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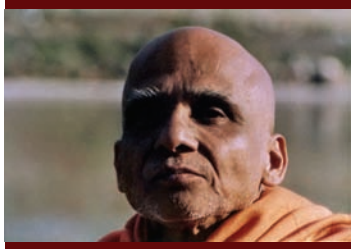

THE DIVINE LIFE SOCIETY

RAMA - THE APOTHEOSIS OF HUMAN PERFECTION

By Swami Krishnananda

Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Jai Ram

Introduction

The necessity which any religious adherent or spiritual seeker would feel for a book of this kind should be obvious. Generally, religion goes by rituals and performances of general routines come by way of tradition, but the mind of man, being what it is, also moves with the routine and does not always feel competent to visualise the vital role which religious observances play as vehicles which embody a deeper significance which may best be described as spiritual. There is a *meaning* behind every *act*, or ritual in the religious field, even as there is a hidden purpose behind the implementation of any project or the doing of any work. Rarely are religions seen to awaken themselves to the spirit that they are expected to convey, the living flame which they enshrine and without which they remain forms without content.

Here, we believe, is a precious gift to everyone who seeks assistance in probing into the philosophical depths and spiritual values behind the injunctions of the religion of man.

(*From the book, 'Spiritual Import of Religious Festivals' by Swami Krishnananda. Copyright The Divine Life Society 2006.*)

Rama - The Apotheosis of Human Perfection

Let us observe this auspicious occasion of Sri Ramanavami as a moment of contemplation on a special spark of Divinity that made its advent on the earth. Popularly speaking, in ancient historical times, to emphasise the historical advent of this great Divinity on earth has been the exoteric side of the Epics as people generally understand it. This popular emphasis on the incarnations of God on earth has taken the form of Epics like the Ramayana. We are told in the Ramayana of sage Valmiki, the earliest of these documents, that it was a history par excellence, a history of a chronological procession of divine exploits which is what we generally mean by a divine Epic. It is believed that the earliest record of the history of Rama, the Ramayana of Valmiki, was written during the life-time of Rama Himself. It was not a biography written later on after several years. It was composed then and there, by a contemporary of Rama, sage Valmiki, and so it is but proper that devotees take it as the most authentic of documents pertaining to the history or life-story of Rama. Surprising though it may appear, this master-poet who composed the Ramayana was an illiterate brute in his earlier life, but suddenly transformed into a Master whose genius is today regarded as incomparable in the history of Sanskrit literature. This total transformation by a magical touch, as it were, was given to Valmiki by another genius, sage Narada. One genius created another genius, and this genius has written an Epic, stirring the soul of man, on a genius of human perfection, Sri Rama Himself. And so, even today a contemplation on these aspects of holiness and perfection brings us into contact with a unique feature, namely humanity as it ought to be properly understood and brought to bear on practical life.

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The whole of the Ramayana is an Epic of humanity. Humanity does not mean mankind but that which particularly characterises human nature. It is in this sense, Sri Rama is oftentimes called the paragon of humanity, an example of the perfection of human nature. This perfection of human nature is not inclusive of the foibles of man in his lower endowments. In the majestic words of Valmiki with which the Epic commences, we are given a description of what this perfection of humanity is, as an answer given by sage Narada to a question put by sage Valmiki as to who is the ideal of human nature. "Whom do you think, O sage, is the perfect embodiment of humanity in this world and can you give me an example of such a perfection?" was the question put by Valmiki to Narada. And then, Narada commences a dignified description of a personality whom today we know and adore as Sri Rama. That majestic feature of bodily personality, the ideal perfection of physiological structure, the profundity and beauty of understanding, dignity of behaviour, exemplary nature of conduct - to put it in one word 'perfection' as conceived or as conceivable by the human understanding - this is what comes forth as an answer from the great sage Narada.

