



Reach

SAYINGS AND TEACHINGS

Sri Ramakrishna on Oneness of All Religions

All religions are true. God can be reached by different religions. Many rivers flow by many ways but they fall into the sea. They are all one.

Source: *Great Sayings: Words of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda*; The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture; Calcutta; page 18.

Sri Sarada Devi on All Paths Leading to the Same Goal

Holy men are born on earth to show people the way to God. They teach differently. There are many paths leading to the same goal. Therefore the teachings of all saints are true.

Source: *Great Sayings: Teachings of Sri Sarada Devi: The Holy Mother*, Sri Ramakrishna Mission Math, Mylapore; page 20.

Swami Vivekananda on Religion as Birthright

Religion, the common inheritance, the universal birthright of the race, must be brought free to the door of everybody.

Source: *Teachings of Swami Vivekananda by Swami Mumukshananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta; page 40.

Torah on Seeking Revenge

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

Source: Leviticus (Wayiqra) 19:18. <https://kidadl.com/quotes/inspirational-torah-quotes-from-part-one-of-the-jewish-bible>

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We welcome you all to the Vedanta Movement in Australia, as epitomized in the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, and invite you to involve yourselves and actively participate in the propagation of the Universal Message of Vedanta.

1. NEWS FROM AUSTRALIAN CENTRES 11 MARCH 2022 TO 10 JULY 2022

ADELAIDE

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Contact: Dr Raman Sharma on (08) 8431 9775

Mrs Pathma Iswaran on (08) 8379 5336

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Daily Activities

- The Centre functions from 7.30am-12.30pm and 4.00-8.00pm. The evening vesper service to Sri Ramakrishna is performed from 7.00-7.30 pm followed by *bhajans*, devotional reading and meditation.

Regular Activities

- Swami Manyananda conducted classes and discussions on the *Vedanta Sara* - 'Fundamentals of Vedanta' every Wednesday from 11:00 am to 12:00 noon.
- Swami Manyananda also conducted classes on the *Narada Bhakti Sutras* on Sundays from 11:00 am.
- Every alternate Saturday, Swami Manyananda conducted a reading and discussion session on *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* before the evening *aratrikam*.
- On Sundays Swami Manyananda conducted classes on the *Vivekachudamani* from 5:30 to 6:30 pm.

Celebrations

- *Rama Navami* was observed on Sunday, 10 April 2022. In the morning special puja, *bhajans*, *pushpanjali* and distribution of prasada were conducted. In the evening the programme included evening *aratrikam*, *Rama Nama Sanskritanam*, *bhajans* and prasada distribution.

Other Activities

- The City of Marion organised an 'Interfaith Forum in the Spirit of Harmony' on Wednesday, 23 March 2022. Swami Manyananda represent-



Rama Navami in Adelaide



Swami Manyananda and others at an Interfaith Function in Adelaide

ed Hinduism at the forum. The representatives talked about the commonalities among Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and the Baha'i faiths. The forum was aimed at promoting respectful relationships and social cohesion, by raising awareness about what diverse faiths have in common, as well as some unique differences.

BRISBANE

96 Vedanta Drive, (next to 2 Poppy Crescent),
Springfield Lakes, QLD 4300

Email: info@vedantabrisbane.org

Contact: Swami Atmeshananda (07) 3818 9986

URL: <http://vedantabrisbane.org>

Daily Activities

- Daily meditation and the chanting of hymns were conducted between 6:15 am and 7:15 am.
- Vesper service (*aratrikam*), *bhajans*, and readings from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* were held between 6:30 pm and 7:15 pm.

Regular Activities

- Sunday mornings:- (a) Yoga class from 8:00 am to 9:15 am. (b) *Srimad-Bhagavad Gitā* Class (10:00 am—11:00 am). (c) *Bala Sangha* or children's classes and *Yuva Sangha* (10:00 am—11:00 am during school term). (d) Hindi language classes fortnightly from 11:00 am to 12:15 pm.
- A class on the *Brahma Sutras* was conducted on Tuesdays from 11 a.m. to 12 noon. In the evening Yoga classes were conducted from 6:30 to 7:45 pm.
- A Vedic Chanting class was held online on Wednesdays from 8:30 am to 9:30 am.
- A monthly *satsang* was held at Sunnybank Hills on the first Monday of every month at 19, Scribbly Gum Street.
- Classes on *Meditation and Spiritual Life* were held from 7:30 pm — 8:30 pm at 134 Fleming Rd, Chapel Hill, Qld, on the last Friday of every month.
- A reading from the lives of the direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna was conducted on their birth anniversaries after the evening *aratrikam*.
- Chanting of the *Sri Rama Nama Sanskirtanam* was held fortnightly at the Centre on *ekadashi* days (7:30 pm — 8:00 pm).
- Devotees took turns in decorating and worshipping Sri Ramakrishna's image every week at the Sri Selva Vinayakar temple, South Mac-

lean, Qld.

