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From *Līlā* to *Nitya* and Back: Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa and Vedānta

Arpita Mitra

Independent Scholar, New Delhi 110019, India; arpitamitra2016@gmail.com; Tel.: +91-837-782-6551

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Abstract: There has been a long-standing academic debate on the religious orientation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa (1836–1886), one of the leading religious figures of modern India. In the light of his teachings, it is possible to accept that Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas were Vedāntic, albeit not in a sectarian or exclusive way. This article explores the question of where exactly to place him in the chequered history of Vedāntic ideas. It points out that Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly referred to different states of consciousness while explaining the difference in the attitudes towards the Divine. This is the basis of his harmonization of the different streams within Vedānta. Again, it is also the basis of his understanding of the place of *śakti*. He demonstrated that, as long as one has I-consciousness, one is operating within the jurisdiction of *śakti*, and has to accept *śakti* as real. On the other hand, in the state of *samādhi*, which is the only state in which the I-consciousness disappears, there is neither One nor many. The article also shows that, while Rāmakṛṣṇa accepted all of the different views within Vedānta, he was probably not as distant from the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Ādi Śaṁkara as he has been made out to be.

Keywords: Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa; Vedānta; Ādi Śaṁkara; Advaita; Upaniṣads; *brahman*; *ātman*; *śakti*; *vijñāna*; *samādhi*

1. Introduction

There has been a long-standing academic debate on the religious orientation of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa (1836–1886), one of the leading religious figures of modern India. He looked upon himself as a devotee and child of Kālī; many of his sayings and spiritual experiences attest great devotion to Vaiṣṇava figures such as Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and Śrī Caitanya; a more engaged reader is likely to find in his ideas a substratum of Vedāntic thought—the idea of the transcendence, as well as immanence of the absolute Godhead; and finally, he had something of his own to add to all of this. Given the richness of his teachings, it has been variously argued, for example, that he was a follower of Tantra (Neevel 1976; Zimmer 2008), at best a form of *tāntric advaitism* (Neevel 1976), or that the core concept taught by him was *vijñāna*, which was both ‘mature bhakti’ and ‘fuller knowledge’ (Devdas 1966), or that he proffered a kind of *samanvayī vedānta*, harmonizing the various strands within Vedānta itself (Chatterjee 1963). It has also been argued recently that Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings can be best described with the capacious and non-sectarian concept of *vijñāna vedānta*, which, among other things, accepted the immanent aspect of the Divine as being as equally real as its transcendent aspect (Maharaj 2018). In the light of his teachings, it is possible to accept that Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas were Vedāntic, albeit not in a sectarian or exclusive way. This is the point of departure in this article, which focuses on where exactly to place Rāmakṛṣṇa in the chequered history of Vedāntic ideas.

In order to demonstrate that the question at hand is not an isolated question, but rather has broader implications for the history of Hinduism, the following pointer is in order. In Hinduism, what is the room for creativity without losing authenticity? As pointed out by Carl Ernst: “Since the Protestant Reformation, the dominant concept of religions has been one of essences unconditioned by history.

The nature of religious traditions can best be understood, from this perspective, by analysing religions into their original components.” (Ernst 2005, p. 15). This model of understanding religion in terms of its ‘original’ components is also applicable to the way in which the history of Hinduism has been looked upon by certain scholars. A case in point is near at hand: the label ‘Neo-Vedānta’, which has been used for a long time by both critics and admirers to describe the teachings of Rāmākṛṣṇa’s own disciple, Swāmī Vivekānanda (1863–1902). The term was used from different vantage points—critics used it to describe what they considered to be a departure from ‘original’ Vedānta, and admirers used it to highlight Vivekānanda’s unique contribution in re-defining the scope of Vedānta. The point that was nonetheless missed is: “Neo- has been the ‘Hinduism’ of each century now for the last thirty-five” (Smith 1979, p. 216), and so is the case with Vedānta¹—‘Neo-’ has been the Vedānta of each age for the last several centuries. In other words, this model does not recognize that Vedāntic ideas too have evolved over time, albeit keeping the Upaniṣads as the constant reference point. Hence, the prefix ‘Neo-’ only serves as a tool to delegitimize the historical transmutation of religious ideas, but does not help in understanding the dynamics of the historical evolution of religion.

Without creativity, no new spiritual wave can be potent; we thus have to concede some kind of newness in Rāmākṛṣṇa’s teachings. On the other hand, emerging traditions within Hinduism, in order to have lasting appeal and legitimacy, also have to be based on what practitioners recognize as the *philosophia perennis* of Hinduism. This paper will, thus, explore the ways in which Rāmākṛṣṇa’s ideas relate to the long history of Vedānta, and what new light he had to shed on it, especially in the light of his own spiritual experiences.

The article is divided into the following sections: the next section discusses what Vedānta is; the section after that gives a brief overview of Rāmākṛṣṇa’s core teachings and scholarly opinions about them, with reference to their Vedāntic orientation; and the penultimate section will attempt to locate Rāmākṛṣṇa in the history of Vedāntic ideas.

2. What Is Vedānta?

Vedānta is an internally diverse and constantly evolving philosophico-theological tradition within Hinduism. The term ‘Vedānta’—which literally means the end portion of the Vedas—originally referred to the Upaniṣads, which indeed formed the later portions of the Vedas (Chatterjee and Datta 1948, p. 395). Gradually, the meaning of the term expanded to include all thought that developed on the basis of the Upaniṣads. Today, Hindu tradition understands by the term ‘Vedānta’ a particular corpus of texts: the *prasthāna traya*, or the three authorities; that is, the Upaniṣads, which form the *śruti prasthāna*; the *Brahmasūtras*, attributed to Bādarāyaṇa, which form the *nyāya prasthāna*; and the *Bhagavad Gīta*, which forms the *smṛiti prasthāna*. Even this categorisation developed over time. In his *prakaraṇa grantha*, *Vedāntasāra*, Sadānanda refers to the Upaniṣads, as well as the *Śārirakasūtras* (the *Brahmasūtras*) and other texts (unspecified) that help in understanding the Upaniṣads, as constituting Vedānta (*vedānto nāmopaniṣatpramāṇam tadupakarīṇi śārirakasūtrādīni ca—Vedāntasāra* I.3). The *Vedāntasāra* might have been composed sometime around the 15th century AD (Nikhilananda 2014, p. 10). Loosely speaking, all of the other treatises, like the *bhāṣyas* (commentaries), *vārttikās* (sub-commentaries), *prakaraṇa granthas* (explanatory treatises), and so on, that were composed to aid the understanding of the *prasthāna traya* are also referred to as Vedānta. Besides these, there are several other texts—like the *Yoga Vāśiṣṭha*, the *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and others—that articulate Vedāntic ideas.