We have two Epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, just as in the West they have two Epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey. These two parallel movements of Epic stories, known as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, give us a complete picture of the process of the advancement of the human soul towards its

Perfection. It is not to be taken as a surprise that the culture of Bharatavarsha is a culture of the Spirit, so that anything that is said and done or believed in, is directly or indirectly connected with the march of the Spirit to the recognition of its Perfection. We have no other culture here except the culture of the Spirit. A connecting of the visible phenomena with what underlies the phenomena, is the significance of the Epics. And these two master-strokes of genius given to us by Valmiki and Vyasa, in the form of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, give us the religion of India.

There were some over-enthusiastic orientalists in the West particularly, and sometimes in the East also, who began to believe that the culture of India is in the Vedas and the Upanishads. But, if we bestow a little thought on the actual situation, it will become clear that if the Vedas and the Upanishads were the sole basis of the culture of India, the Indian culture would have been wiped out like the cultures of Egypt, Greece or Rome. These cultures are only names to us now. They do not actually exist now. They vanished from the process of time on account of their inflexibility, their rigidity of character and their emphasis on a particular aspect of human life. If, as people often believe, the dicta of the Vedas and Upanishads alone were to be taken as the foundation of Indian culture, there would have been no Indian culture today. It would have gone to the winds, because what we have in the Vedas and the Upanishads are 'principles', like theorems of geometry or algebra, which are wonderful enough, which are the basis of all scientific approaches and discoveries. Nevertheless, they are principles, and the masses do not live on principles. When we talk or when we move about in the streets, we do not think of the principles behind speaking and walking. We work with the peculiar manifestation of our personality which is spontaneous in its nature. Principles somehow have the aroma of fixity and rigidity. They cannot be changed. But, emotion seeks a spontaneous expression of itself and this feature, this peculiarity of human nature was taken notice of by the sages of the Vedic times themselves.

In the Srimad-Bhagavata, one among the eighteen Puranas, at the very commencement itself, we are told that Vyasa felt the necessity of composing the Mahabharata and the Srimad-Bhagavata. And for a similar reason, was the Ramayana composed. We believe what we see with our eyes, what we hear with our ears, what we perceive with the other organs, and what we feel from our hearts. We are incapable of believing anything else. Pure principles, though they may be eternal facts, are incapable of evoking the emotion of man. Hence, even the elite and the intelligentia of mankind today think of God in the Epic parlance, and not in the Upanishadic parlance. When you and I think of God, we think of the Epic God only and not the Upanishadic God or Vedic God. The meaning is that we think of a humanised relationship between ourselves and the Creator. When we dehumanise the Creator or take Him above what the human mind is capable of conceiving, the relationship between man and God gets snapped, and the vast majority amongst us, excepting perhaps the very few spiritual heroes, fall down to a level lower than that of the human being. So the need was felt to bring home to the mind of man, that concept of Perfection and Divinity, which can be contained in the human mind, in the form of human perfection, animated by the force of that which is superhuman. Such was the personality of Sri Rama, the superhuman element infusing a personality of a human being. It is difficult to understand this peculiar blend, just as it is difficult to understand Masters, Sages and adepts in Yoga and even spiritual life. This is because they are a blend of what we see and what we cannot see. What we see is the form of their lives and what we cannot see is the essence, the meaning and the significance of what they live.

In the Ramayana, we have such a contradictory picture of the personality of Rama, presented by Valmiki, where we are asked sometimes to look upon him as the perfected man and sometimes as a Perfection of divinity itself manifest. It is in the Yuddha Kanda of

Valmiki's Ramayana, (I am not talking of the Tulasidas Ramayana because that has a different approach altogether) for the first time, we have a proclamation divinity of Rama, where Mandodari in deep sorrow over the death of Ravana, her husband, exclaims that it is Narayana that has come as Nara which fact is unknown to Ravana and due to his ignorance, he has mistaken Rama for human being. The contradiction which Valmiki brings out is that while he puts these words in the mouth of Mandodari, he puts a different type of statement in the mouth of Rama himself. When the whole theme is over, the drama has been played, Brahma comes and speaks to Rama, "Thou art Lord Narayana, Thy play in this world is over, and we seek Thy entry back into Vaikuntha." And Rama says in reply: "What are you speaking? I do not know anything. Am I Narayana! I think I am only a man - *Atmanam Manusham Manye*. Whatever you may think or speak about me, I think I am a man, I am a human being." These are the words of Rama himself. While Rama himself is thinking that he is only a man, Brahma speaks of Him as Narayana and wants Him to go back to His Abode, as His drama in this world is over. These interesting dramatic contradictions are brought into play by the genius of Valmiki, deliberately to fulfil the purpose of the Epic. Otherwise, there would be no meaning in the play itself.