- Swami Atmeshananda conducted *Vivekachudamani* classes for the Vedanta Group at Toowoomba on the first Wednesday of every month.
- A class on the *Ashtavakra Gita* was conducted at 101 Sharpless Drive, Springfield Lakes, on a fixed day of the month.
- On alternate Saturdays, the *Bhagavad Gita* was studied by the Vedanta group on the Gold Coast from 5.30 p.m. to 6.30 p.m.
- On alternate Fridays, the Centre's volunteers cooked food at its soup kitchen for the benefit of the needy. An average of 100 meals per week are cooked by volunteers, packed into containers and frozen. They are distributed free of cost through the Westside Community Centre, the Base Youth Support Services and Serving Our People (SOP).
- Mrs Malarville Kandaiah of Sri Abbinayia Barathalaayam conducted classical Indian Bharatanatyam dance lessons every Wednesday evening in the community hall, Vedanta Centre. Classes are available for all ages. For inquiries please email Malar: ville7560@yahoo.com.au
- Every Friday the Centre's food bank distributed groceries to the needy. An average of 12 grocery hampers along with cooked food and free bread were distributed to the needy. From November 2021 this was provided on an 'on demand' basis.
- The Maa Sarada's kitchen prepares and sells food at a reasonable cost to people. On an average, about 110 persons avail themselves of this service. The kitchen is efficiently managed by volunteers.
- On Fridays, a Justice of the Peace (JP) renders service at the Centre from 10 am to 11 a.m. People needing the service access this free service.

Other Activities

- Swami Atmeshananda attended an event organized by the Queensland Faith Communities Council (QFCC) on 30 March 2022. He interacted with several faith leaders including the Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, The Rev. Mark Coleridge, who was the chief guest at the event.



Swami Atmeshananda and others at the Queensland Faith Communities Council (QFCC) in Brisbane

- The Hridayam school of dance invited Swami Atmeshananda to be a guest in a dance event on 2 April 2022 in aid of the Toowoomba Hospital paediatric ward.
- A holiday programme for children was conducted at the Centre from 4 to 8 April 2022. About 15 children and their parents attended these activities.



A Workshop for High School Girls in Brisbane

conducted their annual New Year's celebrations (Vishu) at the Coorparoo College on 16 April 2022. Swami Atmeshananda was invited as the guest of honour.

- An online talk on "Ramakrishna Movement in



New Year's Celebration of the Organisation of Hindu Malayalees (OHM) in Brisbane

Australia, NZ & Fiji" was delivered by Swami Atmeshananda as part of a three day webinar from 1st May to 3rd May 2022 organised by Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, UK, to commemorate the 125th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Ramakrishna Mission on 1st May 1897.



A Holiday Programme for Children in Brisbane

- A workshop for high school girls was conducted on 15 April 2022. Discussion sessions on body image, self-esteem, hygiene, bullying and resilience were facilitated by female leaders, teachers and seniors. Ten girls participated in the event.
- The Organisation of Hindu Malayalees (OHM)
- Sri Ma Sarada Darshan is an exciting new addition in the lower ground hall of the Centre. This is a colourful display of 40 prints depicting the life of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. We are grateful to Bunnings Springfield for the donation of the picture hanging system for this display. Visitors can view the Sri Ma Sarada Darshan every Saturday morning from 10am

to 1pm. The pictures are numbered 1 to 40 in chronological order.

- Devotees of the Centre installed a water fountain on the front lawn of the ashram. A Mandala garden is also being planned to supplement the fountain.

Celebrations

- *Sri Rama Navami* was celebrated on 10 April 2022 at the Centre. After puja, devotees participated in singing of *Sri Rama Nama Sanskirtanam* and distribution of prasad.



Rama Navami in Brisbane

- Sri Sankaracharya's birth anniversary was observed on 6 May 2022. On the occasion, worship, a talk on the life and teachings of Sri Sankaracharya, devotional music and distribution of prasad were conducted.
- The birth anniversary of *Bhagawan Buddha* was observed on 15 May 2022. Devotees participated in chantings from the *Dhammapada*, readings from the life and teachings of the Buddha, worship, devotional music, guided meditation and distribution of prasad.

CANBERRA

17 Bean Crescent, Mckellar, ACT 2617

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Contact: Mr Jaishankar Venkataraman 6258 7612/0433 593 860

Regular Activities

- On account of the Covid 19 pandemic the *Bhagavad Gita* classes have been suspended temporarily. Friends and devotees are accessing the classes online. When the classes recommence they will be held at the Belconnen Community Meeting Room, 12 Chandler St, Belconnen, ACT. Monthly lectures, once scheduled, are advertised by e-mail.