As mentioned, of the *prasthāna traya*, the Upaniṣads form the *śruti prasthāna*; that is, they contain the revelation of supersensuous knowledge. The Upaniṣads cannot be reasonably dated. They contain many statements that appear contradictory. In order to demonstrate the coherence of these statements, the *Brahmasūtras* were composed as a systematic exposition of the philosophy and theology articulated

¹ I do not use the terms ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Vedānta’ interchangeably. This paper will only focus on Vedānta, but at the same time, the history of Vedānta is a part of the history of Hinduism.

in the Upaniṣads. This belongs to the category of the *sūtra* literature that developed as a particular genre of texts meant for the systematization of philosophical views. The *Brahmasūtras* were composed anytime between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century AD. The concise style of this aphoristic literature again led to the need for the writing of commentaries and sub-commentaries for further explanation. In due course, there developed divergent opinions about the content of the *Brahmasūtras* and the Upaniṣads. As philosophical views proliferated in India, both within the tradition of Vedānta and outside it, doxographical works were composed. By the medieval period, Indian philosophy, designated by the term *darśana*, came to be divided into several schools, one of which was ‘Vedānta’. In the context of the philosophical schools, the word Vedānta refers to the school that grounds itself completely in the philosophy of the Upaniṣads. ‘Vedānta’, as referring to this philosophical school, is the most commonplace use of the term, but it is nonetheless a narrow usage. Again, there are divergences within this school as well; there are various sub-schools, whose key ideas and differences will be discussed below.

What is the mainstay of Vedāntic thought? The true self of the human being is designated by the word *ātman*, which literally means ‘self’. This *ātman* is neither born, nor does it die; it is unborn, constant, eternal and primeval; it is not killed even when the body is killed (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.18). It knows no old age or decay (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). It is eternal because it is not the effect of any cause. It does not originate from anything (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.18). It is “pure and effulgent” (*Mundaka Upaniṣad* III.1.5). It is free from all evils (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5), and is beyond hunger, thirst, pain, sorrow and delusion (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.1.5, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). It is ever unattached and free (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). This *ātman* is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20). This *ātman* is omniscient and all-knowing (*Mundaka Upaniṣad* II.2.7). It is of the nature of bliss (*ānandarūpam*) (*Mundaka Upaniṣad* II.2.7).

What is the locus of this self? It has entered into the bodies up to the tip of the nails (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7) and resides there (*Mundaka Upaniṣad* III.1.5). The *ātman* in the body is homologous to a razor in a case (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). Just as the fire which sustains the world is at its source, similarly the *ātman* is at the source of the body (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). This self is within all (*eṣa ta ātmā sarvāntarah*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.5.1). In every being, it is innermost (*antarātaram*) (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.8); it lies deep within one’s heart (*antarhrdaye*) (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* III.14.3–4), and it is hidden in the heart of every being (*nihito guhāyām*) (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20).

How do we know this self which is hidden? This self has been described as ‘*neti, neti*’ (‘not this, not this’) (that is, no direct description is available); it is imperceptible (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.5.15). Nobody can see the *ātman* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). When it is viewed, it is seen only in its aspects, performing certain functions (like speaking, seeing, etc.); therefore, all such vision is incomplete. This self cannot be known through the senses, the mind, or the intellect, because it is not an object. All knowledge presupposes a split between the subject and object of knowledge, where the knower is the subject and the known the object. But the *ātman* is not an object of knowledge (for instance, like a table or a chair). It can, therefore, never be known in the same way as we know an object. On the other hand, it is through the self that objects of knowledge are known. It is through the self that all is known (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* I.4.7). The self is, therefore, the eternal subject of all knowledge. As Yājñavalkya put it to Uṣasta: one cannot see that which is the witness of the seeing; one cannot hear that which is the hearer of hearing; one cannot think that which is the thinker of thought, know that which is the knower of knowledge—this is the self that is within all (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.4.2).

There then arises the question: how do we know the Knower (*viññātāramare kena viññāyāt*)? Yājñavalkya tells Maitreyī that one smells, sees, hears, speaks, thinks, or knows something when there is duality; when oneness is realized, what should one smell and through what, what should one see and through what, etc.: “through what should one know That owing to which all this is known—through what, O Maitreyī, should one know the Knower?” (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* II.4.14). The self-existent one (*svayambhu*) made the senses outgoing; that is why one sees the outer objects but not the inner self

(*antarātman*); a certain wise man (*dhīraḥ*) desiring immortality turns his sight inwards and sees the self within (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* IV.1). The self cannot be attained through study, intellection, or hearing; it can be known only through the self to which the seeker prays; it is known when the self reveals its true nature (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.23). It is the desireless man who perceives the glory of the self (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* II.20). It is by knowing the self that one knows all. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.1.4 gives the analogy of knowing all that is made of clay by virtue of knowing a lump of clay. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.1.5–6 repeats the same point by using the analogies of gold and objects made of gold, and a (iron) nail cutter and all other iron objects. In all these verses, Uddālaka Āruṇi's refrain to his son Śvetaketu is that all transformation (*vikāra*) is in name (*nāma*) only; the reality in these three cases are clay, gold, and iron, respectively. In other words, names and forms are ever changing, but the substance is the same; it is constant, and therefore, it is the only reality (*satyam*).

What is the relationship between *ātman* and *brahman* (the ultimate indivisible cosmic being)? *Brahman*, after having created (the universe) entered into that very thing; it became the formed and the formless, the sentient and the insentient, etc. (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.6.1). Since there cannot be two infinite, eternal, omnipotent entities, there is, in effect, only one reality (*ekam sat*), which is the reality of all that exists. Hence, the Upaniṣadic *mahāvākyas* like “*tat tvam asi*” (“that art thou”) declare the identity of *brahman* and *ātman*. The same qualities and attributes are used to describe both *brahman* and *ātman*. *Brahman* is the ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of the speech, eye of the eye, etc. (*Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.2). *Brahman* is that on account of which knowledge itself is possible. The ancient people say that *brahman* is indeed different from the known and above the unknown (*Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.4). It is neither known nor unknown, because anything that is known is limited, and on the other hand, *brahman* being unknown would make knowledge itself an impossibility. *Brahman* cannot be uttered by speech, comprehended by the mind, seen with the eyes, and so on (*Keṇa Upaniṣad* I.5–9). The indivisible *brahman* can only be perceived by the one, engaged in meditation, whose mind has become pure and whose intellect is favorable (*Mundaka Upaniṣad* III.1.8).