It was not at all given to Rama to proclaim Himself as Narayana. That was not the purpose of the Avatara at all. It was to defeat the purpose of Ravana who had a poor opinion of human beings. Being a demon, he thought that human beings and monkeys were only a morsel of food for him. On account of this, he deliberately omitted to include men and monkeys in the list of his possible future enemies, when he asked for boons from Brahma. "May I not have death from any one, Gods, Kinnaras, Kimpurushas, Daityas, Danavas, all superhuman beings" - was the boon he asked. But he never said anything about monkeys and men. He thought: "They are only food for me, what need to fear them." Now, this neglect, this contemptuous attitude of Ravana towards aspects through which God could manifest Himself and does manifest Himself was the occasion for God Himself to teach humanity that He can work miracles even through the lowest of His manifestations. And the other side of the teaching of the Epic is that through humanity we reach Divinity.

Sometimes, we are told that the ten Avataras, incarnations of Vishnu beginning from the incarnation as Fish, the Matsya Avatara; the incarnation as Tortoise, the Kurma Avatara; the incarnation as Boar, the Varaha Avatara and so on, represent the process of the evolution of the human consciousness to the perfection of its Realisation. From this point of view of understanding of human nature and its evolution, the stage which was enacted by Rama, God in human form, was the penultimate step which Consciousness takes in its attempt at Self-realisation. He showed what human perfection is and how it becomes a stepping-stone to divine perfection. This we can know only when we read the whole of the Ramayana from the beginning to the end, reading also between the lines. Most of us do not know what the whole Ramayana is. We know only some outline, that Rama was a son of Dasaratha, he learnt archery from Visvamitra, married Sita, who was stolen by Ravana and then he made friendship with Sugriva and Hanuman, crossed the ocean, went to Lanka and then killed Ravana. This is all the Ramayana we know. Everyone knows only this much of it. But this is not the whole of Ramayana, whether it is the Ramayana of Tulasidas, Valmiki or anyone else. The real Ramayana is the spirit that is manifest in its words when you read the original of the masters. Whether it is Kamban's Ramayana or Tulasidas Ramayana or Valmiki Ramayana, ultimately it makes no difference, because it is said that all great men think alike. All these masters thought alike and they had a common purpose. One wrote in Tamil, another wrote in Hindi and the third wrote in Sanskrit, but the spirit expressed by these is similar and common, and it is directed to the same purpose

of transforming human nature into divine perfection.

I will now give an outline of the background of the writing of the Ramayana and the purpose behind the Epics of India. The other more important aspect relevant to a Sadhaka or seeker of Truth is that Sri Ramanavami, the birthday of Sri Ramachandra, is a day for divine contemplation. It is an occasion for intensified contemplation on the Spirit, God, or Sri Rama, as we call Him. It is a day of self-control and an occasion to raise our emotions, feelings and understanding to the level of the understanding of Valmiki or Tulasidas or Kamban, or of Sri Rama Himself. These contemplations are processes by which Consciousness, our own Self establishes relationship with the powers of the cosmos. The observation of the birthday of Sri Rama or the celebration of Sri Ramanavami is not a day of mere rejoicing or feasting, but a day of spiritual contemplation and self-restraint, by which we become en-rapport with the forces of the world. What was the power of Rama? Why was He so powerful and forceful? We say that He was an incarnation of God. But, why is God so powerful, while we are not? What is the difference? What makes these masters, heroes and incarnations centres of such energy, force and activity, while we are the contrary of it? The simple reason is that they are en-rapport with the forces of the universe, while we are cut off from them. They are facing the light of the sun and so they drink the nectar of the rays of the sun. But we turn our backs to the sun and see only darkness. This is the difference between mortal men and divine incarnations who are immortal, eternal emblems moving on this earth. So, in these contemplations today, as on similar such occasions, we should recharge the cells of our personality by introducing a new light of divinity into ourselves. Let not the day pass in waste, in idle talk or merely hearing a few words about Ramayana from someone. These celebrations are only indications for you, pointers to you, to help you to raise yourself up to a state higher than you were yesterday. If your days have not been spent without getting at least an iota of satisfaction or contentment that you have become a worthy child of God, in His eyes, you should consider your life as unworthily spent.