MELBOURNE

5-7 Angus Ave, Ringwood East, VIC 3135

Email: vedanta.melb@gmail.com

Contact: Swami Sunishthananda (03) 8684 9594

URL <http://www.vedantamelbourne.org>

Regular Activities

- Vesper service (*aratrikam*), *bhajans*, reading from the Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, Swami Vivekananda literature and meditation were conducted between 7:00 pm and 8:00 pm daily.
- The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* was discussed online on Tuesdays from 7:30 pm to 8:30 pm.
- An online class on *Mundaka Upanishad* was conducted on Thursdays from 7:30 pm to 8:30 pm.
- An online scriptural class on Sundays from 10:00 am to 11:00 am on the *Bhagavad Gita*.
- Guided meditation was conducted online on Wednesdays and Saturdays from 7:30 pm to 8:00 pm and on Sundays from 9:30 am to 10:00 am.

Celebrations

- On the evening of Sunday, 10 April 2022, *Rama Navami* was celebrated at the Ashwood Hall,

Ashwood, Victoria. The programme included evening vesper service followed by puja, *Rama Nama Sanskirtanam* and *bhajans*. Devotees shared *prasad* after the event.

- On the morning of Sunday, 15 May 2022, *Buddha Purnima* was celebrated at Ashwood Hall, Ashwood, Victoria. The programme included chanting the *Prajnaparamita Stotram*, guided meditation, talk on 'Be kind to your mind – The Buddha Way' and Question-and Answer Session. Devotees shared *prasad* after the event.



A Cultural Event in Melbourne

formed by the healing touch of Swami Vivekananda, was staged on 9 and 10 April 2022 at Clayton Theatre, Clayton, Victoria. It was a part of SPANDAN – a collaborative cultural event organized in partnership with Australian Creative and Experimental Review Society (ACERS) and Bengali Association of Victoria (BAV).

- Swami Sunishthananda represented the Hindu Faith in an Interfaith Meet organized by the Sikh Interfaith Council to celebrate Vaisakhi at Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji Gurudwara, Keysborough, Victoria on 16 April 2022.
- 'Reconnecting Communities' – A Cultural Event was organized on 1 May 2022, at 4.30 pm at Clayton Community Hall, Clayton, Victoria.



Buddha Purnima in Melbourne



Parash: The Touchstone

Other Activities

- 'PARASH: The Touchstone' - A play depicting the life of Emma Calve, a famous French Opera singer of the 19th Century, whose life was trans-

PERTH

51 Golf View Street, Yorkine, WA 6060

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Regular Activities:

- *Aratrikam* was conducted each night by a person or family taking the responsibility for it.
- *Satsangs* were held on 10 April 2022 and 15 May 2022. The programmes included *aratrikam*, *bhajans* and *prasad* distribution.

SYDNEY

2 Stewart Street, Ermington, 2115

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Contact: (02) 8197 7351

URL: www.vedantaaustralia.org

Daily Activities

- The shrine was open from 7:00 am to 1:00 pm and 4:00 pm to 8:30 pm seven days a week.
- Vesper service (*aratrikam*), *bhajans*, and readings from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* were conducted from 7:00 pm to 8:00 pm. The times change on special occasions.

Regular Activities

- Swami Sridharananda conducted his study of the *Srimad-Bhagavad Gitā* on Sundays between 9:30 am and 10:30 am. Due to the current restrictions owing to Covid 19, the talks were pre-recorded and uploaded to the Centre's website and Youtube Channel.
- *Sri Rama Nama Sanskirtanam* was conducted on *ekadashi* days after the vesper service.
- Devotees also received spiritual counselling and guidance.
- The quarterly newsletter entitled *Reach* is compiled and published.
- The Centre also has a library containing books of the Ramakrishna-Sarada-Vivekananda literature, philosophy and religion.

Celebrations

- The Centre celebrated *Rama Navami* on 10 April 2022. The function included worship, *bhajans*, singing of the full *Rama Nama Sanskirtanam* and *prasad* distribution.

Other Activities

- Swami Vedamritananda (popularly known as Bob Maharaj) from the Vedanta Centre of Southern California, Hollywood was a guest at the Vedanta Centre of Sydney between March 2020 to March 2022. His prolonged stay was on



Rama Navami in Sydney



Swami Vedamritananda (Bob Maharaj) in Sydney

account of the Covid 19 pandemic. During his stay he involved himself in the activities of the Vedanta Centre, being active in the garden and lecturing on Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary.

- Swami Manyananda from Adelaide visited the Centre from 5 June to 11 June 2022.



