

Impact Of Great Prophets On The Mind Throughout The Ages

By Swami Tathagatananda

Great spiritual giants move the mind down the ages. This is the testimony of history. We are citing a few examples below to highlight this idea. The subtle spiritual impact of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda courses unerringly through spiritually receptive individuals to the entire world. It is an engaging and radiant, continuous chronicle that includes the names of Romain Rolland, Madame Calvé, K. J. Popov, Nicholai Roerich and Natalia Tots.

ROMAIN ROLLAND'S DISCOVERY OF SHRI RAMAKRISHNA THROUGH DHAN GOPAL MUKERJI'S BOOK, *THE FACE OF SILENCE*

It was the destiny of Romain Rolland (1866-1944), the great biographer of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, to learn about Shri Ramakrishna from a book by Dhan Gopal Mukerji, *The Face of Silence*. Steeped in the long wake of disillusionment and negative effects on the Western culture of the First World War, Rolland was profoundly motivated to find the truth that would bring peace and harmony to the West and to the warring religions of the world. He sought a truth that would deliver him and the entire humanity from spiritual stagnation. Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda came to haunt his inner imagination. They reached far beyond the grasp of his knowledge. The subtle suggestions of their redeeming grace were to become real for him, as he was destined to broadcast the message of their lives and work with fervor and intellectual depth to the rest of the world in the biographies he wrote of the two spiritual luminaries.

The subtle influence of Shri Ramakrishna in Rolland's life actually began through the initial agency of Miss Josephine MacLeod, whose passion for truth and spiritual freedom had led her to Swami Vivekananda. In 1913, "Tantine," or "Joe," as she was fondly called, met Dhan Gopal Mukerji when he was an assistant professor of philosophy at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. She wrote to her niece Alberta Sturges Montagu, the Countess of Sandwich, about the effects of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda's transforming power upon Professor Mukerji (who was only twenty-two at the time). She described the spiritually receptive young professor as "a brain and power! Afire with Swamiji whom he never saw." After meeting Mr. Mukerji, Miss MacLeod immediately felt that he was capable of bearing Vivekananda's teachings and mission to the world—a legacy she herself had borne.

In 1926, twelve years after the meeting between Miss MacLeod and Mr. Mukerji, E. P. Dutton published his book, *The Face of Silence*, in New York. His book immediately achieved a special distinction that projected it into the future. It was chosen by the League of Nations as one of the year's forty outstanding works to be included in the International Library of Geneva. More imaginative and poetic than factual, *The Face of Silence* captured the attention of readers around the world.

In September 1926, during a discussion about the religious movements in India with someone who was visiting him, Rolland learned about the newly formed Ramakrishna Mission. From the moment he heard about the fascinating personality of Shri Ramakrishna, he wanted to learn more about Shri Ramakrishna's life. Searching for a biography, he found the *Face of Silence*. The book fascinated Rolland and made a tremendous impact on his artistic thought, casting a deep, lasting charm on his responsive mind. After reading the book, Rolland eagerly wanted to meet with the author personally. He invited Mr. Mukerji to his home. Fulfilling Rolland's earnest desire, Mr. Mukerji came to see him from America on October 4, 1926; Rolland gave a vivid and lengthy description of his impressions in his diary. After this visit, Rolland's interest in Ramakrishna and Vivekananda increased tenfold.

He also recorded his first visit with Miss MacLeod on May 13, 1927, which included his remarkable statement that "many months—nearly a year—after the coming of Mukerji, my sister and I developed an attraction towards Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Mukerji acquainted us with the Ramakrishna Mission in India." He further wrote that he received "a whole library of books" on Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda "through the medium of Miss MacLeod." But Rolland did not know English. His sister, Madeleine, was a dedicated assistant and translated the works aloud to him in French, thus becoming the first to nourish his thought with Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. The eminent religious historian, Mercea Eliade, identified an additional formidable obstacle that Rolland had to transcend and not merely overcome:

It was in total ignorance—of the country, the history, the languages of India, and even of English—that Rolland wrote the four volumes on Gandhi, Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda! I believe the case is unique in the history of modern culture.