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One of the central questions in your spiritual diary should be, 'What am I in the eyes of God?' But this question is never put and you do not want to know the answer. You always wish to know, 'What am I in the eyes of people, in the eyes of my neighbours, in the eyes of the public? What does the country think about me? What do the vote-givers think about me? What is the international opinion about me?' Never for a moment you think, 'What does God think about me'. Let this be your contemplation. The moment you begin to know what God thinks about you, you will not speak afterwards; your mouth will be hushed. It will be hushed for two reasons. One reason is that you would look so small and insignificant and a nothing and all your importance vanishes in toto, when you compare yourself in His light. The other reason is that you would feel lifted up into a state of joy that the time has come for you to realise your true duty as a human being, which is nothing but realisation of God. This is what Sri Rama teaches us in the 'Rama Gita', as His

final message - how the soul should come out of the cage of flesh, like a lion breaking its boundaries and roaring in its majesty or power. The moment you begin to recognise your true status in this world, you become powerful, not because you own large wealth or you have a seat in the Parliament or in the cabinet, but because you have a seat in the constitution of the universe. When this seat is given to you, you become a member of the government of the cosmos. And here the powers are not given by the votes or plebiscite. People do not raise hands to make you a member. Something else, mysterious and miraculous, takes place. Your cells become revitalised. They get charged with a power unknown totally upto this time. Where from this power comes? It does not come from anywhere. You keep yourself open to the powers that 'are' and allow them to enter into you, while upto this time, you were preventing them from entering into you.

What are we doing now? It is something like building a house with four walls without any ventilation and sitting inside in pitch darkness while the sun is shining outside in all its might and glory. The sun has come up wanting to enlighten the whole world with its lustre and force. But we live in a dungeon covering ourselves with a blanket and closing our eyes so that the energy and the light of the sun may not have any effect on our personality. This is what we do in our relation to God and in our relationship with the forces of the universe. The forces of the world are just here, within this hall, wherever we are. They are not far away in the skies. You can keep yourself open to them or keep yourself shut to them. Thoughts which are directed to the body and to the centre of the personality called the ego, prevent the entry of universal forces into our personality, so that the more important we look in our own eyes, the more impervious we are to the entry of the forces of the cosmos. The bigger we are in the world, the worse we are from the point of view of spiritual strength and knowledge. Because, this self-importance, self-assertion, Ahamkara, personality-consciousness, body-consciousness, social-consciousness and status-consciousness - all these put together act as psychological barriers which shut off the forces of the cosmos from entering into us. These forces are not absent. They are just here, and the moment we think in terms of them, they enter into us. When we think in terms of our own personality, they run away from us. So contemplation on the Masters and Incarnations and the recognition of the forces of divinities which manifest as incarnations and sages are the ways in which a Sadhaka should observe Ramanavami, the day of God's incarnation or a celebration of a birthday of a superhuman Master. Our birth-right is to imbibe the grace of the Masters, to assume the contour and personality equal to theirs, to attain Sarupya or equality of personality with there, to become like them and to imbibe their characteristics by meditation on them.

"So the Epic of Ramayana is a long meditation on the superior manifestation of God in the form of Sri Ramachandra. Terror was Rama, thunderbolt was Rama - says Valmiki. But butter was Rama, a rose petal was Rama, all compassion was Rama - says the same sage Valmiki."