Swami Sridharanandaji and Others

2. FEATURE ARTICLE: JUDAISM

(COMPILED FROM VARIOUS SOURCES)

Judaism is a very ancient religion that goes back to Abraham and his family. It received great impetus through Moses. Moses not only received the 10 Commandments from God, the core of the Jewish scripture, but led the Jews in slavery in Egypt to the promised land. This compilation traces the historical context of Judaism including the ancient temple in which sacrifices were made. It then concentrates on the modern practice of Judaism in synagogues with the various articles of worship and facets of belief. There is also some discussion of the scripture and the different strands of Judaism functioning in current times.

Historical Context

Judaism began about 4000 years ago with the Hebrew people in the Middle East. Abraham, a Hebrew man, is considered the father of the Jewish faith because he promoted the central idea of the Jewish faith: that there is one God. At the time many people in the Middle East worshipped many gods. It is said that Abraham and his wife Sarah, who were old and childless at the time, were told by God that their children would be as plentiful as the stars in the sky and that they would live in a land of their own -- the Promised Land. This gradually came true.

Abraham's son, Isaac had a son, Jacob, also called Israel. In this way the descendants of Abraham came to be known as the Israelites. God promised the Israelites he would care for them as long as they obeyed God's laws. While still traveling, the Hebrews lived in Egypt where they were enslaved. Moses, a Hebrew, was chosen by God to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Moses led the Hebrew people out of the Sinai Desert toward the promised land. At Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the Law which would guide the

Israelites to today. The laws were called the Ten Commandments and form the basis of the Torah, the book of Jewish law.

It took many years for the Israelites to finally get to what they thought was the Promised Land - Canaan. After some fighting the Jews established the Israelite kingdom. After many years, Canaan was conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians and then eventually the Romans. The Israelites once again found themselves enslaved, this time by Babylonians. The Israelites were then taken over by Romans who destroyed much of what had been built in Jerusalem by the Israelites. Most of the Jews were scattered all over the region and eventually moved from place to place to avoid persecution which continues to this day. The dispersion of the Jews is called the Diaspora.

Israel is a very sacred place to Jewish people. Jews who do not live there try to visit at some point in their lives. In particular, Jerusalem is important because it is the ancient capital of Israel and the site of the original temple.

The Temple and Faith

The Temple was the central site of Jewish worship in Jerusalem, where pilgrimages would be made at least three times a year and where sacrifices would be offered. The first exile from Jerusalem and destruction of the first Temple occurred around 586BCE when the leadership of the community were led off to Babylon. The Iraqi Jewish community thus considers itself the first Diaspora community and until the 20th century maintained a significant Jewish presence.

The second Temple was destroyed by the Romans around 70CE and Diaspora communities slowly became the norm, although communities remained in the land of Israel. With the destruction of the second Temple, Rabbinic Judaism really came into its own, transforming Jewish custom, festivals and theology to adapt to a world without sacrifices and the focal point of Temple worship. This process continues to the present day, with Jewish texts and learning exploring what Judaism can mean in the world and the communities Jews find themselves living in, while drawing on the ancient wisdom

of all that has come before.

It was during the Roman rule of Judea that Jewish communities began to take root in Europe, though the Italian Jewish community is thought to have begun in the city of Rome around 139BCE. The Italian Jewish community considers itself to be the oldest in Europe. Jewish communities began appearing across Europe around 2000 years ago, at times enjoying relative prosperity, as well as suffering persecution and oppression.

Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, the synagogue (derived from a Greek word meaning “assembly”), or Jewish prayer and study house, became the focal point of Jewish life. The role of the priesthood, so central to the Temple service, diminished, and the rabbi (literally, “my master”), or scholar versed in Jewish law, rose to a position of prominence in the community.

The Western Wall of the ancient temple remains. This is where the tablets that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments were stored in a golden box called the Ark of the Covenant. Jewish people make pilgrimages to this wall. It is also called the Wailing Wall because people grieve the destruction of the temple and other persecution of the Jews.

Worship in Synagogues and Dietary Observances

Some Jewish people go to the synagogue daily, some weekly

on Shabbat, and some periodically on Shabbat and on special holy days. Some rituals, like the blessing said at the Shabbat meal and the observance of Passover, take place in Jewish homes.

Synagogue services are led by a rabbi and usually a cantor, who sings traditional and contemporary melodies. There are prayers, songs, chants and readings, as well as a sermon or discussion by the rabbi or members of the community.

The Torah is read ritually in synagogues three times a week, on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays, following a yearly cycle through the entirety (or a third, depending on community) of the Five Books of Moses. Additionally, on holidays, special sections are read in synagogues that tie to the themes or origin story of the holiday being observed.

Jewish prayer services are conducted in the Hebrew language in the more traditional denominations of Judaism, and include varied levels of English (or the native language of the community’s Jews) in denominations such as Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal. A rabbi can lead services but is not required. On weekdays, daily prayers are recited three times—morning, afternoon, and evening—with a fourth prayer service added on the Sabbath and holidays. While many prayers can be recited individually, certain prayers and activities, such as the reading of the Torah, the mourner’s prayer (the *kaddish*), require a *minyan* or quorum of ten Jewish adults. As with the distinctions regarding English in the prayer ser-

vice, some traditional denominations only count male adults in a *minyan*, while others count all adults.