Miss MacLeod visited Rolland in Switzerland twice more in 1927, on May 14th and May 16th. Her visits served to further inspire and encourage him to write about Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. He was greatly helped in this work by Swami Ashokananda. Rolland wrote to him on June 28, 1927:

It is now one year since some pages of Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *The Face of Silence* . . . effectually revealed to me the great soul of Sri Ramakrishna, and this beam of light has impelled me to know more of his life and thought. . . . during the days passed together [with Miss MacLeod] we talked at length of Swami Vivekananda . . . whom I look upon as a fire of spiritual energy, and on Sri Ramakrishna as a flower of love. Both radiate God and Life Eternal. The greater genius is Vivekananda, but Sri Ramakrishna is above genius.

On October 4, 1927, Rolland wrote to Mr. Mukerji:

When I happen to read in some text about India some revelation which makes a deep impression on my mind, I do not discover it as a new thought, I recognize it as one of my own hidden thoughts. It was engraved within me, since eternity. . . . The Eternal has scattered Himself, in handfuls, over the entire field of humanity. The earth is not yet ready everywhere to make the seed germinate. Somewhere, it rises and bears fruit. Somewhere else, it lies dormant. But the seed is everywhere. And turn by turn, what was dormant awakens, and what was awake goes back to sleep. The Spirit is always moving, from people to people, from man to man. And no people, no man, imprisons it. But it is the fire of the eternal life in each one, the same Fire. And we live, to feed it. _

All these events are links in an unbroken chain of quiet, profound spiritual labors. The ancient spiritual truths of India—through an embodied form that broadcasts them to the world—continue to be mastered and given to humanity in every age with a suitable dimension and depth. All of India was elated with joy at the publication of Rolland’s biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Moreover, his desire to bring spiritual enlightenment to the West was combined with a deep appreciation of the incarnations of Truth capable of social action to introduce, implement and maintain unity among the people.

In his preface to *The Life of Ramakrishna*, Rolland expressed his gratitude to Mr. Mukerji,

who first revealed Ramakrishna’s existence to me, and to my faithful friend, Dr. Kalidas Nag, who has more than once advised and instructed me. May I have made the best use of so many excellent guides for the service of the India which is dear to us and of the human spirit!?” _

Rolland paid tribute to Mr. Mukerji when he listed *The Face of Silence* in the bibliography at the back of his book. He wrote that it is an “exceptional value as a work of art” because it “is a brilliant evocation of the figure of the Master in the atmosphere of the India of his time.” He added that

Mukerji has consulted all the principal documents. He has also interviewed several of the eminent personalities of the Ramakrishna Mission, who knew the Master, in particular Swami Turiyananda, and he has used the *Memoirs* of Swami Premananda, one of Ramakrishna’s dearest disciples. . . . I can never forget that it was to the perusal of this beautiful book that I owe my first knowledge of Ramakrishna and the impetus leading me to undertake this work. I here record my gratitude. With extraordinary talent and tact Mukerji in this book has chosen and put in the limelight those features in Ramakrishna’s personality which will most attract the spirit of Europe and America without shocking it. I have felt it necessary to go beyond his precautions and to cite exact documents without allowing myself to “embroider” them. _

Mr. Mukerji read Rolland's biography of Sri Ramakrishna, which his *Face of Silence* had inspired. On November 10, 1931, he wrote a letter to Rolland from New York, expressing his praise and appreciation:

Dear Master,

At last I have read your *Ramakrishna* and *Vivekananda* both in French and English. In the English translation I have studied the notes with care. Now I can say without any modification that this book equals your *Beethoven* and *Jean Christophe*. This is not a book but the epic poem of the holiness of our time. You have traced the holiness of all mankind under every sentence.

The Ramakrishna that emerges from your pages is not a Hindu saint only, [he is] also the agony of our modern soul for Godhood. The pain of man-God for God-man nowhere do I find so poignantly stated in the literature of the world since Tolstoi penned his *Confessions*! Now I feel I have earned my passport to Paradise because I introduced you to Ramakrishna. I had no idea that I was bringing Prometheus to the hidden source of the Flame Eternal.