So the Epic of Ramayana is a long meditation on the superior manifestation of God in the form of Sri Ramachandra. Terror was Rama, thunderbolt was Rama - says Valmiki. But butter was Rama, a rose petal was Rama, all compassion was Rama - says the same sage Valmiki. In anger, Rama was fierce like fire - fire comparable only with the fire during the dissolution of the cosmos, and at the same time nobody could be so compassionate, good-hearted and simple as Rama himself was. This is the dramatic contradiction of personality which Valmiki introduces into his Epic, to bring out the greatness of the divine

personality. What are the characteristics of great men? They are harder than a diamond but softer than a lotus-petal. The great Masters are harder than a diamond and, therefore, you cannot do anything to them and they will never budge from their principles. You cannot shake them by your powerful logic and argumentation. This is only one side of these great Masters. The other side is that no person can be so good, merciful and tender-hearted as they, which characteristics are revealed in proper time. Such is the mysterious combination, a terrific manifestation of divinity combined with most perfect humane characteristics and features that we see in Sri Rama.

I had occasions to go through the beautiful descriptions of Valmiki Ramayana in Sanskrit, but I had less opportunities to go through the Tulasidas Ramayana. I believe that the comparisons and descriptions are almost similar. Without telling you what they actually want to tell you - this is the peculiarity of poets in general - they imply their meaning in words which, without your knowing, influence your emotions and the total personality. Slowly, without your knowing what is happening, the whole personality is shaken up from beginning to end when you read the Ramayana. You come out burnt and burnished, beautified and purified, because of a very graduated purificatory process which you undergo in your emotions and your understandings, when you pass from Kanda to Kanda in the Ramayana, until you reach the Pattabhisheka Kanda, the crowning glory of the Ramayana Epic.

I shall conclude with a prayer and a request. We are humble seekers, we are not Masters. We are small people trying to follow the footsteps of great Masters like Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj, in our own humble faltering way, trying to raise our minds to true devotion to God. In this attempt, let us be honest to ourselves. This is my prayer to my own self and to all. Honesty of conscience is the watchword of a Sadhaka. Honesty of conscience has a very important significance which we have to make note of. Many times we may look honest, but we are not really honest in the deepest core of our feelings. Then it upsets the whole structure of our endeavour in the life spiritual. Because, spiritual life is nothing but the life that we lead in the bottom of our being, and not the life that we live in our rooms or in our offices or colleges or factories. What our conscience speaks is our spiritual voice. And if our conscience is not honest and pure, well, you will see the sure outcome of it, an utter failure in the spiritual path. It is difficult to be true to one's conscience, because of the circumstances under which people generally live. The pressure of society, the needs of the body and the weaknesses of flesh are such that it is difficult to be true to one's conscience. It only means that it is difficult to live the spiritual life, to have divine characteristics imbibed into our personality, and to be a devotee of God; in short, it is difficult to realise God.