Other central aspects of Jewish ritual observance include the dietary laws (laws of *kashrut*) which forbid consumption of certain foods (like pork or shellfish), prohibit the mixing of milk and meat, and prescribe special rules for the slaughter of meat and poultry. Denominations and individual Jews may or may not follow these dietary laws strictly.

Many Jewish men wear a skull cap or *kippah* when praying. Some wear it all the time. It is a sign of being in the presence of God.

The *Tallit*, or prayer shawl, is used in worship. The fringe on the shawl reminds Jewish people to obey God’s law.

The six-pointed *Star of David* is an important Jewish symbol said to be from the shield of King David, the Israelite king who established Jerusalem as the capital city of the Israelites.

Features of Synagogues

- The *Holy Ark* with one or more Torah scrolls, covered by curtains.
- A six-pointed star, the *Star of David*, is often found both inside and outside synagogues.
- An *eternal light* in front of the ark, which represents the light which led the Hebrew people through the Sinai and was in the original temple, is kept lit at all times.
- A *reading table*, at the front or in the middle of the sanctu-

ary, sometimes on a stage, or bimah.

- A replica of the *Ten Commandments*.
- A special seat for the rabbi.

No images of God, since images are forbidden in the commandments.

Beliefs and Sacred texts

Jewish people believe in the *Torah*, which were given to the Israelites at Sinai. They believe they must follow God's laws which govern daily life. Later legal books, written by rabbis, determine the law as it applies to life in each new place and time. The *Torah* is written on scrolls and kept in a special cabinet called the *aron hakodish*, the holy ark, in synagogues. The *Torah* is read with a pointer called a *yad* (hand) to keep it from being spoiled. Each week, one section is read until the entire *Torah* is completed and the reading begins again.

The Ten Commandments, as written in the *Torah*, are:

1. Worship no other God but Me.
2. Do not make images to worship.
3. Do not misuse the name of God.
4. Observe the Sabbath Day (Saturday). Keep it Holy.
5. Honor and respect your father and mother.

6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not accuse anyone falsely. And do not tell lies about other people.
10. Do not envy other's possessions.

The *Tenakh* is the ancient collection of writings that are sacred to the Jews. The word *Tenakh* comes from the three first letters of the three books included in this text: the *Torah*, plus the *Nev'im* (prophets) and the *Ki'tuvim* (writings, which include histories, prophecies, poems, hymns and sayings).

The *Talmud* is also an important collection of Jewish writings. Written about 2000 years ago, it is a recording of the rabbis' discussion of the way to follow the *Torah* at that time. Later texts, the *Mishnah Torah* and the *Shulhan Aruch*, are recordings of rabbinic discussions from later periods.

Judaism: Celebrations and Festivals

Jewish festivals and celebrations centre around important events in the history of the Jews.

Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year festival which usually takes place in September or October.

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement during which Jewish people fast, pray, and atone for their sins, asking God for forgiveness. This happens ten days after *Rosh Hashanah*.

Passover or Pesach is in the Spring and marks the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, the giving of the Ten Commandments and the journey to Israel. The *Hagaddah*, which is the story of the exodus from Egypt, is read at this celebration, which takes the form of a ritual meal. There are many ritual objects which enable the family to experience the Exodus as they sit around the dinner table.

The *seder meal* is an important ceremony on the first night of Passover celebrations. The egg symbolizes a new beginning. The roasted lamb bone is a reminder that God told the Israelites to put blood on their doorpost so that the angel of death would "pass over" their home. The horseradish, which tastes bitter, is a reminder of the Jewish people's time in slavery. The salt water symbolizes tears.

Hanukkah is the festival of lights. It is held in late November or December. When the temple was rededicated after a period of persecution, the eternal light was rekindled but there was only enough oil for a few days. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days, until more oil could be found. The *Menorah*, a candelabra with eight candles representing the eight days, plus an additional candle to light the others, is a central focus for prayers said during the nights of *Hanukkah*.

Important passages in Jewish life are marked by special observances. There are specific traditions for the birth of a child and for when someone dies.

Bar mitzvah and *Bat mitzvah* ceremonies mark a child's thirteenth birthday (in some traditions, a

girl's twelfth birthday). The first act of adulthood is reading from the Torah scroll during services.

All Jewish holy days begin at sundown and end at sundown. The *Shabbat* begins at sundown each Friday and lasts until dark on Saturday. There is a special *Sabbath* meal which includes special foods, songs and readings and prayers. Families hold this ceremony together, beginning with the blessing of *Shabbat* candles, wine and bread (*challah*).