It is mainly regarding the nature of *brahman* and the nature of its relationship with *jīva* (embodied soul) that the various sub-schools of Vedānta differ in opinion. Among the many schools of Vedānta, the most well-known are Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Dvaita. According to Advaita, *brahman* is not only the ‘efficient cause’, or the *nimittakāraṇa*, but also the material cause (*upādānakāraṇa*) of the universe. In other words, *brahman* is not merely the cause behind creation; *brahman* is also the very stuff out of which the universe is made. *Brahman* is pure consciousness (*jñānasvarūpa*), devoid of all attributes (*nirguṇa*) and beyond all categories of the intellect (*nirviśeṣa*). Advaita does not reject personal theism: it merely says that the personal God is not the ultimate truth. According to Advaita, *brahman*, in association with its power *māyā*, appears as being qualified (*saguṇa* and *saviśeṣa*), that is, as *īśvara* (the Lord), who is the creator, preserver and destroyer of this world which is His appearance. The Advaita Vedānta *prakaraṇa grantha*, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* describes *māyā* as the power of the Lord (*paramēśasakti*), as beginning-less (*anādi*), and as being made up of three *guṇas* (*triguṇātmikā*). It is *māyā* by whom the phenomenal universe is produced. She can only be inferred from the effects she produces. She is neither existent, nor non-existent, nor both; she is neither the same, nor different, nor both; she is neither composed of parts, nor an indivisible whole, nor both. She is indescribable (*anirvacaniyarūpa*). Just as the mistaken idea of a rope as a snake is removed by the discriminative discernment of the rope, similarly, *māyā* is destroyed by the realization of the pure (*śuddha*) and one-without-a-second (*advaya*) *brahman* (*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, verses 108–110). *Māyā* has two aspects: one that obscures (*āvaraṇa*) the real Self, and the other that projects (*vikṣepaṇa*) the non-self.

Rāmānuja of the Viśiṣṭādvaita tradition did not accept this doctrine of *māyā/avidyā*, and offered a seven-fold objection (*saptavidhā-anupapatti*) to it. *Brahmasūtra* IV.1.3 says “*brahman* is realized as one's own *ātman*”. Both Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita accept this aphorism, but they interpret the meaning differently. Advaita claims the absolute identity of *brahman* and *ātman*; Viśiṣṭādvaita proffers an organic unity that preserves both unity and difference. Rāmānuja thus gave the concept of ‘identity in and through and because of difference’. For him:

... unity means realization of being a vital member of [the] organic whole. God or the Absolute is this whole. He is the immanent controller ... God is the soul of nature. God is also the soul of souls. Our souls are souls in relation to our bodies, but in relation to God, they become His body and He is their soul. The relation between the soul and the body is that of inner separability ... (Sharma 1987, p. 346)

In *Vedārthasaṅgraha* verse 93, Rāmānuja states: “*Brahman*, whose body is formed by animate and inanimate beings, who in his gross form is divided by distinctions of names and forms, is presented in the effect. This disunited and gross state of Brahman is called the creation.” On the other hand, for Madhva of Dvaita Vedānta, God is only the efficient cause of the universe, but not its material cause. For him, difference is so great a fact that he advocates five kinds of differences—that between soul and God, between soul and soul, between soul and matter, between God and matter, and finally, between matter and matter. According to Dvaita Vedānta, God is the repository of infinitely good qualities; He is the creator, preserver, and destroyer; He is transcendent, as well as immanent as the inner controller; the human soul is, by its nature, conscious and blissful, but is subject to pain and imperfections on account of its association with the body, sense organs, and minds, etc. In the Dvaita scheme, matter, souls, and God are three distinct entities.

It is important to note that many schools (*sampradāya*) of Vedānta are in fact theistic. Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaitādvaita, Dvaita, Śuddhādvaita and Acintyābhedaśābhedā belong to the Vaiṣṇava lineage. The Advaitin, Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, was a devotee of Kṛṣṇa. The Advaitin, Appayya Dīkṣita, was an avowed Śaiva. Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, on the other hand, attempted a fusion of Śrī Vidyā ritualism with Advaita Vedāntic theology. Hence, in the case of Rāmākṛṣṇa too, it would be helpful not to look at Vedānta and *bhakti* as competing categories. Rāmākṛṣṇa was both Vedāntin and *bhakta*, and there is no contradiction between the two.

3. Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa's Core Teachings

Before discussing Rāmākṛṣṇa's core teachings, let us briefly discuss his spiritual practices. As is well-known, he performed *sādhana* (spiritual training and practice) according to Tantra (with Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī as *guru*), Vaiṣṇavism (five-fold attitude of *śānta*, *dāsyā*, *sakhya*, *vātsalya* and *madhura* towards God), as well as Vedānta (with Totā Purī as *guru*). During his Vedānta *sādhana*, he attained *nirvikalpa samādhi* with great ease, and also received *sannyāsa* from Totā Purī. Thereafter, he also took initiation from the Sufī Govind Rai, and performed *sādhana* according to Islam. All of his various spiritual practices came to fruition in spiritual experiences and visions of the highest order. He also had visions of spiritual figures like Jesus Christ.

Since Rāmākṛṣṇa's core teachings are well-known, I will only summarize them briefly here. Firstly, both *nitya* (eternal, not subject to change) and *līlā* (play, representing that which is changing all the time) belong to the same entity; the one who is *akhaṇḍa sacchidānanda* (indivisible Existent-Consciousness-Bliss) assumes different forms for *līlā*. The same idea is expressed in a different way: *brahman* and Kālī are identical and inseparable; when it is static, we call it *brahman*, when it is active in play, we call it *śakti*. *Brahman* is *aṭala*, *acala*, *sumeruvat*—that is, unmoving. But the one who has an unmoving aspect also has a moving aspect—that moving aspect is *śakti*. Secondly, God is both *saguṇa* (with qualities) and *nirguṇa* (beyond all qualities); *sākāra* (with form) and *nirākāra* (without form); and much more. Thirdly, it follows from the preceding idea that God can be reached through a variety of paths, and all paths are equally salvific.