Of course, the book goes beyond the limits of India and embraces the holy and the (one word here is impossible to decipher) in all humanity. This is what an epic of holiness should do. Your Ramakrishna is as simple and as fierce as the one, they, his apostles knew. I wish Vivekananda were alive to gaze upon the portrait that you have drawn of the Master. He alone could give you the praise that you deserve. As for Vivekananda, yours is the only one that India recognizes.

Where you say, "Ecce Homo," we recognize of whom you speak. He was implicit in all of us; but you have made him explicit. If your Ramakrishna is the eternal India, your Vivekananda is the precipitation of the Eternal in our history. Ramakrishna IS; Vivekananda moves. What a magical composition of holiness you have wrought in two keys!

I have no criticisms to offer you. I am deeply flattered that you follow my version of Girish's relation to Ramakrishna. This makes me have faith in my sense of design. To confess the truth, I personally feel deeply unsure of our modern designs, whether in music or in literature. Whenever a master of your stature indirectly blesses a young fellow's design he finds peace and assurance. When I read your *Michelangelo* or your *Ramakrishna*, the thing that carries me away is your fury of movement completely controlled by your design—the madness of Dionysus wedded to the silence of Brahma. In short, your art is abundant and impeccable.

A word about my physical self and I shall close this letter. I have been ill three years now. The last one was unhappily painful. Here in America people are so unhappy about finance that they care not a jot for India's political future, nor for Gandhi's moral grandeur. Naturally I, a sick man, feel all this more than the physically healthy people. It has a bad effect on one's psyche. In this mental anguish I read your *Ramakrishna* whose

trumpet tones have filled me with moral optimism and spiritual joy. This earth is indeed holy now that you, Shivananda and Gandhi are still on it. I feel like saying, “L’humanité, en avant!” With my love and most sincere appreciation, dear Master,

I remain,
your obedient servant,
Dhan Gopal Mukerji_

It is interesting to note that Swami Ashokananda, the editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*, expressed his high appreciation of Mr. Mukerji’s way of presentation in *The Face of Silence* in an article, “A Biographical Fiction?” and then added, “Never have we been so sorely disappointed as in this book. It has been like looking on a fair face fraught with insanity. . . . The book is a strange medley of facts and unjustifiable fancies.”

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA’S UNIQUE GRACE IN THE LIFE OF MADAME CALVÉ

The chronicle now turns to the famed singer Madame Calvé, one of Swami Vivekananda’s followers with whose poignant story some readers may already be familiar. In a mysterious way, the celebrated vocalist was unconsciously led to Swami Vivekananda. In Chicago in 1894, when she was at the height of her career—the toast of two continents and the world at her feet—Madame Calvé suffered a terrible tragedy. One evening, she had the worst attack of stage fright that she had ever experienced. In spite of her nervousness, her first act was successful. Returning to the stage after the intermission, she experienced profound depression and considered cancellation that evening’s performance. She staggered from her dressing room and reached the stage wings unable to move, as if paralyzed. The stage manager, however, was able to persuade her to go on stage and she performed magnificently. But she collapsed upon returning to her dressing room after the second act and instructed the manager to announce her inability to continue. Despite succumbing to the depression and developing breathing problems, she was nearly carried by the manager and others nearby to the stage for the last act. She finished her performance, which proved to be one of the most glorious of her entire career, only with the greatest effort of her life. Departing from the blazing applause to her dressing room, she was greeted with the saddened faces of the persons awaiting her there. Her mind was filled with a foreboding of some impending grave peril. Upon receiving the tragic news that during that very glorious performance, her beloved and only child had been burnt to death, Madame Calvé fainted.

The agony of losing the child upon whom she had showered all her tender and loving affection caused her to realize the shallow triumph of success and made her suicidal. Overwrought and fragile like a straw upon the powerful stream of emotions, she resolved to throw herself in a nearby lake. Until this moment, she possessed only vague misconceptions of the spiritual power behind Swami Vivekananda, which was about to come to her redeeming rescue. She certainly had heard of him and had the opportunity to visit him—Swamiji was in Chicago at the time of her tragic loss and being sought by

many who wanted his help and guidance. But the great celebrity had neglected or ignored the opportunity.