Three basic groups of Jewish people who have a different under-

standing of the interpretation of the Torah.

Orthodox Jews believe that all of the practices in the *Torah* which it is practical to obey must be obeyed without question.

Conservative and Reform Jews believe that the ancient laws and practices have to be interpreted for modern life with inclusion of contemporary sources and with more concern with community practices than with ritual practices.

Reform Jews also allow everyone

to sit together, men and women, and both Hebrew and the local language are spoken in services.

Source:

<https://www.uri.org/kids/world-religions/jewish-beliefs>

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-judaism>

<https://www.onelittleangel.com/wisdom/quotes/book.asp?mc=474>

<https://>

www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Judaism

3. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM DEVOTEES AND FRIENDS: SRI RAMAKRISHNA: MERGING IN SILENCE AND EMERGING IN LOVE —APARNA MITRA (FROM MELBOURNE)

The Vedanta Centre of Sydney, Melbourne Chapter, celebrated Sri Ramakrishna's birth anniversary with an interfaith meeting on 5 March 2022. The name of the meeting was 'Merging in Silence, Emerging in Love'. It was funded by the Ministry of Multicultural Affairs, Government of Victoria, and was held at Knox Gardens Community Hall. This article is the text of Aparna Mitra, who was the Master of Ceremonies', introductory remarks. It deals with the avatarhood or incarnationhood of Sri Ramakrishna, especially when combined with his human aspect, culminating in the founding and motto of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. The Ramakrishna Mission celebrates its 125 years of service in 2022-23.

"This is the story of a phenomenon" said Christopher Isherwood, the Anglo-American poet and playwright, part of Hollywood's smart set in the middle of the last century, the man who collaborated with Auden in composing three verse dramas and the writer of the book "Sri Ramakrishna and His Disciples."

Isherwood goes on to say, "Sri Ramakrishna was extraordinary and mysterious; I believe, or am

at least strongly inclined to believe, that he was what his disciples declared that he was: an incarnation of God upon earth. I only ask you approach Ramakrishna with the same open-minded curiosity you might feel about any highly unusual human being. Dismiss from your mind, as far as you are able, such categories as holy-unholy, sane-insane, wise-foolish, pure-impure, positive-negative, useful-useless. Just say to yourself as you read: this, too, is human-

ly possible. Then later, if you like, consider the implications of that possibility for the rest of the human species."¹

Isherwood calls Sri Ramakrishna an incarnation of God, what we Hindus call an avatar. Who is an avatar? Sri Krishna says famously in the Gita

Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati bhārata |

Abhyathanamadharmasya tadatma-

nam srijamyaham ||
Paritranaya sadhunang vinashay
cha dushkritam |
Dharmasangsthanarthay sam-
bhabami yuge yuge ||

“I come whenever dharma is threatened. I come whenever the dark forces of adharma rear their head. I come to protect the good and to destroy evil. I come again and again to establish religion and righteousness.”

Throughout history, avatars have been born in every age and in every land. Sri Ramakrishna was an avatar just as Sri Krishna before him or Christ or Buddha or Nanak. Sri Ramakrishna, in his inimitable style, explains the concept of an avatar with the help of a homely story of the three friends.² Three friends were going on a journey and they came across a great wall. They did not know what lay on the other side of the wall. So, with great difficulty one of them clambered up the wall. He must have seen a wonderful sight for he beamed in delight and immediately jumped to the other side. The other two were mystified. Then the second friend went and climbed the wall and again he cried out in great joy and jumped to the other side. The bemused third friend wondered what had happened to his friends. He too climbed, and he too saw on the other side, what can perhaps be only described as an ocean of

bliss. He was about to jump but then he thought of the poor villagers he would leave behind, their small cramped lives filled with suffering and pain and he thought who would give these miserable people the good news, who would tell them of the ocean of bliss that awaited them. So instead of jumping, he turned around and he went back. **This** is the avatar. The avatar comes not because he has to but because he cannot not come. He is moved by our suffering, his motive force is compassion. It is this compassion that marks out every avatar that the world has known. Think of Christ on the cross interceding with God for forgiveness for his tormentors, think of Buddha whose entire religion revolved around compassion and then think of Sri Ramakrishna. He is compassion cast in the human form. Sri Ramakrishna's story is the story of radical compassion.