Fourthly, one first reaches the *akhaṇḍa* by the process of ‘*neti, neti*’ (‘not this, not this’): God is not this world, not the creatures, not the 24 cosmic elements; after reaching the *akhaṇḍa*, one sees that it is God who has become all this—the world, the creatures and the 24 cosmic elements. The analogy is given that one climbs to the terrace using the stairs and leaves one step behind every time; after one reaches the terrace, one sees that the terrace and the stairs are made of the same material. Lastly, after one has climbed up to the terrace, it is possible to climb down and be at a lower storey. This is true of the *vijñānī*, who knows God in a *viśeṣa* manner. There are exceptional souls (*īśvarakoṭis*), who can

remain in the body even after *samādhi* (in the case of others, the body dies after 21 days of *nirvikalpa samādhi*). A *vijñānī* is one who comes back from *samādhi*, and sees God as being immanent in this world, and lives in this world whilst assuming a personal attitude of being a devotee (*'bhakter āmi'*), servant (*'dāsa āmi'*), or child of God. A *vijñānī* comes back from *samādhi* mainly for the purpose of *lokaśikṣa*, or the dissemination of spiritual knowledge among the people. *Vijñānīs* are mostly *bhaktas*. Examples of *vijñānī* are Nārada, Sanaka, Sanātana, Sananda, Sanat Kumar, Śukadeva, Prahlāda, Hanumāna, and Rāmakṛṣṇa himself. Śrī Caitanya had both *brahmajñāna* in *samādhi* and *premābhakti* (a higher form of love for God). Śaṅkara also came back after *samādhi* with the I-consciousness of knowledge (*'bidyār āmi'*) for the purpose of *lokaśikṣa*. A *vijñānī* sees God not only within, with eyes shut in meditation, but also all around, with eyes open—a *vijñānī* moves effortlessly from *līlā* to *nitya* and back. Rāmakṛṣṇa contrasts the state of the *vijñānī* with that of the *jñānī*, who merely realizes the transcendent *brahman*. These are Rāmakṛṣṇa's principal theological teachings.

Scholars find it difficult to accept that Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings were completely aligned with those of the philosophical school of Advaita Vedānta. For instance, Heinrich Zimmer is of the following opinion:

Both the Tantra and popular Hinduism accept the truth of Advaita Vedānta but shift the accent to the positive aspect of *māyā*. The world is the unending manifestation of the dynamic aspect of the divine, and as such should not be devaluated and discarded as suffering and imperfection, but celebrated, penetrated by enlightening insight, and experienced with understanding. (Zimmer 2008, p. 570)

In this sense, Zimmer considers Rāmakṛṣṇa to be a follower of Tantra. Walter Neevel, too, is of the opinion that "Rāmakrishna is an advaitin but ... his non-dualism must be viewed from the perspective of a tantric *advaita*, not that of Śaṅkara." (Neevel 1976, p. 86). Nalini Devdas, however, takes the opposite view, and finds Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings about the supreme *brahman* to be closer to Advaita than to Tantra (Devdas 1966). This article will not deal with the question of Tāntric elements in Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings. However, it should be noted that, while Rāmakṛṣṇa performed full *sādhana* in the Tāntric fold as well, he never prescribed Tāntric methods in his teachings. On the other hand, he had reservations about certain Tāntric practices as being unsuitable for most spiritual aspirants.

Devdas identifies *vijñāna* as the core concept in Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings (Devdas 1966). Recently, Ayon Maharaj² argued that Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vedānta can be best described as Vijñāna Vedānta, characterized by the acceptance of both the transcendence and immanence of God, among other things. I will not debate about the nomenclature 'Vijñāna Vedānta'—whether we should give Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vedānta a new name at all, or not. As far as the conceptual content of Vijñāna Vedānta is concerned, I accept all of the six central tenets of it, as identified by Maharaj (Maharaj 2018, pp. 27–45). However, Maharaj posits this Vijñāna Vedānta as being sharply in contrast with Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta:

Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta ... is a *world-affirming* Advaitic philosophy that contrasts sharply with Śaṅkara's world-denying Advaita Vedānta. For Śaṅkara, the sole reality is the impersonal nondual Brahman, so *jīva*, *jagat*, and *īśvara* are all ultimately unreal. For Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, the sole reality is the Infinite Divine Reality, which is equally the impersonal Brahman and the personal Śakti. Unlike Śaṅkara, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that both *jīva* and *jagat* are *real* manifestations of Śakti, which is itself an ontologically real aspect of the Infinite Reality. (Maharaj 2018, p. 40, emphasis in original)

The following section of the essay will mainly engage with this argument and test its validity. This question has special significance in the debate on Rāmakṛṣṇa Vedānta, because it will help in ascertaining a correct understanding of Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas, as well as determining his proper place in the history of Vedānta.

² Now known as Swami Medhananda.

While Ayon Maharaj includes, in his concept of Vijñāna Vedānta, a harmonizing approach to all theological views within and outside Vedānta, it is worthwhile to examine this ‘harmonizing’ aspect of Rāmākṛṣṇa’s Vedānta separately. Satis Chandra Chatterjee used the expression ‘*samanvayī vedānta*’ to describe Rāmākṛṣṇa’s ideas as “being a synthesis of all schools of Vedānta” (Chatterjee 1963, p. 105). Chatterjee, too, engages with a comparison of Śaṅkara’s and Rāmākṛṣṇa’s views on the impersonal (Absolute) and personal God, that is, *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa brahman* (Chatterjee 1963, pp. 109–12). He, too, is of the opinion that, according to Śaṅkara, *saguṇa* or lower *brahman* is real only empirically, but unreal in relation to the Absolute, which is beyond all *upādhis*. On the other hand, Chatterjee explains that Rāmākṛṣṇa considered *brahman* and *śakti* to be non-different. There should be no difficulty in accepting the validity of both these arguments independently. However, I would like to argue that, when they are contrasted against each other, they do not give us the correct assessment, because firstly, they do not represent Śaṅkara’s and Rāmākṛṣṇa’s views on a strictly corresponding subject, and secondly, both of the views presented are but partial. A few pages later, Chatterjee refers to the fact that Rāmākṛṣṇa showed the validity of all of the views that depend on the level of consciousness from which it was perceived. In this, Chatterjee finds a ‘rational basis’ for Rāmākṛṣṇa’s reconciliation of the conflicting systems of Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita (Chatterjee 1963, p. 122). This is, I would like to argue, key to understanding Rāmākṛṣṇa’s ideas. It will be taken up for elaborate consideration in the next section.

Before proceeding with a fuller engagement with these issues in the next section, a few words of qualification are in order. Ayon Maharaj also provides a set of Interpretive Principles that one should follow while analysing Rāmākṛṣṇa’s teachings. Of these, Interpretive Principles (1) and (4) directly concern us here. The first principle states: “Instead of appealing to external philosophical doctrines or frameworks, we should strive to understand Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical teachings on their own terms.” (Maharaj 2018, p. 19). I agree with this principle inasmuch as we do not forget what was pointed out in the Introduction to this essay: despite the room for creativity, emerging traditions within Hinduism have to be based on what practitioners recognize as the *philosophia perennis* of Hinduism. Here, it would be useful to remember Vivekānanda’s remark about his *guru*: “Ramakrishna came to teach the religion of today ... He had to go afresh to Nature to ask for facts ... Shri Ramakrishna’s teachings are ‘the gist of Hinduism’; they were not peculiar to him. Nor did he claim that they were ... ” (Vivekananda 1921, pp. 75–76). Vivekānanda seems to be making two contradictory statements, but when one understands the balance between the two, one would understand Rāmākṛṣṇa correctly both in his individual capacity and in terms of his proper place in the history of Hinduism.

