocean of being.

I and Mine

Sri Ramakrishna would say it very simply. "I" and "mine" is ignorance. "Thou" and "Thine" is knowledge. When a man feels, "I am the doer, this house is mine, this wife is mine, this body is mine," he is bound. He forgets God and clings to what he calls his own. That little word "mine" ties the knot. But the true devotee turns it around. He says to God, "O Lord, Thou art the doer, and I am Thy instrument. This house is Thine, this family is Thine, this body is Thine." When a man can honestly say "Thou and Thine," his bonds fall away, for he has given everything back to the One who owns it all. The difference between bondage and freedom, he taught, lies only in these two words. Keep saying "mine, mine," and you stay caught in the world. Learn to say "Thine, Thine," and you are already near to God.

The Unripe I and the Ripe I

Sri Ramakrishna said the ego does not easily go away, so let it stay as the servant of God. But learn to tell the two kinds of "I" apart. There is the unripe "I" and the ripe "I." The unripe "I" says, "This is my house, my money, my learning. I am the doer. I am great." That "I" is thick and hard, and it keeps you far from God. The ripe "I" says, "O God, I am Thy servant, Thy child. Thou art the master, and I do only what Thou makest me do. Nothing is mine." This "I" does no harm at all. It is like the ego of a devotee. So he taught: do not try to destroy the ego by force, for it clings again and again. Instead, ripen it. Turn the proud "I am the doer" into the humble "I am His." Let the ego remain, but let it belong wholly to God.

The Servant I

Sri Ramakrishna knew the ego is hard to kill. Drive it out the door, and it climbs back through the window. So he gave a gentle way. He said, if the "I" will not leave you, then let it remain as "the servant I." Say, "I am the servant of God, I am His devotee." There is no harm in an ego like that. He compared it to a mark drawn with a stick. When you divide water with a line, it looks as if there are two parts, but really there is only one water. So the "servant I" is only a thin line drawn upon the one Reality. It keeps a little separation, just enough to love God, to serve Him, to taste the sweetness of devotion. Sweets, he said, are made of sugar, yet we like to shape them into figures to enjoy them. In the same way, keep a trace of "I" so you may love and serve the Lord. That "I" does no harm.

The Power of Attorney

Sri Ramakrishna taught that the secret of peace is self-surrender. Give God your power of attorney, he said. Let Him do whatever He likes with you, and be free of all care. When a man gives his affairs over to a trusted guardian, he no longer worries; he knows the guardian will manage everything. In the same way, throw all your burden on the Lord and rest. He told of two friends who came to a field being harvested. One climbed a tree, ate the fruit, and enjoyed himself in peace. The other went to help gather the crop, and got his share only after much labor. So it is with the man who leaves everything to God and simply enjoys His grace, and the man who insists, "I must do it all myself." Resign yourself, he said, and the load falls from your shoulders. Say, "O Lord, not I, but Thou." Then whatever comes, joy or sorrow, you will remain calm, held safely in His hands.

LIVING IN THE WORLD

The Maidservant

Sri Ramakrishna liked to speak of the maidservant who works in a rich man's house. She sweeps and scrubs, she looks after her master's children, she calls them 'my Hari, my Gopal,' and holds them as if they were her own. But all the while she knows, in her heart, that this great house is not hers. Her real home is in her own village, far away. Her own children are there, and it is toward them that her love truly flows. She does every duty here faithfully, yet her mind is fixed on her village. So, he said, should you live in the world. Do your work. Care for your family, your money, your house. Perform every duty well. But know within yourself that none of this is truly yours. Your true home is God, your true relations are near Him. Keep the mind there, even while the hands are busy here. That is how one lives in the world and still belongs to God.

The Boat in the Water

Sri Ramakrishna gave a simple picture to those who feared that worldly life would drown their devotion. A boat, he said, may stay in the water. There is no harm in that. That is where a boat belongs; it floats and it carries people across. But water must not be allowed to get into the boat. Once the water seeps inside, the boat grows heavy, and slowly it sinks. In the same way, he said, live in the world. There is no fault in the world itself. Have your home, your work, your dealings; float upon the water of the world and let it carry you. But do not let the world get inside you. Do not let greed and lust and attachment leak into your heart, or you will surely go down. Keep them out, keep God within, and you may live in the water all your life and never sink. The boat that stays dry inside always reaches the other shore.