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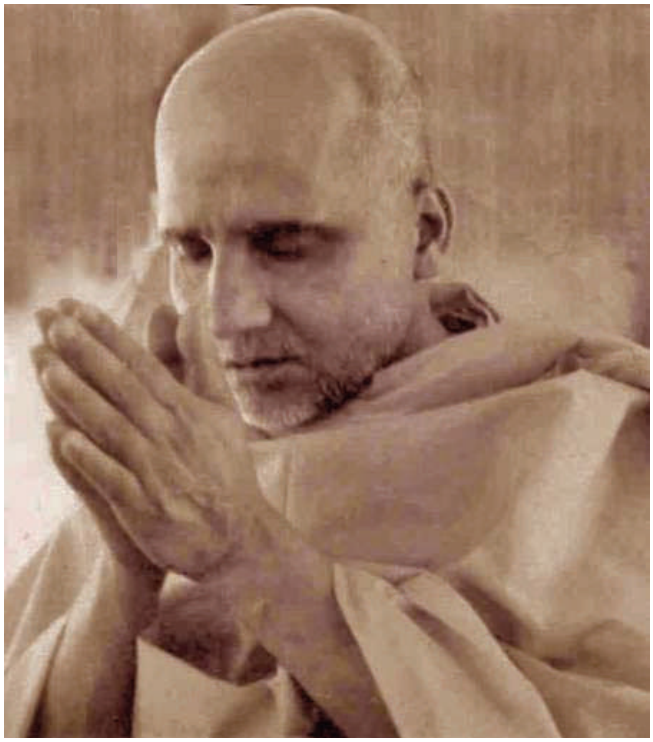
For this purpose - the purpose of overcoming these unavoidable limitations of our personality - the remedy is to contemplate on the lives of saints. What a difficult but ideal life, saint Tulasidas lived? What a hard and painful life all our saints lived, inspite of the great obstacles placed on their path by the vast majority of the public! How difficult it is to be a man of God, can be known only when we study the lives of saints. To be a man of God, is to be a fool in the eyes of the public. This seems to be a necessary outcome of turning one's face towards God. "*Yasyaham anugrihnami tasya vittam haramyaham*" - "When I want to shed My grace on any person,

I deprive him of all his pleasure-centres," is a famous statement reported to have been made by Lord Narayana Himself as recorded in the Srimad-Bhagavata. What are our pleasure-centres? We know them very well. The greatest fortress of our pleasure is our own personality-consciousness, our egoism. We have many other pleasure-centres, no doubt; but the greatest among all of them is what we call, in common parlance, Izzat, dignity of personality, self-respect. This self-respect was unknown to great masters and saints. They respected God and so they were humiliated in the eyes of people, put down as 'no-ones' in the eyes of the world. What torture and what suffering they underwent - it is something terrifying, if you think over it. We have only to read the lives of a few saints of the past. We can read even the life of such a recent personality as Swami Sivanandaji. While it is easy to think that we believe in God, it is really difficult to be true to the salt. Hence, may we take these auspicious occasions as occasions for honest Sadhana of our own conscience and spirit also, and not the Sadhana of the hands, the limbs and the feet alone. We have the Sadhana of the limbs of the body, in the form of ritualistic worship with waving the lights in the temple, opening a scripture and reading it loudly through the vocal organ and paying obeisance physically by Sashtanga Namaskara through the body. All these are beautiful, wonderful and very necessary. But they become null and void, if the conscience is set at naught and is opposed in its spirit to all our outer performances of rituals and religious observances. God is within us, in the deepest root of our being, and to turn to Him would be to turn to ourselves, in our essence, finally. This should be the spirit of Sadhana and devotion to God and nothing can be more difficult, because it is the death of the individual personality. 'Die to live', as Gurudev Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj used to say. If you want to live in the Eternity, you have to die to the temporal, which means to say that you should die to all that you regard as beautiful, meaningful and valuable in this world. Who can do this! No ordinary man is prepared for this. No ordinary mortal can have the courage, the power and the strength to face the weaknesses of flesh, the foibles of human nature and the impetuosity of the human ego. Who can face these powerful demons! Who can face Ravana? No one, not all the gods, not even Indra could face him. And who are we! It is not a joke to face and overcome these great negative forces. They are awful - this is the only word we can use here. They are so terrifying that even a mere thought of them is enough to make one run away. Such is the terror that one has to meet with before one becomes fit for God-realisation. "The fear of the Absolute", said Plotinus, a great saint of the West. Entering the Absolute is like entering a lion's den, from which you cannot come back. Fierce is the ocean, fierce is the lion, fierce is the conflagration of fire, fierce is love of God. No one can love God, unless one is prepared to die, wholly and totally, to the so-called good, beautiful and pleasant in this world, to this body and to the ego. Hard is the job! Difficult is the task! God's grace is the only saving factor.



So, may we pray to Him, the Almighty, that He may bless us with this uncanny courage, knowledge and strength, that we may realise Him in all His Glory in this very birth.