But before we speak of His compassion let us remind ourselves of Sr Ramakrishna's *sadhana*, His arduous seeking of God, that period of spiritual striving that we see in every avatar's life. The question may well arise that if the avatar is God incarnate then He is already perfect. What need is there for Him to strive? He is spiritual perfection to begin with. The whole purpose of an incarnation is to show us the way to God, to con-

firm again that religion is true, that God can be realised. Now to do that, Sri Ramakrishna had to go through His *sadhana*. Was this play acting then? The traditional view is that the incarnation is always aware of his divine nature. But there is another view. Swami Saradananda, Sri Ramakrishna's disciple and his biographer, says that one should not discount the human aspect of the avatar. It is not play-acting. When God descends in human form, He also takes on human attributes completely. So the urge to experience God, the struggles and frustrations on the path, the joys and the ecstasies, are all real. Whatever an ordinary human being experiences, whatever you or I would experience as a spiritual seeker, the avatar also experiences. Not in half measure, but completely, or as we say in Bengali, *sholo-aana*. Elsewhere Sri Ramakrishna says, “Do you know why I do so much? If I walk the whole mile then the devotees will be inspired to take a few tentative steps.”³ The avatar leads by example. We have heard Sri Ramakrishna himself describe his long years of spiritual striving when He was a priest at the Dakshineswar temple. He would weep bitterly before Ma Kali for *darshan*, for a vision of the Goddess. In those days it was common to see the young priest on the banks of the Ganga as the sun was setting, weep-

ing bitterly...“Mother another day has passed and you have still not revealed yourself to me”. People in Dakshineswar thought that the young priest was homesick, that the village boy was missing His mother. They did not know that He was crying for the Mother of the universe. He spent whole nights in meditation. He would later describe the yearning, the actual pain that He experienced during this period. In Bengal, we use a thin piece of cloth called the *gamchha* to dry ourselves after a bath. And once we have dried ourselves, we wring the *gamchha* to take the water out. Sri Ramakrishna described His yearning, His pain, as the sensation of His heart being wrung out like the *gamchha*. At one point, this pain was so excruciating that He seized upon the sword of Ma Kali and decided to cut off His head — what was the point of this life if God could not be experienced? It was at this point that He had his first great vision. He saw great waves of *jyoti*, wave upon wave of an other-worldly light, rushing towards Him and crashing and breaking on Him as he lost all outward consciousness. This is the state of samadhi. It is not a state of stupor or of being unconscious but in fact, is the exact opposite, it is a state of intense absorption. Sri Ramakrishna would go into samadhi every other day, sometimes several times a day. Imag-

ine. This is something that a yogi spends lifetimes to experience even once and here was Sri Ramakrishna going in and out of samadhi at ease. Many years later, Dr Mahendralal Sarkar, his physician and somewhat of a sceptic, would examine him during the samadhi state. Prising his fingers into Sri Ramakrishna’s eyes, he would fail to find the expected involuntary response. There was no pulse, there was no heartbeat, the breath had stopped and yet the mysterious, blissful God-man, was radiating joy.

Sri Ramakrishna has been described as a ‘spiritual glutton’, he wanted to taste the various paths through which God could be experienced. Not only did he practise the many paths within the bhakti tradition but also Tantra, Advaita, and Yoga. He even practised some of the contemplative and mystic traditions of Christianity and Islam. The one thing He was not, was a dabbler, a dilettante; whatever He took up, He saw through to the end. On every path that He walked, He breasted the highest hill. And when He had completed His journey, He declared that all paths were true and every path ultimately winds its way Godwards. There was not an ounce of sectarianism, of narrow bigotry, in this unlettered temple priest from a remote village in Bengal who lived almost two hundred years ago. Not once did he claim that

any one religion or denomination had a monopoly on the truth. Pause for a moment and reflect how incredible that is, how extraordinary and mysterious.

What can we say about Thakur Sri Ramakrishna’s compassion? He was love incarnate, compassion incarnate. Like water made ice, He was compassion made human. Once a devotee called Harinath, while walking with Swami Vivekananda from Dakshineswar to Baranagar, had asked Swamiji to opine on Sri Ramakrishna. Swamiji, famously reluctant to speak on his Guru as he considered himself unfit to express an opinion, was silent for a long time. At last, he said, “What can I say of him? He is ‘L’ ‘O’ ‘V’ ‘E’ personified.” We cannot really wrap our minds around His love, His compassion. We consider ourselves capable of love, at least to some degree. But if we examine ourselves, we will clearly see that our compassion is centred in our sense of self, anchored firmly in our ego. The moment the person we profess to love is disagreeable to us, is rude or ignores us, our so-called compassion vanishes like camphor and we are filled with indignation, with anger. Sri Ramakrishna’s compassion was elementally different. There was not the slightest whiff of the self in it. It was unearthly, it was radical. There are thousands of examples. We have

time for just one or two.