Maharaj’s Interpretive Principle (4) says: “Sri Ramakrishna’s nonsectarian attitude allows him to accept the spiritual core of various philosophical sects without subscribing to all the doctrines of any sect in particular.” (Maharaj 2018, p. 23). Agreeing with this in principle, my attempt here is not to prove whether Rāmākṛṣṇa was ultimately an Advaitin or not. He did harmonize various seemingly contradictory elements, but I doubt if this act of reconciling or combining different systems was deliberate. Perhaps a better way of understanding him is to recognize that he followed different paths and discovered the underlying principles of each system, the harmony of which he was able to recognize in the light of his own spiritual experiences. This last point about the centrality of his spiritual experiences is acknowledged by Maharaj too, and this is what we need to keep in mind while reading Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa.

It is possible to argue that, instead of refuting any accepted teaching within Hinduism, Rāmākṛṣṇa showed the proper place of each and explained the factors owing to which there seem to be differences. Two contradictory teachings can be equally accepted only when the differences in their underlying perspectives can be understood.

4. Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s Vedānta

Ayon Maharaj clearly interprets Śaṅkara Advaita Vedānta as world-denying; that is, according to this framework, the universe, living beings and the personal God are empirically real but ontologically

unreal (this is a reference to the *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika* levels of reality in Advaita Vedānta). In other words, Śaṅkara does not give ontological parity to *nirguṇa brahman* on the one hand, and *jīva*, *jagat* and *saguṇa brahman*, on the other hand. This is Maharaj's principal premise for distinguishing between Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's position and that of Advaita Vedānta. While this is the standard accepted view about Advaita Vedānta, there is some room for disagreement. I would like to argue that the idea of a devaluation of *saguṇa brahman* in the thought of Śaṅkarācārya³ has generally been an over-interpretation.

The Upaniṣads talk about both transcendence and immanence in the context of *brahman*. Therefore, firstly, let us see what Śaṅkara has to say in his commentary on a few such representative verses. Let us see, for instance, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.6.1, which says that *brahman*, after having created (the universe), entered into that very thing; it became the formed and the formless, the sentient and the insentient, etc. Śaṅkara says in his *bhāṣya*:

... it is the one Brahman ... that became ... all this that there is—all modifications, without any exception, starting with the visible and the invisible, all of which are the features of the formed and the formless—, there being no existence for any of these modifications of name and form *apart from* that Brahman. (Gambhirananda 2009, p. 358, emphasis added)

In other words, the world of name and form has no existence independent of *brahman*, which is one, and which itself has become this world of name and form. Finally, Śaṅkara summarizes: "... this Self must be accepted as existing, since It is the cause of space etc., *exists in this creation*, is lodged in the supreme space within the cavity of the heart, and is perceived through Its diverse reflections on the mental concepts." (Gambhirananda 2009, p. 359, emphasis added). Then, there is *Īśā Upaniṣad* 8, which says: "He is all-pervasive (*paryagāt*), pure, bodiless ... transcendent (*paribhū*), and self-existent (*svayambhū*) ... " (Gambhirananda 2009, p. 15). Śaṅkara, in his commentary, accepts that the Self is all-pervasive, 'like space', and explains the concepts of *paribhū* and *svayambhū* thus: "*Paribhūh* is one who exists above all (transcendent). *Svayambhūh* means he who exists by himself. He, the all, becomes (*bhavati*) by Himself (*svayam*) all that He transcends, and He is also the Transcendental One. In this sense He is *svayam-bhūh*, self-existent." (Gambhirananda 2009, p. 16). Do these explanations speak of a denial of the immanence of *brahman*?

In support of his argument, Maharaj cites Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I.i.11⁴, where Śaṅkara "distinguishes the "*upāśya*" Brahman, the personal God who is worshipped and contemplated, from the "*jñeya*" Brahman, the impersonal nondual Reality which can only be known", and also claims that "the *upāśya* Brahman is associated with unreal "*upādhis*" (limiting adjuncts), while the *jñeya* Brahman is entirely devoid of *upādhis*." (Maharaj 2018, p. 36). Let us examine the verse. In the context of a discussion about *brahman* being the cause of the universe, Śaṅkara says:

Brahman is known in two aspects—one as possessed of the limiting adjunct [*upādhi*] constituted by the diversities of the universe which is a modification of name and form, and the other devoid of all conditioning factors and opposed to the earlier ... it is *in the state of ignorance* that Brahman can come within the range of empirical dealings, comprising the object of meditation, the meditator, and so on ... Although *the one God*, the supreme Self, is to be meditated on as possessed of those qualities, still the results differ in accordance with the quality meditated on, as is stated in the Vedic texts ... one hears about the Self—unchanging and ever homogeneous though It is—that there is a difference in the degrees of Its manifestation of glory and power, that being caused by *the gradation of the*

³ Whether or not Śaṅkara considered *saguṇa brahman* as unreal, it did not hinder him from saluting *saguṇa brahman* (usually Śrī Hari) at the beginning of many of his treatises. Even if we consider these as "attributed" works, it clearly demonstrates that the Advaita tradition accepts such salutations. Such intellectual inconsistency is unlikely in the case of Śaṅkara.

⁴ Maharaj cites I.i.12, but he is, in fact, discussing I.i.11. The verse number cited is erroneous. Here, we shall follow the correct verse number, that is, I.i.11.

minds by which It becomes conditioned . . . Thus also it is a fact that, although the knowledge of the Self results in instantaneous liberation, yet its instruction is imparted with the help of some relationship with some conditioning factor. Accordingly, although the relationship with the conditioning factor is not the idea sought to be imparted, still from the reference to the superior and inferior Brahman the doubt may arise that the knowledge refers to either of the two . . . although *Brahman is one*, It is spoken of in the Upaniṣad as either to be meditated on or known (respectively) with or without the help of Its relation with the limiting adjuncts. (Gambhirananda 2011, pp. 62–64, emphasis added)

Instead of focusing on the unreal nature of *upādhis*, let us look at what Śaṅkara is trying to say in its totality, and in context. Firstly, he clearly says that *brahman* is one; that is, whatever is appearing as *saguṇa brahman* is nothing else but *nirguṇa brahman* in a particular form. In essence, *brahman* is *nirguṇa*; when it manifests itself, it takes a form—this form (including the *upādhis*) is unreal, but the substance itself is not unreal, because the substance is none other than *brahman* itself. Elsewhere, Śaṅkara gives full legitimacy to both the ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ *brahman*, which are in reality only one. *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* II.ii.8 says: “When that Self, which is both the high and the low, is realized, the knot of the heart gets untied, all doubts become solved, and all one’s actions become dissipated” (pp. 131–32). Here, one is talking of the Self that is both high and low (*parāvare*). Śaṅkara’s commentary on this part says: “when that One, the omniscient and transcendent—who is both *para*, the high, as the cause, and *avara*, the low, as the effect—is seen directly as ‘I am this’”; it is then that all this happens (the knot of the heart gets untied, doubts are quenched etc.) (Gambhirananda 2012, p. 132).