The Mud-Fish

Sri Ramakrishna often pointed to the little mud-fish that lives in a pond. It is born in the mud, it moves through the mud, it spends its whole life there. Yet take it up in your hand and look: its skin is bright and clean, and not a speck of mud clings to it. It lives in the mud and stays unstained by the mud. He said the same of the lotus. Its roots are down in the slime at the bottom of the pond, but its flower rises above the water, and the water does not wet its petals. Live in the world like that, he taught. You cannot always run away to the forest, and you need not. Stay where God has placed you, in the middle of the mud of the world, doing your duties. But keep your heart lifted toward Him, so the world cannot cling to it. Then you may live surrounded by it and remain pure, like the mud-fish, like the lotus above the pond.

One Hand for Duty, One Hand for God

Sri Ramakrishna told his householder devotees not to give up their work, but to change where the heart rested while they did it. Do your duty in the world with one hand, he said, and with the other hold fast to the feet of God. When the work is finished, then hold to His feet with both hands. He gave another picture for the same thing. A woman with a jar of water on her head walks home, laughing and talking with her friends along the way. Her hands are free, her tongue is busy with the others, yet all the while a part of her mind is fixed on the jar, so that it never tips and never falls. So live in the world, he said. Talk, work, attend to your affairs; but keep one steady thread of the mind always upon God, as the woman keeps hers upon the jar. Do everything, and forget Him in nothing. That is the whole secret of living in the world.

Churn the Butter First

A young man once asked Sri Ramakrishna whether he must leave his home and his family to find God. No, said the Master; stay where you are, but first gain a little strength within. He gave the example of milk and water. If you pour milk into water, the two mix and you can no longer tell them apart. But first turn that milk into curds, churn out the butter, and set the butter in water. Now it floats. The water cannot touch it or dissolve it. So, he said, first churn the butter of devotion in the solitude of your own heart. Pray, weep for God, spend some quiet days apart with Him, until love for Him grows firm and solid in you. Once that butter is formed, you may go back and live in the very midst of the world's water, and it will not spoil you. You will float upon it, doing your duties, untouched. Get the strength first; then the world can do you no harm.

MANY PATHS, ONE GOD

The One Pond with Many Ghats

Sri Ramakrishna liked to tell of a pond with several bathing steps, several ghats. At one ghat the Hindus draw water, and they call it jal. At another the Musalmans draw water in their leather bags, and they call it pani. At a third the Christians come, and they call the same thing water. Now, is it three different things because it has three different names? No. It is one and the same water. Some say jal, some say pani, some say water, but it is all the one substance, with no difference at all. So it is with God. He is called by many names. Some call Him Allah, some God, some Brahman, some Kali, and others by yet other names. But it is one Reality, one Being, that all are seeking. Only the names and the ghats are many. Do not quarrel over the name at your step. The water is the same, and the thirst it quenches is the same.

As Many Faiths, So Many Paths

There is a saying Sri Ramakrishna returned to again and again: jato mat, tato path. As many faiths, so many paths. He would picture the roof of a tall house, and the many ways up to it. One man climbs by the stone staircase. Another goes up by a wooden stair. A third climbs by a rope, and a fourth by a bamboo pole. Their ways look nothing alike, yet every one of them reaches the same roof. So it is with the ways to God. You may come by the path of the Hindu, or the path of the Musalman, or the path of the Christian. The paths differ, but the goal is one. He used to say he had tested this himself, following one path and then another, and had found that all lead to the same God. So never think your own path is the only true one, and another's is false. Follow your own with your whole heart, and be sure it will bring you home.

The Chameleon on the Tree

Sri Ramakrishna told of a chameleon that lived on a tree. One man saw it and went away saying, The creature on that tree is a beautiful red. Another had seen it at a different moment and said, No, it is green. A third insisted it was yellow, and others called it still other colors. They fell to quarreling, each certain of what his own eyes had seen. So they went to a man who lived under that very tree. He said, You are all right. But the fact is, this creature changes its color. Sometimes I have seen it red, sometimes green, sometimes yellow, and sometimes no color at all. Now, the one who says God has this nature and no other knows only what his own glimpse has shown him. But the man who dwells under the tree, who lives always in God, he alone knows that God takes many forms and is also formless, beyond every color. Do not quarrel over your one glimpse.

