

“I’m not able to call you a he”

An excerpt from Jeffrey Kripal’s provocative study of Ramakrishna Paramhansa

The nineteenth century Bengali mystic Ramakrishna has been the subject of biographies by Christopher Isherwood, Romain Rolland and Max Müller, among others. Jeffrey Kripal presents an entirely new analysis of the saint’s visions in his book *Kali’s Child—The Mystical and Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramkrishna* (University of Chicago Press and Mediamatics, Calcutta). While tales of Ramakrishna’s “madness” and cross-dressing abound in Bengali folklore, this study looks at him in a completely new light, as this extract demonstrates. Kripal emphasizes that all the facts were obtained from existing works of the saint’s own disciples like Mahendranath Gupta’s *Kathamrta* as well as Ramakrishna’s “secret talk” which was omitted or blurred in the English translation of *Kathamrta* by Swami Nikhilananda.

Ramakrishna used various techniques to arouse this “passionate love” likened to a symbolic phallus, among his disciples. Among them, singing and dancing, nudity, the examination of bodies, and the pairing up of his disciples into spiritual couples were particularly important.

Singing and dancing were especially popular in the incarnation’s erotic community. Often, Ramakrishna would dance naked, surrounded by his male disciples, or pace, or sit naked among them. Sometimes the boys would dance naked (KA 3.99). Such practices did not always sit well with the locals. One scholar, after visiting the saint, and witnessing such a show of dancing and singing, was supposed to have commented curtly: “Yes, a paramhansa indeed.”

Naked bodies were also common. For Ramakrishna, nudity was a natural expression of the mystical state: when the kundalini rises “from the feet to the head,” he taught, one’s garments automatically fall off (KA 1.237). Nakedness was also seen as an instrument to loosen the bond of shame (LP 3.8.29). It was particularly as “the Paramhansa” that Ramakrishna practiced his mystical nudity. M described Ramakrishna in “the state of Paramhansa” thus: “He moves like a child! He grins again and again! He is wearing nothing around his waist. He is naked. His eyes float in bliss!” (KA 2.67). It should also be noted that many of the personages that appeared in Ramakrishna’s secret visions were naked. Most of them were boys.

Just as nudity is a sign of the mystical state, it is also necessary in order to reveal a man’s mystical potential, recorded for the trained eye in the curves, colors, and shapes of the male body. Accordingly, Ramakrishna would ask to examine the bare chests of men and boys in order to determine their spiritual fitness (KA 3.119). Sometimes, he would go further: one day, for example, he asked the boy Prasanna

to strip for him, whereupon Ramakrishna exclaimed, “What a boy!” (KA 3.124). Another day, he was explaining to a boy how he could not keep his loin-cloth on: “I, a man so advanced in age, have to go about naked, but I don’t feel my nakedness.” But, Ramakrishna adds, he has abandoned that practice for all those who feel shame in his naked presence. Having identified himself as a man who has gone beyond the bond of shame, Ramakrishna then tests the boy with the same standard by asking him to take off his clothes, wrap them around his head like a turban, and walk around the temple courtyard. The boy does so and then notes he would only do such a thing before Ramakrishna. Apparently, many others had stripped for Ramakrishna before this boy, for the Master acknowledges the boy’s lack of shame as the usual response: “Many others say that. They say, ‘Before you we don’t feel shame when we take off our clothes, but we do before others’” (LP 5.7.15).

On Becoming a Woman

Finally, Ramakrishna paired his disciples up into “masculine” and “feminine” disciples in order to waken their devotion and love. This is a particularly interesting technique, since its logic demonstrates, once again, the secret that lay at the heart of Ramakrishna’s life and teachings. It has often been pointed out that Ramakrishna took on the mannerisms and moods of women in order, in his own words, “to conquer the enemy of lust” (KA

4.4). If a man can act exactly like a woman—dressing like one, brushing his teeth like one, talking like one—then he can conquer lust (KA 4.4). According to Ramakrishna, the effeminate actors of Bengal, who had mastered such techniques for their trade, were models for the male devotee and should be imitated (KA 4.4). Ramakrishna was a



master of such imitations. In numerous scenes, Ramakrishna acts like a woman, making fun of her gestures and foibles, to the roar of his all-male audience (KA 2,50). In one scene, for example, he rolls on the ground, imitating a woman wailing for her dead husband while she carefully holds her nose-ring lest it break (KA 4.72). A dead husband is a tragedy, but so is a lost or broken nose-ring. Becoming a woman, then, was not just a sacred duty

for Ramakrishna. It was also a lot of fun, an opportunity to laugh at the other, slightly despised gender.

Such a discipline may seem unnatural, a dangerous translation of the stage into real life, but in the symbolic world of Ramakrishna it is not, for in such a world every human being is already a woman in relation to the divine. There is a view, Ramakrishna pointed out, that says “whoever has nipples is a woman.” And only two beings born in this world did not have nipples: the heroic Arjuna and his divine charioteer Krsna. Everyone else by definition is a woman (KA 2.155). Becoming a woman on the stage of life, then, even if one thinks he is a man, is not only spiritually helpful, it is theologically natural.

But whether natural or not, this ascetic technique of becoming a woman in order to conquer lust is a tricky thing, since at least in Ramakrishna’s case, it is built on a mistake that in the end rights itself within the technique. The mistake is this: same-sex love is impossible. Such is the logic of Ramakrishna’s

teachings. If a man can become a woman, his desire for a woman will die, since sexual desire exists, by definition it seems, only between a man and a woman. But clearly, given all that we know about Ramakrishna’s secret such an assumption is patently wrong, especially in Ramakrishna’s world. For homosexual love not only exists in Ramakrishna’s world, it is absolutely central to that world. So what are we to make of Ramakrishna’s teaching on becoming a woman?

If we look carefully at the contexts in which Ramakrishna becomes a woman, it becomes apparent that he did not “become a woman” simply to conquer desire. True, he became a woman when he lived with his wife, Sharada, in order to conquer his desire for

her. And he succeeded: “I’m not able to call you a he,” she confessed (KA 2.154-155). But he also took the nature of a woman to live with and lie down with Mathur, to sing to his beloved Narendra, and to mother little Rakhal. As a woman, Ramakrishna was ascetic to women and erotic to men. ▼

LP: *Srisriramakrishna-Lilaprasanga*
KA: *Srisriramakrishna-Kathamrta*
M: *Mahendranath Gupta*