

A. The Ramakrishna Order

The Ramakrishna Order, with headquarters in Kolkata, is one of the largest and most respected religious orders in India today. The Order was inspired by the great Bengali saint, Sri Ramakrishna. Shortly before his death in 1886, Ramakrishna encouraged his young disciples to formally renounce the world by giving them the ochre cloth of renunciation. He entrusted the care of these young men to his foremost disciple, Swami Vivekananda, who later, in 1897, founded the Ramakrishna Order.



The Seal of the Ramakrishna Order

The emblem depicts the four paths to God:

- The wavy waters—unselfish work.
- The lotus—love of God.
- The rising sun—knowledge.
- The encircling serpent—awakening of spiritual power.

The swan represents the Supreme Being or Godhead. By the union of these four paths, the vision of God is obtained. The goal of the Ramakrishna Order is written in Sanskrit on the emblem:

May the Supreme Spirit illumine us.

The Ramakrishna Order was formed along two parallel lines: The Ramakrishna Math, which is primarily dedicated to spiritual development, and the Ramakrishna Mission, which is dedicated

to social service. In a sense these twin efforts cannot be separated, since the motto of the Ramakrishna Order has been since its inception: “Liberation for oneself and service to mankind.” There are over 166 official centers of the Ramakrishna Order, and many more unofficial, or unaffiliated ones. These centers not only cover the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, but can also be found in Europe, Russia, Japan, South America, Africa, Canada and the United States.

Those branches of the Ramakrishna Order located outside India are generally known as Vedanta Societies, and are under the spiritual guidance of the Ramakrishna Order. The work of the Vedanta Societies in the West has primarily been devoted to spiritual and pastoral activities, though many of them do some form of social service.

On the Indian subcontinent, the Ramakrishna Mission has been in the forefront of philanthropic activities. Its first social service efforts—inspired by Swami Vivekananda—began in 1897. Since that time, the Mission’s activities have continued to expand up to the present day.

The Ramakrishna Mission has its own hospitals, charitable dispensaries, maternity clinics, tuberculosis clinics, and mobile dispensaries. It also maintains training centers for nurses. Orphanages and homes for the elderly are included in the Mission’s field of activities, along with rural and tribal welfare work.

In educational activities, the Ramakrishna Mission has consistently been ahead of its time. It has developed some of the most outstanding educational institutions in India, having its own colleges, vocational training centers, high schools and primary schools, teachers’ training institutes, as well as schools for the visually handicapped. It also has adult education centers throughout the country.

Whenever disaster has struck, the Ramakrishna Mission has been there to offer relief from famine, epidemic, fire, flood, earthquake, cyclone, and communal disturbances.

B. Ramakrishna

A Short Biography

India, with her wealth of spiritual tradition, has produced many spiritual giants. One of the greatest was Ramakrishna (1836-1886). His life was a testament to truth, universality, love and



purity.

Born in a rural village outside Calcutta, Ramakrishna even as a boy naturally gravitated toward leading a spiritual life. This tendency only intensified as he grew older. When as a young man he became a temple priest, he was seized by an unquenchable thirst for union with God, and he immersed himself in intense meditation and other spiritual practices.

Ramakrishna was constantly absorbed in the thought of God. He would often go into high spiritual states where he would merge with the Infinite Reality. For him, the Vedantic teaching of unity of all existence was more than theory; he literally saw, and knew, this to be true.

In his thirst for the divine, Ramakrishna followed different religious paths including various branches of Hinduism. Not content to stop there, however, he also practiced Islam and later meditated deeply on Christ, experiencing the same divine Reality through these non-Hindu paths. Thus, he came to the conclusion, based on his direct experience, that all religions lead to the same goal.

In addition, through his many Sikh devotees, he learned of their faith and its great founders, and he was told of the wonderful life and teachings of the Buddha. This exposure to Sikhism and Buddhism further confirmed his experience of the universality of spiritual truth.

Ramakrishna's love for humanity was limitless. He often said human beings were the highest manifestations of God. His disciples saw this love firsthand, and the monastic order Ramakrishna inspired achieved the distinction of being the first order in India to serve humanity. Service to God in humankind is one of the foremost ideals of the Ramakrishna Order.

Among his many other noteworthy characteristics were his universality and childlike purity, his intense sincerity, his vast knowledge of things spiritual and human (which came not from book-learning but from direct perception), and his extraordinary power to transform lives.

Ramakrishna's teachings regarding the highest truths of spiritual life were delivered in the simplest language and were punctuated by parables and homely metaphors as illustrations. Many noted writers and philosophers—Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Thomas Merton, Arnold Toynbee, Joseph Campbell—have been deeply impressed and influenced by him.

