

Parables and sayings from Hindu sage Ramakrishna



Highland Views

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Guest Columnist

Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was a Hindu mystic and saint. He was particularly devoted to the Goddess Kali, an intriguing deity who is both a tender and fiercely protective Mother. Ramakrishna was a priest of her temple in Kolkata. For him, Kali was the Universal Mother. He even called his wife, Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother — an incarnation of the Goddess.

His most famous disciple, Swami Vivekananda, spoke at the first World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago

in 1893. He is credited with bringing Hinduism to America. During my years as an interfaith chaplain I often found retreat on land managed by the Vedanta Society in Northern California. Walking in the quiet calm of forests and fields I would pass beautiful white deer, bobcats, hawks and a memorial to Vivekananda.

According to the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of North Carolina (in Morrisville), Ramakrishna “was the only person in the religious history of the world who practiced not only the religions of various Hindu sects but also practiced both Islam and Christianity.” Be that as it may, he was an unusual sort of person and practitioner, offering wise observations such as, “Many good sayings are to be found in

holy books, but merely reading them will not make one religious.”

Two of my favorite parables are adapted here from “The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna,” the most popular translation of his teachings:

Once, a group of people were crossing the Ganges river in a boat. One of them was a religious scholar who impressed everyone with his knowledge. One by one he told each passenger how much he knew the Vedas (scriptures) and religious philosophy. He asked one traveler, “Do you know the scriptures?” They responded: “No, I’m afraid I don’t.” He asked another, “Have you read the great holy books?” The reply: “No, sorry, I haven’t.” Again he asked: “Haven’t you read any philosophy at all?” “No, sir, I have not,” came the an-

swer.

A great storm arose and soon the boat was swamped and sinking. As the water rose and each traveler fell into the water the passengers asked the scholar, “Do you know how to swim?” “No!” he yelled as he was sinking. Then one spoke up: “I don’t know all those things you know. But I know how to swim.”

Practical knowledge is essential. You can’t float on a raft made of holy books.

You may hear a touch of humor in another parable:

A frog lived in a well. Born and brought up there, he had never seen another frog. One day a frog who had lived

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in the sea hopped down the well. Startled, the well frog asked:

"Where are you from?" "The sea." "How big is that?" "Very big." The well frog stretched his legs. "Is your 'sea' this big?" "Much bigger." The well frog took a leap from one side to the other. "Yes, but is your sea as big as my well?" "Friend, you can't compare them."

The well frog grew very angry and shouted: "That is not true! There could never be anything bigger than my well. You are a liar. Get out!" Ramakrishna

draws out the lesson: Such is the narrow-minded one who sits in their little well and thinks the whole world is no bigger.

Stories like these invite contemplation for anyone, Hindu or otherwise. Those open-air walks in nature on Vedanta land were the best meditation. I had similar experiences at other retreat centers managed by Benedictine monks, Dominican sisters, Buddhist priests, Episcopal priests and Presbyterian ministers. Now I find the same in the "secular sanctuaries" of our National Parks and other natural open spaces on mountains, by rivers or even in a garden or a walk in the neighborhood. Who wants to be trapped in a well of

one worldview?

There's a meditation room in the main house of the Vedanta retreat that is open to people of any faith or no faith. Surrounding the room are large pictures of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Buddha and Jesus. Sarada Devi is there too, reminding each person of the power of the feminine. While sitting there, my attention was drawn out the windows. Nature beckoned.

As Ramakrishna once said: "Divine Nature can be realized and fully actualized in daily life by sincerely following any number of revealed paths." As a secular person, I take this to mean whatever path we choose, secular or spiritual, we can discover the nature of

our world and our own nature. We simply need to keep in mind that studying scriptures and theology, praying or meditating, does not teach us to swim or help us leap from our wells.

Maybe, like Ramakrishna, some of us are hopping along the riverbank of various religious traditions, searching for the sea.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. His latest books are "A Freethinker's Gospel" and "Broken Bridges." Learn more at chighland.com.