Secondly, in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I.i.11, Śaṅkara is also referring to a gradation of minds and a state of ignorance, as opposed to a state of knowledge. This is about differences in levels of consciousness. The gradation of minds leading to a difference in the perception of the *saguṇa brahman* clearly indicates that even *saguṇa brahman* is perceived differently by different aspirants. The state of ignorance that Śaṅkara refers to is the state before God-realization. We will have the occasion to return to these issues in the following discussion on Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa.

Rāmakṛṣṇa’s core teachings are clearly Vedāntic (not in an exclusive sense though), and are especially similar to those articulated in the Upaniṣads, which are also based on the spiritual experiences of the *ṛṣis*. As mentioned in the scriptures, he too said that one cannot describe *brahman* in words; *brahman* can only be described in terms of *taṭastha lakṣaṇa*; for example, Ghoṣapallī can only be described as being situated by the bank of the Gangā (Gupta 1990, p. 582). *Nirguṇa brahman* is beyond description, because description entails the use of adjuncts which are limiting, and *brahman* is, in essence, infinite. He says: “What Brahman is cannot be described. Even he who knows It cannot talk about It. There is a saying that a boat, once reaching the ‘black waters’ of the ocean, cannot come back.” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 268) He also gives his well-known analogy of the salt doll which went to measure the sea and never came back, because salt got dissolved into the sea (Gupta 1990, p. 53). In other words, after *sakṣātkāra* (in *samādhi*), who is left to describe *brahman*? What exactly happens in *samādhi*? Referring to the *saptabhūmi* (seven planes of existence) as mentioned in the Veda, Rāmakṛṣṇa says that *samādhi* occurs in the seventh plane, where the mind is annihilated (*maner nāśa*) (Gupta 1990, p. 136). The mind, according to Vedānta, is subtle body, that is, finite matter. In *samādhi*, this finite mind gets dissolved. What exactly happens in *samādhi* cannot be described in words (Gupta 1990, p. 136). The very instrument by which to describe it—that is, the mind—is itself annihilated. In the state of *samādhi*, body-consciousness (*dehabuddhi*) disappears, and so does the perception of multiplicity (*nānā jñāna*) (Gupta 1990, p. 249).

Rāmakṛṣṇa says elsewhere:

As long as a man analyses with the mind, he cannot reach the Absolute. As long as you reason with your mind, you have no way of getting rid of the universe and the objects of the senses—form, taste, smell, touch, and sound. When reasoning stops, you attain the Knowledge of Brahman. Ātman cannot be realized through this mind; Ātman is realized

through Ātman alone. Pure Mind (*śuddha mana*), Pure Buddhi (*śuddha buddhi*), Pure Ātman (*śuddha ātmā*)—all these are one and the same. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 802)

He is in effect saying the following: firstly, the mind is not the instrument for the realization of *brahman*, because the mind perceives objects, and *brahman* is not an object (refer to the discussion in Section 2, above). Secondly, *ātman* can only be realized through *ātman*. This is an Upaniṣadic teaching (see Section 2). He mentions elsewhere that the ṛṣis of yore had the *sakṣātkāra* of *śuddha ātmā* through the *śuddha ātmā* (Gupta 1990, p. 897), and again, that the ṛṣis had the *sakṣātkāra* of *caitanya* (pure consciousness) through *caitanya* (Gupta 1990, p. 889). Thirdly, he is saying that *śuddha mana*, *śuddha buddhi* and *śuddha ātmā* are the same thing. The ordinary mind is impure (due to the presence of desires) and finite; it cannot be the same as *ātman*. It is only when this mind undergoes a particular kind of transformation through purification that it can be said to be the same as *ātman*. Fourthly, *ātman* cannot be known through the ordinary mind, but it is accessible to the pure mind: the Infinite cannot be known through this mind, but it can be known through the pure mind (Gupta 1990, p. 889). Elsewhere, Rāmakaṛṣṇa says: “God is realized as soon as the mind becomes free from attachment [*āśaktiśūnya*]. Whatever appears in the Pure Mind is the voice of God . . . because there is nothing pure but God.” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 178). Therefore, fifthly, whatever occurs in the purified mind is the voice of God, because God is the only pure entity in this world. By implication, this means that, after God-realization, one’s embodied I-consciousness disappears; what remains is only the reality of God. Lastly, a mind that is free from desire and its resultant attachment is the pure mind.

Now, let us turn to the other aspect—which is ‘*āmi*’, that is, embodied or subjective I-consciousness. In ordinary contexts, Śrī Rāmakaṛṣṇa advises common people to adopt the attitude of *bhakti* and retain the I-consciousness of a devotee, child or servant of God, because it is very difficult to get rid of this I-consciousness, especially for ordinary people in the *kali yuga*, where materialism is naturally heightened. When he speaks of I-consciousness in the context of *viṣṇānī*, he is speaking about the same thing in a different context. In such instances, he says that if the body remains after *samādhi*, the *viṣṇānī* has to live with something, so he lives by adopting a particular or a variety of *bhāvas* (attitudes) towards God: *bhakter āmi* (the I of the devotee), *bidyār āmi* (the I of knowledge), *bālaker āmi* (the I of a child), *dāsa-āmi* (the I of a servant vis-à-vis God as the master), or *rasika-āmi* (the I of an enjoyer of God) (Gupta 1990, p. 870). He explains:

Why does such a lover of God retain the ‘ego of Devotion’? There is a reason. The ego cannot be got rid of; so let the rascal remain as the servant of God, the devotee of God. You may reason a thousand times, but you cannot get rid of the ego. The ego is like a pitcher, and Brahman like the ocean—an infinite expanse of water on all sides. The pitcher is set in this ocean. The water is both inside and out; the water is everywhere; yet the pitcher remains. Now, this pitcher is the ‘ego of the devotee’. As long as the ego remains, ‘you’ and ‘I’ remain, and there also remains the feeling, ‘O God, Thou art the Lord and I am Thy devotee; Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant.’ You may reason a million times, but you cannot get rid of it. But it is different if there is no pitcher.” (Nikhilananda 1942, pp. 708–9)

Elsewhere, he gives this important analogy: “Water appears to be divided into two parts if one puts a stick across it. But in reality there is only one water. It appears as two on account of the stick. This ‘I’ is the stick. Remove the stick and there remains only one water as before.” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 170)