Quotes from Sri Ramakrishna

“Different people call on [God] by different names: some as Allah, some as God, and others as Krishna, Siva, and Brahman. It is like the water in a lake. Some drink it at one place and call it ‘jal’, others at another place and call it ‘pani’, and still others at a third place and call it ‘water’. The Hindus call it ‘jal’, the Christians ‘water’, and the Moslems ‘pani’. But it is one and the same thing.”

“One can ascend to the top of a house by means of a ladder or a bamboo or a staircase or a rope; so too, diverse are the ways of approaching God, and each religion in the world shows one of the

ways. . . . A truly religious man should think that other religions are also so many paths leading to the Truth. One should always maintain an attitude of respect towards other religions.”

“There are pearls in the deep sea, but you must hazard all perils to get them. If you fail to get at them by a single dive, do not conclude that the sea is without them. Dive again and again, and you are sure to be rewarded in the end. So also in the quest for the Lord, if your first attempt to see Him proves fruitless, do not lose heart. Persevere in the attempt, and you are sure to realise Him at last.”

“As a lamp does not burn without oil, so a man cannot live without God.”

“That which you think, you should speak. Let there be harmony between your thought and word. Otherwise, if you merely say that God is your all in all, while in your mind you have made the world your all in all, you cannot derive any benefit.”

“Knowledge leads to unity; ignorance to diversity.”

“When God is realised, the world never appears empty. He who has attained Him sees that the Lord Himself has become all these—the universe and its creatures.”

What Others Said About Sri Ramakrishna

“The story of Ramakrishna Paramahansa’s life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face.”

—*Mahatma Gandhi*

“Ramakrishna’s teachings on the essential unity of the great religions comprise Hinduism’s finest voice on this topic.”

—*Huston Smith*

“Sri Ramakrishna’s message was unique in being expressed in action. Religion is not just a matter for study, it is something that has to be experienced and to be lived, and this is the field in which Sri Ramakrishna manifested his uniqueness. His religious activity and experience were, in fact, comprehensive to a degree that had perhaps never before been attained by any other religious genius, in India or elsewhere.”

—*Arnold Toynbee*

“Ramakrishna was a rare combination of individuality and universality, personality and impersonality. His word and example have been echoed in the hearts of Western men and women. His soul animates modern India.”

—*Romain Rolland*

“This highly noteworthy document [*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*] conveys the personality of a great mystic in such an intimate, direct, and almost astounding manner that to read it must be an enriching experience for any intellect which is receptive and open to all things human.”

—*Thomas Mann*

“This is the story of a phenomenon.”

(Isherwood’s opening sentence in *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*.)

—*Christopher Isherwood*

Recommended Reading on Ramakrishna

[The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna](#)

[Ramakrishna and His Disciples](#)

[Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master](#)

[Sri Ramakrishna: A Prophet for the New Age](#)

C. Sarada Devi

A Short Biography



The affectionate term “Holy Mother” refers to Sri Sarada Devi (1853-1920), Ramakrishna’s wife and spiritual counterpart. According to the custom then prevalent in India, she was betrothed to him while still a child. At the age of 18, she left her parental home to join her husband, who lived some sixty miles away, near Calcutta.

By that time Ramakrishna had dedicated his body and mind to the spiritual search and lived the life of a monk. Yet he received Sarada very kindly, feeling that Divine Providence had brought her. After nursing her to recovery from an illness contracted on the journey, Ramakrishna one day asked her why she had come to join him.

She replied that she had come only to help him in his chosen way, which—as she well knew—meant the way of complete renunciation of all earthly ties for the sake of God-realization. Thus, instead of seeking conjugal fulfillment, she became his first disciple.

Sarada Devi was a spiritual giant in her own right and yet, in her simple and unassuming way, she served Ramakrishna and his disciples for many years. After Ramakrishna’s passing away, she carried on his religious ministry, serving as guide and inspiration of the new spiritual movement.

Within the ambiance of her natural simplicity and modesty, she set a unique example of an ideal disciple, nun, wife, teacher, and also mother to her countless spiritual children. Those who

associated with her were overwhelmed by her unconditional love and selfless service. All were her children irrespective of nationality, religious affiliation, or social position. No one was ever turned away. She accepted all.

Quotes from Sri Sarada Devi

“I tell you one thing—if you want peace, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own.”

“God is one’s very own. It is the eternal relationship. He is everyone’s own. One realizes him in proportion to the intensity of one’s feelings for him.”