Three times she approached the lake to fulfill her awful intention. Three times she was inexorably drawn away from it and directed on the road towards Swamiji's house instead. She repeatedly resisted and returned to her home instead. But finally, as though in a daze, she was led unintentionally to his house and found herself sitting there in a chair outside his room. "Come my child. Don't be afraid," she heard in her hypnotic state, and following his consoling words, found herself before the Swami.

Madame Calvé sought to express the spiritual impact of her encounter with Swamiji:

It has been my good fortune and my joy to know a man who truly "walked with God," a noble being, a saint, a philosopher and true friend. His influence upon my spiritual life was profound. He opened up new horizons before me, enlarging an unifying my religious ideas and ideals, teaching me a broader understanding of truth. My soul will bear him eternal gratitude. . . . When I entered the room, . . . he was seated in a noble attitude of meditation, his eyes on the ground. After a pause he spoke without looking up. "My child," he said, "what a troubled atmosphere you have about you; be calm; it is essential." Then in a quiet voice, untroubled and aloof, this man who did not even know my name talked to me of my secret problems and anxieties. He spoke of things that I thought were unknown even to my nearest friends. It seemed miraculous, supernatural. . . . Finally, it was time for me to leave. "You must forget," he said as I rose. "Become gay and happy again. Build up your health. Do not dwell in silence upon your sorrows. Transmute your emotions into some form of eternal expression. Your spiritual health requires it. Your art demands it." I left him, deeply impressed by his words and his personality. He seemed to have emptied my brain of all its feverish complexities and placed there instead his clean and calming thoughts. I became once again vivacious and cheerful, thanks to the effect of his powerful will. *He did not use any of the hypnotic or mesmeric influences. It was the strength of his character, the purity and intensity of his purpose that carried conviction.* It seemed to me, when I came to know him better, that he lulled one's chaotic thoughts into a state of peaceful acquiescence, so that one could give complete and undivided attention to his words.

Madame Calvé's unique experience illustrates the truth of Swami Vivekananda's assertion from his own experience: a great spiritual personality who is perfectly established in higher realizations can transmit this knowledge to a disciple even if the disciple has not undergone vigorous spiritual practices:

I began to go to that man (Shri Ramakrishna) day after day, and I actually saw that religion can be given. One touch, one glance, can change a whole life. I have read about Buddha and Christ and Mohammed, about all those different luminaries of ancient times, how they would stand up and say, "Be thou whole," and the man became whole. I now found it to be true, and when I myself saw this man, all scepticism was brushed aside. It could be done, and my Master used to say, "Religion can be given and taken more tangibly, more really, than anything else in the world."

Madame Calvé was among the great celebrities acquainted with Romain Rolland. In a letter he wrote to Madame Calvé in 1930, Rolland attested to the remarkable power of the transference of ideas beyond place and time, of which the effects following Rolland's acquisition of *The Face of Silence* are a lucid illustration. His letter reveals the factual nature of the subtle spiritual foundation he was seeking and confirms that a spiritually illumined personality can transmit this knowledge even to one who has not undergone rigorous spiritual practices. On April 4, 1930, Rolland wrote to Madame Calvé:

Dear Madame,

I am deeply touched by your letter. How happy I am that my book did not in any way disappoint the eyes which had the good fortune to see the great Swami and to retain devotedly his image. But it now seems to me that my eyes too have seen him. I lived so intimately with him and with Paramahansa in these latter years that it is as though I was seated day after day in the little room at Dakshineswar on the banks of the Ganga.

I hope that the good effect of that great thought may enter into the soul of the West, wounded but still hard and contracted. It is a serious moment for the West, which has learnt nothing from the troubles it has already had. If it doesn't do something to gain possession of itself, the spell would be cast. It certainly won't be the first great Empire in the world that would have crumbled. The flame of the spirit will find—will even create—other places to dwell. It is never extinguished.

