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THE HEART OF ETHICS IN RAMAKRISHNA'S SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction

Ethics should not be regarded as a separate area of discussion within the Indian philosophical system. Its reflection can be seen in Indian philosophical thought, where different branches of Indian philosophy offer various perspectives on moral issues and their resolutions. It is generally admitted that ethics begins when the freedom of individual will is granted.

The reality of the individual is the fundamental principle of ethics. If an agent is real, then ethical conduct can only be addressed in that context. Additionally, there must be a domain in which this conduct is evident. Therefore, without recognizing the reality of individual selves, moral problems cannot be examined.

The moral issues have been consistently addressed by Indian thinkers; both theistic and non-theistic perspectives were also highly moralistic. They determined that morality does not require theological support and can be rooted in the natural inclination toward goodness that all individuals inherently possess. Regardless of the caste into which someone is born, every person has the ability to improve their situation or seek liberation from it.

The core principles of Indian ethics emphasize Dharma (righteous duty), Karma (the law of action and consequences), Ahimsa (non-violence), self-realization, and the well-being of all.ⁱ Indian ethics is a holistic system that integrates personal virtue, social responsibility, and spiritual realization. It teaches that a good life is one that balances duty, non-violence, truthfulness, and service to others. These principles remain relevant in guiding individuals and societies toward righteousness and harmony.

Growth of Ethical Concepts in Indian Philosophy

Indian ethics is one of the great tradition systematic studies of the spectrum of moral reflections from India engaging a critical cross-cultural perspective and attending to modern secular sensibilities. The ethical concepts of Indian thought have evolved over time, influenced by spiritual traditions, philosophical schools, and socio-cultural changes. Indian ethics originated with Vedic ethics and further

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

developed through the introspection found in the Upanishads.ⁱⁱ This foundation was enriched by the teachings of Buddhism, Jainism, and classical Hindu philosophy. Over the years, ethical concepts continued to evolve, shaped by the Bhakti movement, contributions from modern reformers, and contemporary ethical challenges.

Phases of Ethical Evolution in India

Early Indian ethics originated in the Vedas, Vedic ethics, which developed between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE, was rooted in the religious and philosophical traditions of the Vedic period in ancient India.ⁱⁱⁱ These ethics emerged from the Vedas, particularly the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda, as well as later texts such as the Upanishads, Brahmanas, and Dharmashastras. In which morality was associated with religious duty (yajna) and cosmic order (Rta). Ethical life was guided by Dharma, Satya (Truth), and Rita (Cosmic harmony).^{iv} After the Upanishadic period, Buddhist and Jain ethics (approximately 500 BCE to 200 CE) developed as distinct but interconnected traditions, responding to Vedic and Upanishadic thought. Both traditions emphasized non-violence (ahimsa), self-discipline, and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (samsara). However, their approaches to ethical living and attaining the ultimate goal varied.

The ethics that India developed in her Upanishad have continued to develop in all subsequent ages through great personalities. The Upanishads, which are the later texts of the Vedas, focus on the realization of ultimate reality (Brahman) and the self (Atma), leading to liberation (moksha). During this period, ethical behaviour was closely linked to self-knowledge, detachment from material desires, and adherence to one's duty (svadharma). Ethics was not merely a set of social norms; it was deeply connected to the pursuit of ultimate truth and the quest for liberation (moksha).and adherence to one's duty (svadharma). During this period, ethics was not simply a set of social norms; it was closely associated with the search for ultimate truth and liberation (moksha).

Classical Hindu ethics, which spans roughly from 200 CE to 1200 CE, is deeply embedded in ancient Hindu philosophical traditions and Holy Writ. This includes the Dharmasāstras, Itihāsas (grand literature similar as the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa), Purāṇas, and colourful seminaries of Hindu gospel (darśanas). During this period, a structured ethical frame developed, predicated in the generalities of duty/ righteousness, action and its consequences, and emancipation.^v

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

Classical Hindu ethics emphasizes living a balanced life through four primary pretensions

1. Dharma - righteousness and moral duty.
2. Artha - material substance and success.
3. Kama - pleasure, solicitations, and emotional fulfillment.
4. Mokṣa - spiritual emancipation and tone-consummation.