The I-consciousness, in the ordinary context, refers to the I-consciousness before God-realization. This is what Śaṅkara refers to as the ‘state of ignorance’ (see above). On the other hand, the case of the *viṣṇānī* refers to the I-consciousness after God-realization. Śaṅkara has an equivalent concept in the *jīvanmukta*. This is a well-known Advaita Vedāntic concept. Ayon Maharaj equates the dry *jñāni* with a Śaṅkara Advaitin (Maharaj 2018, p. 39). What about the *jīvanmukta* then? Does the *jīvanmukta* not perceive immanence of God? If we consider the case of the *jīvanmukta*, we shall see that, in this

framework, *nirvikalpa samādhi* is not the last word, it is not the *final* stage; it is simply the method through which to reach *advaita brahmajñāna*, which enables one to perceive God in everything. It would also be wrong to conceive of the *jīvanmukta* in association with *nirguṇa brahman* alone. One may refer to *Jīvanmuktānandalahari* verse 7, which clearly states that the *jīvanmukta*, at times, chants the name of *Śakti*, at times that of *Śiva*, at times that of *Viṣṇu*, at times that of *Gaṇapati*, and so on.

Coming back to the issue of the two kinds of I-consciousness, it should be noted that these are clearly two different states. It is necessary to mention that, in *bhakti yoga*, the process is two-way. Rāmākṛṣṇa clearly says that ‘I am devotee, you are God’, ‘I am your servant, you are my master’—these are attitudes towards the divine by the adoption of which one attains God. Again, after attaining God, one cultivates similar attitudes towards God (Gupta 1990, p. 138). Secondly, the ‘I’ of a *vijñānī* after God-realization is different from the ordinary I-consciousness. The latter is a materialist ‘I’, embroiled in attachment to *saṃsāra*; whereas the *vijñānī* only has the form of an ‘I’, it is in effect insubstantial, and has undergone a complete transformation. After coming into contact with the philosopher’s stone, the sword becomes a golden sword—only the form remains that of a sword, but it is not possible to cut anything with that sword anymore (Gupta 1990, p. 138). Only a mark of ‘I’ remains (*ahamkāra dāgamātra thāke*) (Gupta 1990, p. 138). When one has seen God, his/her entire being is transformed after that experience.

The only state in which I-consciousness is absolutely erased is *jaḍasamādhi* (even in *cetansamādhi* or *bhāvasamādhi*, a little bit of ‘I’ remains so that God can be ‘enjoyed’). When asked if the “I of the devotee” never goes, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa replied:

Yes, it disappears at times. Then one attains the Knowledge of Brahman and goes into samādhi. I too lose it, but not for all the time. In the musical scale there are seven notes: sā, re, gā, mā, pā, dhā, and ni. But one cannot keep one’s voice on ‘ni’ a long time. One must bring it down again to the lower notes. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 481)

The reason for discussing I-consciousness is that it is really this that makes all the difference. In the state of *samādhi*, where there is no I-consciousness, there is no world either, and no attribute of *brahman*. Either one leaves the body after this experience, or one comes back. Now, if one comes back, one again enters the field of I-consciousness. So, again, one has to come back to the domain of name and form (*nāmarūpa*), and attributes of God. On the other hand, since this is a transformed I-consciousness, it enables one to see God as being immanent in this world. We have available from Rāmākṛṣṇa’s own words the description of such an experience:

Kacha⁵ had been immersed in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. When his mind was coming down to the relative plane, someone asked him, ‘What do you see now?’ Kacha replied: ‘I see that the universe is soaked, as it were, in God [*jagat jena tānte jare rayeche*]. Everything is filled with God. It is God alone who has become all that I see. I do not know what to accept and what to reject.’” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 851)

This is the perception of a *vijñānī*. Thus, Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s definitive position was the following: “... one should realize both the Nitya and the Līlā and then live in the world as the servant of God. Hanumān saw both the Personal God and the formless Reality. He then lived as a devotee of God, as His servant.” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 851).

Therefore, the difference in the attitude towards the Divine—even in the case of the same person—is owing to the difference in the levels of consciousness. This is the real meaning of the different states of consciousness, as expressed in the analogies of Prahlāda and Hanumāna. When Prahlāda had *tattvajñāna*, he would be in the state of ‘*soham*’ (‘I am He’); when he had *dehabuddhi*, he would have the attitude of ‘I am your servant’ towards God (Gupta 1990, p. 983). Again, “Once Rama asked Hanuman,

⁵ An ancient sage, son of Bṛhaspati.

‘How do you look on Me?’ And Hanuman replied: ‘O Rama, as long as I have the feeling of ‘I’, I see that Thou art the whole and I am a part; Thou art the Master and I am Thy servant. But when, O Rama, I have the knowledge of Truth, then I realize that Thou art I, and I am Thou.’” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 105) Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa also explains his own case:

But, my dear sir, I am in a peculiar state of mind. My mind constantly descends from the Absolute to the Relative, and again ascends from the Relative to the Absolute ... The manifold has come from the One alone, the Relative from the Absolute. There is a state of consciousness where the many disappears, and the One, as well; for the many must exist as long as the One exists. Brahman is without comparison ... Again, when God changes the state of my mind, when He brings my mind down to the plane of the Relative, I perceive that it is He who has become all these—the Creator, maya, the living beings, and the universe. Again, sometimes he shows me that He has created the universe and all living beings. He is the Master, and the universe His garden. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 307)

Rāmakṛṣṇa says elsewhere:

You see, in one form He is the Absolute [*nitya*] and in another He is the Relative [*līlā*]. What does Vedānta teach? Brahman alone is real and the world illusory. Isn’t that so? But as long as God keeps the ‘ego of a devotee’ [*bhakter āmi*] in a man, the Relative is also real. When He completely effaces the ego, then what *is* remains. That cannot be described by the tongue. But as long as God keeps the ego [*āmi*], one must accept all. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 801)

Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly gives the caveat: “... as long as ‘I-consciousness’ [*ahambuddhi*] remains, one cannot but feel that it is God Himself who has become everything.” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 652). Again: “So long as ‘I-consciousness’ exists, a man cannot go beyond the Relative.” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 851). *Ahambuddhi* goes only in *samādhi*. Now, how many people can go into *samādhi*, and how many can continue to stay in *samādhi*? Thus, the one who has had God-realization and those who haven’t all have to accept the play of *śakti* as real. Rāmakṛṣṇa explains:

The jñānis, who adhere to the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedānta, say that the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, the universe itself and all its living beings, are the manifestations of Śakti⁶, the Divine Power. If you reason it out, you will realize that all these are as illusory as a dream. Brahman alone is the Reality, and all else is unreal. Even this very Śakti is unsubstantial, like a dream. But though you reason all your life, unless you are established in *samādhi*, you cannot go beyond the jurisdiction of Śakti [*śaktir elākā*]. Even when you say, ‘I am meditating’, or ‘I am contemplating’, still you are moving in the realm of Śakti, within Its power. (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 134)