Please be assured, dear Madame, of my respectful fellow feeling.

THE INSCRUTABLE MISSION OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA THROUGH HIS INSPIRATION IN K. J. POPOV

The powerful influence of Swami Vivekananda's mission for humanity came forth again in an unpredictable way. K. J. Popov (1844-1918, a brilliant and famed philanthropist was serving in the Russian military at the same time that Swamiji was declaring the message of Vedanta in America and India. His beloved wife, a chemist, perished in her laboratory while performing an experiment. The shock was so terrible that he could not be consoled. Grief-stricken, he attempted to contact her departed soul, hoping to find her in a higher world than the one they had dwelled in together. To this end, he enlisted the help of spiritualists and theosophists and visited many spiritual centers around Europe to no avail. He followed the advice he received in Italy, to go to India and ask for the help of Indian Yogis.

By divine providence, he arrived in Bombay just as Swami Vivekananda was returning from America. Remarkably, their paths crossed and Mr. Popov received the opportunity to talk about his wife to Swamiji, whose comments, unfortunately, are lost to posterity. It is known, however, that after this meeting, Mr. Popov's agitated mind became calm and

he abandoned the desire to contact the spirit of his wife. He received from Swamiji a higher inspiration: he would dedicate his life to God through service to mankind.

He returned to Russia a man transformed and began to translate Swami Vivekananda's works. He published Russian translations of Swamiji's writings on the four *Yogas* and the *Philosophy of Vedanta* between 1906 and 1914. Swamiji's *Lectures on Raja Yoga* underwent three editions after being translated into Russian in 1911.

Nothing remains of Mr. Popov today except his translations of Swamiji's works. Popov's archives and his notes are mysteriously absent, noticeably leaving posterity with the far-reaching effects of Swamiji's message alone. His translations of Swamiji's works reached Leo Tolstoy, Russian scientists, the famed academician B. L. Smirnov, who translated the *Mahabharata*, and Nicholai Roerich among others.

NICHOLAI ROERICH'S COMPELLING VISION OF RAMAKRISHNA-VIVEKANANDA

Nicholai Roerich (1874-1947), one of Russia's foremost artists, left a spontaneous, moving recollection in his diary of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda that he experienced while traveling in the Mongolian desert. Returning to base camp from the stony hills of Shiret Obo one day, he was struck by a compelling sight: in the vast desert expanse he noticed a towering elm tree with its broad shadow spread out upon the sand. Approaching it, he looked up and saw traces of myriad birds and creatures that harbored high in its leaves and branches; in the sand beneath, patterns of larger mammals passing by its redeeming shade could also be seen. Marveling at the sight, Roerich's memory was stirred, and his mind

vividly turned to the shadow of the banyan [the *Panchavati* under which Sri Ramakrishna meditated and achieved *samadhi*]. The mighty branches reminded us of other great achievements of India. What a joy to think of India! Thoughts turned to the radiant giant of India—Sri Ramakrishna. . . . there remains over the whole world the one great name—Ramakrishna. The personal name has already changed into a great all-national, universal concept . . . in various countries has grown the understanding of the radiant Teaching of Ramakrishna. Beyond shameful words of hatred, beyond evil mutual destruction—the word of Bliss, which is close to every human heart, spreads widely like the mighty branches of the sacred banyan tree. On the paths of human searching, these calls of goodwill were shining like beacons. We ourselves witnessed and have often heard how books of Ramakrishna's teaching were as if unexpectedly found by sincere seekers. We ourselves came across the book in a most unusual way.

Great power is contained in a united benevolent thought. Humanity should value such sublime manifestations, which are the cause of all these unifying and constructive thoughts. . . . The names of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and the glorious host of their followers remain on the most remarkable pages of the history of the spiritual culture of

India. . . . Many millenniums ago the words of Wisdom were already recorded in India. And how many more millenniums were they preserved even before, in verbal transmission. And in this sacred mouth-to-ear transmission they were kept perhaps even safer than on written records.