Different Foods for Different Mouths

Why, asked Sri Ramakrishna, are there so many religions in the world? Because God has made them so, he said, to suit different men in different times and countries. A mother has several children. To one she gives rice and curry, to another she gives simple bread and milk, and to the sick one she gives only a little sago. Do you say she loves one more than another? No. She gives each the food he can take and digest. All doctrines are so many paths, but a path is not God Himself. You will reach God if you follow any one of them with whole-hearted devotion. Think of a cake with sugar. Whichever side you eat it from, you will taste its sweetness. So it does not matter which faith you are born into. What matters is longing for God, and calling on Him with a sincere and yearning heart. Cry to Him earnestly, and along whatever path, He will surely reveal Himself to you.

DISCRIMINATION AND PRACTICE

You Are a Tiger, Not a Goat

Once a tigress attacked a flock of goats. She was big with young, and in the leap she gave birth and died. The cub grew up among the goats. He nibbled grass. He bleated the little bleat of a goat. He believed himself to be one of them, weak and timid. One day another tiger came upon the flock, and he was amazed to see this grass-eating, bleating tiger. He seized him and dragged him to the water. Look, he said. See your face beside mine. They are the same. Then he pushed a piece of meat into the cub's mouth. At first the cub drew back. But the taste awakened him, and at last he roared. Do you see? You too are that cub. You are not this weak body, this timid mind. You are the Self, ever pure, ever free. The teacher comes only to hold up the water and say, You are not a goat. You are a tiger.

The Swan That Separates Milk From Water

They say that if you set before a swan a bowl of milk mixed with water, the swan will drink only the milk and leave the water behind. It has that power. This is what discrimination means, what the wise call viveka. In this world the real and the unreal are poured together, mixed in the same bowl. God is real; everything else, the name and the fame, the body and its little wants, all of it is passing, unreal. The one who has discrimination is like the swan. He takes the milk and leaves the water. He clings to what is eternal and lets the fleeting things fall away. And how is that power gained? Not by talk. Pray to Him with a longing heart, and He gives it. Reason first: God alone is substance, all else is two days' show. Then the mind, of itself, learns to drink only the milk.

Money Is Clay and Clay Is Money

In my younger days, when I was practising here by the Ganges, I would take a rupee in one hand and a lump of earth in the other. Taka mati, mati taka, I would say. Money is clay, clay is money. I said it over and over until the two seemed the same, and then I threw them both together into the river. What binds a man? It is the craving for lust and gold, kamini-kanchan, woman and gold. This is the thing that pulls the mind down and makes him forget God. But understand me rightly. I do not say money is evil. Keep it, use it, feed your family, serve the holy, help the poor. Only do not set your heart on it. Do not make it your god. See it for what it is, a little clay you happen to hold for a while. When you can look on gold and earth with the same eye, then the knot is loosened, and the heart turns freely toward the Lord.

The Green Coconut and the Dry One

Take up a green coconut, an unripe one, and try to scoop out the kernel. You cannot. The soft white flesh clings to the inside of the shell. It will not come loose; it is stuck fast to the hard rind. But let the coconut dry. Let it ripen and grow old. Then when you shake it, you hear the kernel rattle inside, free of the shell. Now you can take it out whole and clean. The mind of a worldly man is like the green coconut. It is glued to the body and to the objects of the senses; it cannot be drawn away from them. But the mind of one who has ripened in the love of God dries up its attachment. It rattles free. The body remains, the world remains, but the mind no longer sticks to them. That is the state to pray for, to live in the world and yet be unattached, the kernel loose within the shell.

Practise in a Quiet Corner

People say, Why should I pray in a lonely place? God is everywhere. True, He is everywhere. But there is a power in solitude, and a power in the company of the holy. When you churn milk you must let it set first, undisturbed, before the butter forms. So the mind must be gathered in a quiet corner, and there you call on Him, weep for Him, repeat His name. Go now and then into solitude, whether the woods or a still room, and think only of God. Once the butter is formed, you may drop it in water and it will not dissolve; then you can move about in the world and keep your peace. And keep the company of the holy, satsanga, for the mind is like a wet cloth soaked in water; hold it near the fire of holy company and it dries. Do not take anxious thought for the morrow, as the true sadhu does not. Weep for God with a longing heart, and He will surely show Himself.