“If you practice spiritual discipline for some time in a solitary place, you will find that your mind has become strong, and then you can live in any place or society without being in the least affected by it. When the plant is tender, it should be hedged around. But when it has grown big, not even cows and goats can injure it. Spiritual practices in a solitary place are essential.”

“Whatever you yearn for, that you will get.”

“Everyone can break down something, but how many can build it up?”

“I am the mother of the wicked, and I am the mother of the virtuous. Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, just say to yourself, ‘I have a mother’.”

“Forbearance is a great virtue; there is no other like it.”

“The purpose of one’s life is fulfilled only when one is able to give joy to another.”

“As wind removes the cloud, so the name of God destroys the cloud of worldliness.”

Recommended reading on Sri Sarada Devi

Holy Mother

Sri Sarada Devi: The Great Wonder

The Gospel of the Holy Mother

Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi

Teachings of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother

D. Swami Vivekananda

A Short Biography



Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was the foremost disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and a world spokesperson for Vedanta. His lectures, writings, letters, and poems are published as *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. He felt it was best to teach universal principles rather than personalities, so we find little mention of Ramakrishna in the *Complete Works*.

Swami Vivekananda represented Hinduism at the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 where he was an instant success. Subsequently he was invited to speak all over America and Europe. He was a man with a great spiritual presence and tremendous intellect.

Most of the Vedanta Societies which were founded in America and Europe up through the 1930s can trace their origins directly to Vivekananda or the people who heard him speak from 1893 through 1900.

After his first visit to the West, Swami Vivekananda returned to India and founded the Ramakrishna Order in 1898.
Chronology of Swami Vivekananda in the West

Quotes from Swami Vivekananda

“Religion is not in books, nor in theories, nor in dogmas, nor in talking, not even in reasoning. It is being and becoming.”

“Infinite power and existence and blessedness are ours, and we have not to acquire them; they are our own, and we have only to manifest them.”

“Be an atheist if you want, but do not believe in anything unquestioningly.”

“I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow’s tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan’s mouth.”

“In judging others we always judge them by our own ideals. That is not as it should be. Everyone must be judged according to his own ideal, and not by that of anyone else.”

“He who has no faith in himself can never have faith in God.”

“The first sign that you are becoming religious is that you are becoming cheerful. When a man is gloomy, that may be dyspepsia, but it is not religion.”

“The living God is within you.”

“Manifest the divinity within you and everything will be harmoniously arranged around it.”

“He alone is worshiping God who serves all beings.”

What Others Said About Swami Vivekananda

“I have gone through Swami Vivekananda’s works very thoroughly, and after having gone through them, the love that I had for my country became a thousand-fold. ...His writings need no introduction from anybody. They make their own irresistible appeal.”

—*Mahatma Gandhi*

“Where can you find a man like him? Study what he wrote, and learn from his teachings, for if you do, you will gain immense strength. Take advantage of the fountain of wisdom, of Spirit,

and of fire that flowed through Vivekananda.”

—*Jawaharlal Nehru*

“I had the special privilege of being introduced to the writings, sayings, and life of Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission. That was when I was very small. In fact both my parents and specially my mother had very close connections with the Mission. And I can truly say that the words of Swami Vivekananda inspired the whole of my family, in our political work as well as in our daily lives.”

—*Indira Gandhi*

“The book by Vivekananda is more than a pleasure, it is a broadening of the soul.”

—*Leo Tolstoy*

“The paragon of all Unity systems is the Vedanta philosophy of India, and the paragon of Vedanta missionaries was the late Swami Vivekananda. The man is simply a wonder for oratorical power. ...The swami is an honor to humanity.”

—*William James*

“The qualities I most admire in Vivekananda are his activity, manliness and courage. ...He spoke up and acted. For this, all must honor him, who, whatever be their won religious beliefs, value sincerity, truth and courage, which are the badges of every noble character.”

—*Sir John Woodroffe*

It is very difficult to evaluate his [Swami Vivekananda's] importance in the scale of world history. It is certainly far greater than any Western historian or most Indian historians would have suggested at the time of his death. The passing of the years and the many stupendous and unexpected events which have occurred since then suggest that in centuries to come he will be remembered as one of the main molders of the modern world, especially as far as Asia is

concerned, and as one of the most significant figures in the whole history of Indian religion.”

—*A.L. Basham*

“One of the very greatest historical figures that India has ever produced.”

—*Christopher Isherwood*

Recommended Reading on Swami Vivekananda

[Living at the Source](#)

[Vivekananda: The Yogas and Other Works](#)

[The Life of Swami Vivekananda](#)

[Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries](#)

[The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda](#)

[What Religion Is](#)