Service to humanity—great is this ordainment of Ramakrishna!_

In a letter Roerich wrote to Swami Abhedananda in 1928 (the year that he emigrated to India) he confessed that Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings had led him to venerate Swami Vivekananda and had drawn him to India, where he lived until his death in 1947. In India, Roerich became acquainted with the thought and life of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. He also visited Belur Math, where one of his paintings can be found in the old monastery building.

Tiny insects silently quench their thirst from dewdrops sprinkled on flowers and leaves. A few sporadic words about Shri Ramakrishna in the letters of Elena and Nikolai Roerich virtually transformed the life of a Russian journalist and granted her the greatest satisfaction in her labor. We turn to the fourth of these fascinating accounts, each of which illustrates the eternal spiritual power of Truth through Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. This truth arouses the latent divinity in receptive minds, reveals our inner potentiality and brings fulfillment and success, as it did in the life and work of Natalia Tots.

THE SUBTLE INFLUENCE OF SHRI RAMAKRISHNA’S UTTERANCE:
“YATO MAT TATO PATH”

The story of Natalia Tots, a news correspondent from Moscow who came across a few references to Ramakrishna Paramahansa while reading, illustrates the subtle influence of Sri Ramakrishna in Russia in recent times. “Russian Translates *Kathamrita*,” an article describing her unique experience of a dramatic transformation in her life and work, appeared in the *Bulletin of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture* as an abstract from the December 6, 1997 issue of *The Asian Age*:

A few stray letters written by Elena and Nikolai Roerich, which were sprinkled with references of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, changed the life of Natalia Tots. A correspondent of Tass News Agency, who was busy reporting on crime and punishment till 1990, she gave up her job to know more about the philosophical preacher of the nineteenth century.

The fruit of her in-depth study is now in Gorky Sadan—an 80-page book on the basic philosophy of Ramakrishna. *The Teachings of Ramakrishna*, as the book is called, is not a literal translation of the voluminous *Kathamrita*. “This would have been a Herculean task. All that I have attempted to do is capture the essence of Ramakrishna’s preachings into an easy-to-read book,” says the Muscovite, who is in the city to release the book formally.

The Teachings of Ramakrishna looks at the life of the preacher and contains impressions of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Lokeshwarananda. It also carries articles by eminent Indologists Nikolai Roerich and B. Rybakov. “I was absolutely bowled over by the philosophical message of *Yato Mat Tato Path* [“As many minds, so many paths”]. In a world torn apart by religions, I found this to be the only answer to peace,” says the robust lady with a smile. So impressed was Ms. Tots with the message, that, in a seminar hosted at the Institute of Oriental Studies, she read out the Russian translation of *Yato Mat Tato Path* to an audience of five hundred people.

Ms. Tots, who is also the editor of a Russian philosophical journal, *Delfis*, says she will carry translations of articles written on Paramahansa. In one of the issues the quarterly had carried poems by the Tamil poet, Ramalingam.

The book, which was published in 1993, hit top-of-the-charts within a few months of publication. “All the 10,000 copies that we had published had sold out,” Ms. Tots says. A copy of the book has also been distributed to all the libraries in Moscow through the Library of Foreign Languages. The book has won a good response among the Muscovites.

“All the books which were available earlier on Ramakrishna were elaborate philosophical essays. Now for the first time, a book which even the general mass[es] could understand was published. Naturally, the people took to the book well,” Ms. Tots says.

She receives letters from people asking her to tell more about Ramakrishna. Some have even mistaken Ramakrishna for Krishna.

We have offered a mere glimpse into that wonderful reality of profound association with the inexhaustible fountain of love in Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. That which was experienced in a special way by Romain Rolland, Madame Calvé, K. J. Popov, Nicholai Roerich and Natalia Tots is open to any one who is developed spiritually to receive it. Religion is not only an abstract philosophy. That it is tangible, solid fact—life itself—that can be conveyed by the Avatars to others is being demonstrated in modern times by the gift of spiritual power bestowed to humanity through Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. We want to end the article by quoting Romain Rolland in another context:

The man himself was no more. His spirit had departed to travel along the path of collective life in the veins of humanity.

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