Girish Chandra Ghosh was a towering intellectual of the time, a celebrated playwright and a creative colossus. Girishbabu was unconventional and did not always follow the social mores of morality. He also happened to be blisteringly honest, something I love about him. He was especially honest about himself and would say that he was such a fallen man that he defiled not only the floor on which he sat but also seven feet under. A mercurial man, there were times when the inebriated Girish Ghosh would let loose a torrent of abuse at Sri Ramakrishna.⁴ The devotees were scandalised and asked Sri Ramakrishna to never associate with the immoral drunkard. Sri Ramakrishna's love however, was cast in pure titanium. Insult and abuse could leave no mark on it. In later life, Girish Ghosh would be a changed man. He would be immersed in loving contemplation of his Guru, a far cry from the unruly alcoholic sceptic he had been in his early years. Sri Ramakrishna could twist and turn minds and samskaras, our innate propensities, at will. Like lumps of clay, He would fashion of men's minds as He desired, bending them Godward. This was our *Thakur*, the quiet miracle-worker.

Every man who came into His orbit, sensed His unearthly

love. Even animals sensed it. Each of His disciples have recalled in their later lives, how they could not stay away from Dakshineswar because they could not bear to live without seeing Him, they could not bear to live starved off the oxygen of His love. The high philosophy and the religion came much later.⁵

There was a maid called Bhagawati in the household of Rani Rashmani. Bhagawati had had deep character flaws in her youth but in later life, she had changed. One day Bhagawati was in Sri Ramakrishna's room in Dakshineswar. She had recently returned from a pilgrimage to Kashi and Brindavan and Sri Ramakrishna was conversing with her about her experiences. At the time of taking leave, Bhagawati suddenly reached out for Sri Ramakrishna's feet and touched Him. Sri Mahendranath Gupta, who was an eyewitness, describes the scene. On her touch, Thakur who was purity incarnate, recoiled as though stung by a scorpion. He stood up, stumbled to the pitcher of holy ganga water and repeatedly poured water on his feet. Sri Ramakrishna had a physical reaction to contact with impurity in any shape and form. We see a similar reaction to gold or currency — His renunciation was so complete that even unknowing contact produced a painful reaction. His reaction to Bhaga-

wati's touch had been instinctive. However, He did not want to hurt her, so He quickly collected Himself, addressed her as "Ma" or 'Mother' and went on to sing devotional songs for her. In this way, He wiped away Bhagawati's hurt.

One day, in Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna was explaining Vaishnava dharma, the key teachings of Sri Gauranga. He said: 'The essence of the Vaishnava faith is in three precepts—delight in the name of the Lord, compassion for all beings, and service to devotees.' Uttering these last words, 'compassion to all creatures,' Sri Ramakrishna was suddenly transported into Samadhi. A little later, returning to a semi-conscious state, he exclaimed, 'Compassion to creatures! Compassion to creatures! You who are lower than a worm, how dare you speak of showing compassion to creatures! Who are you to pity them? No, no, it is not pity, not compassion, it is service, service to all humankind in the consciousness that they are verily God himself, Shiva himself.' Swami Vivekananda was present in Sri Ramakrishna's room at the time of this incident and this was the moment when the seed was sown of the mission of the Ramakrishna Mission. Swamiji came out of the room and told his brother disciples, "What blessed wordsif I ever get the opportunity, I will tell the world what I have heard

here today; that the greatest worship is the service of man, man who is made in the image of God." These two sentences of Sri Ramakrishna, *Shivagnane Jeevaseva*, became the mission of the entire Ramakrishna Mission order. And this is why we see today the monks of the order dedicating their lives to the service of man. Today the Math and the Mission runs hospitals, dispensaries, mobile-medical units and nursing training institutes. It runs medical camps and eye camps for the needy, leprosy detection centres, maternity and child care centres, orphanages, schools, polytechnics, colleges, schools for the visually impaired. It provides relief and rehabilitation during natural disasters. Actually, the scope of work of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission is so wide and so deep that it is impossible to list them all. You really need to go to the Belur Math site and see for yourselves how a group of 1800 monks are doing the work of 18 thousand or perhaps a hundred and eighty thousand. These monks are not social workers, they do not do charity. What they do, is worship; their service is their prayer. Their motto is ATMA-NO MOKSHARTHAM JAGAD HITAYA CHA, "For one's own salvation and for the welfare of the world." It is a huge karma-yagna, and all of it, every last bit of it, is the flowering of the radical compassion of Sri Rama-

krishna.

Till the last days of His life, while cancer riddled His throat, when speaking was excruciatingly painful, the compassionate Sri Ramakrishna continued to speak to His disciples, giving spiritual counsel that would sustain them in their later life and sustains us to this day. What can we say of Him!! The Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland⁶ called him the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people. Sri Ramakrishna has given up His bodily form over a hundred and thirty-five years ago but His spirit animates us, His compassion arcs over time and space to touch us. His words water our parched souls. He sits on the lotus of our hearts and fills us with hope, with bliss. He answers our prayers. He will never ever forsake us. He is our own, closer than our closest. I end with Swamiji's words on Sri Ramakrishna:

*Sthapakayacha Dharmasya
Sarva Dharma-Svarupne;
Avatara-Varsthaya
Ramakrishnaya Te Namah*

End Notes

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