The very next statement is “Thus Brahman and Śakti are identical. If you accept the one, you must accept the other. It is like fire and its power to burn.” Therefore, we see two things. Firstly, he simply shows that, with the singular exception of the state of *samādhi*, we are—all the time—operating within the jurisdiction of Śakti. So long as that is the case, how can we say *śakti* is unreal? Secondly, *brahman* and *śakti* are not two different entities—they cannot be—even according to Advaita, because that being the case would negate the *ekamadvitīyam* quality of *brahman*. That would, in fact, come close to Sāṃkhya philosophy, positing the separate entities of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, and no longer remain within the scope of Vedānta. If we add up these two points, what we get is: there is only one Reality, *brahman*, which—when it becomes active in play—we call *śakti*, and unless we reach this *brahman* in the state of *samādhi*, we are always operating within the domain of *śakti*.

One more point before we move to our conclusion. Let us consider this dialogue from the *Kāthāmṛta*:

⁶ The Vedantins call it *māyā*.

[Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa]: Each ego may be likened to a pot. Suppose there are ten pots filled with water, and the sun is reflected in them. How many suns do you see?

A Devotee: Ten reflections. Besides, there certainly exists the real sun.

Master [Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa]: Suppose you break one pot. How many suns do you see now?

Devotee: Nine reflected suns. But there certainly exists the real sun.

Master: All right. Suppose you break nine pots. How many suns do you see now?

Devotee: One reflected sun. But there certainly exists the real sun.

Master (to Girish): What remains when the last pot is broken?

Girish: That real sun, sir.

Master: No. What remains cannot be described. What *is* remains. How will you know there is a real sun unless there is a reflected sun? (Nikhilananda 1942, pp. 776–77)

What is the purpose of this analogy? It is always with reference to the Relative that we speak about the Absolute as being real and the Relative itself as being unreal. However, in a state where the Relative ceases to exist (in *samādhi*, for instance), there exists only one indescribable entity. Then, with reference to what should we say that it is the opposite of unreal? The Absolute also needs the Relative in order to be deemed as Absolute; where there is no Relative, there is only one Existence, and neither a real Absolute nor an unreal Relative. This is also what was meant in the quotation above: “There is a state of consciousness where the many disappears, and the One, as well; for the many must exist as long as the One exists.” (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 307).

Thus, we clearly see that Rāmakṛṣṇa repeatedly refers to different states of consciousness while explaining the difference in attitude towards the Divine. As was rightly pointed out by Chatterjee (1963), this is precisely how he harmonized the various strands within Vedānta, that is, by showing the proper place of each idea, and by providing an explanation for the differences. This may be called Rāmakṛṣṇa’s original contribution to Vedānta. The concept of *vijñāna*, too, is remarkable, but it is possible to trace the precedents of this concept (for instance, *jīvanmukti*) and, more importantly, actual examples. It should be noted that most of the examples of *vijñānīs* that Rāmakṛṣṇa himself gave are really from long, long ago. As such, it may be surmised that the experience and the practice already existed: he simply gave them a name and an explanation.

Secondly, he also showed that—so long as one has I-consciousness—one is operating within the jurisdiction of *śakti*, and has to accept *śakti* as real. On the other hand, in the state of *samādhi*, which is the only state in which the I-consciousness disappears, there is neither One nor many. I do not claim that Rāmakṛṣṇa was exclusively an Advaitin. He accepted all of the different views within Vedānta. He was grounded in the spiritual experience of *advaita* or non-dual consciousness as it is obtained in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, but that is not the only state in which he remained—he moved effortlessly from *līlā* to *nitya* and back. However, I argue, it is possible that Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa comes closer to Śaṅkara than most scholars are willing to concede. Their ideas may not be *absolutely* identical, but there seems to be greater correspondence than is usually acknowledged owing to a partial understanding of Śaṅkara. It is possible to argue that the difference between Śaṅkara and Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa is one of emphasis. Śaṅkara’s focus seems to be more on the transcendental aspect of *brahman*, and this could be owing to his historical circumstances. However, he never denies immanence. We saw above that, in his commentary on the *Īśā Upaniṣad*, he says “He, the all, becomes by Himself all that He transcends.” In other words, transcendence and immanence, Absolute and Relative—we cannot think of one without thinking of the other. Transcendence implies immanence; otherwise, it would indicate two realities—one that transcends and another that is transcended. Coming back to Śaṅkara, he himself was an *īśvarakoṭi* who had come back from *nirvikalpa samādhi*. The same Śaṅkara who was the Advaita Vedāntin commentator on the *prasthāna traya* was also the organizer of the Hindu religion on the ground, and is believed to have himself installed the *śrī cakra* at Devi Kāmākṣī’s feet in the Kāmākṣī temple in Kanchipuram. Śaṅkara himself was a great harmonizer of many apparently

contradictory elements within Hinduism. It may not be far-fetched to argue that we, in fact, need a better assessment of Śaṅkara now—a better assessment of his contribution to the development of Hinduism, as well as a better understanding of his philosophy. It is possible to do the latter especially in the light of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings, rather than the common approach which is vice versa (that is, interpreting Rāmakṛṣṇa with reference to Śaṅkara), because Rāmakṛṣṇa's explanations shed invaluable light on all of the ideas that preceded his.

5. Conclusions

The following observations may thus be made in conclusion. Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's ideas are clearly Vedāntic, as it would be possible to show through a comparison of his teachings and the key Vedāntic ideas elaborated above. Firstly, as is found in the Upaniṣads, he accepted the transcendent-immanent one-without-a-second Reality which cannot be known through the ordinary mind. Secondly, while it has been generally accepted that Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings are aligned with those of the Upaniṣads, many scholars think his ideas are different from those of Śaṅkara. However, it was shown above that they are not as different from each other as is generally believed. Thirdly, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa was grounded in the experience of *advaita* or non-dual consciousness, but he accepted all other states of consciousness vis-à-vis the Divine as equally true; as such, he found the doctrines of the competing philosophical schools of Vedānta acceptable. He harmonized these mutually-conflicting statements in the light of the fact of different states of consciousness. Finally, recognizing this idea of differences in states of consciousness is crucial not only for understanding this harmonization, but also for understanding his complete position regarding the nature of *śakti*. According to Rāmakṛṣṇa, so long as one is within the realm of I-consciousness, one is within the scope of *śakti*, and cannot consider it to be unreal. This *śakti* is non-different from *brahman*. Hence, the same Reality which the Upaniṣads call *brahman*, Rāmakṛṣṇa endearingly called Kālī.

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