In India during the 19th and 20th centuries, modern ethical thought was influenced by social reformers, nationalists, and philosophers who aimed to balance traditional values with contemporary concepts of justice, equality, and human dignity. Notable figures in this movement included Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Raja Rammohan Roy, among others. The primary goal of these social reform movements was to eradicate social evils such as caste discrimination, untouchability, child marriage, and the oppression of women. Many reformers and thinkers advocated for ethical values grounded in human dignity, equality, and justice, with Sri Ramakrishna standing out among them. This ethical system incorporates individual liabilities, promotes social harmony, and encourages spiritual growth. The moral principles established during this time continue to impact Hindu study and practices moment.

Views of Śri Rāmakrihna

India has witnessed a brilliant star in her horizon who has revealed the soul of India to the people and created a commotion in their minds. He is *Param Purusa Śri Rāmakrishna*. *Śri Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa*, one of the most revered spiritual figures of 19th-century India^{vi}, is celebrated for his profound insights into spirituality, devotion, and ethical living. His teachings emphasized the realization of God through various religious paths while upholding the fundamental ethical principles of love, compassion, truthfulness, and selflessness. The ethical dimension of Ramakrishna's spirituality remains a significant aspect of his legacy, influencing countless seekers across the world.

Sri Ramakrishna played a vital role in promoting human welfare by helping people overcome their crises of faith in religion and feelings of inferiority regarding their own beliefs. His actions marked a significant moment in history, where individuals began to understand that 'all religions are valid and represent a rich ultimate reality.'^{vii}

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

At the time of Sri Ramakrishna's advent, society was plagued by superstitions, and most educated individuals did not believe in the existence of God within the human soul. The pleasures and luxuries of life had become the ideals of earthly existence, leading people to degenerate into mere money-making machines. In this context, Sri Ramakrishna, through his strenuous moral life and perfected intelligence, was able to peer into the realm of truth. Concerned about the welfare of suffering humanity, he spread the truths of moral living as he perceived them, enabling individuals to navigate the stream of samsara. Ramakrishna stated, "I tell people that there is nothing wrong with life in the world, but they must live in the world as a maidservant lives in her master's house."^{viii} Although Sri Ramakrishna stated that the ultimate goal of human life is the realization of God, he did not disregard the other important pursuits recognized by Hindu scriptures, such as kama (enjoyment), artha (wealth), and dharma (moral and religious duties). He advised some of his disciples to embrace the householder's life, fulfil their responsibilities, and have children, all while keeping their minds focused on God. In fact, Ramakrishna acknowledged the importance of marriage for a householder. "When Pratap's brother, one of his devotees, came to him after leaving his wife and children with his father-in-law, the Master reprimanded him quite sternly."^{ix} However, he made it clear that after having one or two children, couples could choose to live as brothers and sisters if they wished to pursue a spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna again said, "he who has realized God knows that God himself has become the world and all living beings"^x if we go through the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna we will find that Ramakrishna forbade nothing, he never told his household devotees that the world is illusory like a dream and hence they should give it up, rather, he insisted on remaining in the world remembering the goal of life, i.e. God-consciousness. According to him, the human being is only 'someone who is fully conscious' that is, someone who is endowed with self-knowledge and that is why man stands highest in the world of living beings. His life is an opportunity to know and realize god as the highest reality.

The Ethical Core of Ramakrishna's Teachings

Ramakrishna's ethics were deeply intertwined with his spiritual vision, which revolved around the realization of the Divine in all beings. His moral philosophy was not based on rigid doctrinal rules but on the spontaneous flowering of love and selflessness from deep spiritual experience. A significant aspect of *Śrī Rāmakrishna's* ethical teachings was universal love and acceptance, as he believed that all religions ultimately lead to the same truth. His life exemplified simplicity, humility, and detachment from material desires, serving as an ideal model for ethical conduct. He emphasized that truly ethical living requires sincerity, self-discipline, and the recognition of the divine presence in all beings. For him,

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

ethics was not separate from spirituality; rather, it was an essential part of it. He taught that individuals should practice truthfulness (satya), selfless service (seva), and renunciation (bairagya) while carrying out their worldly duties. The parable of the maidservant—who works in a household but remains unattached, despite knowing she is somewhere else—beautifully illustrates how one can live in the world without being bound by its temptations. Through simple illustrations, personal experiences, and profound spiritual insights, Sri Ramakrishna conveyed an ethical perspective that remains relevant today. His teachings not only guided his disciples, including Swami Vivekananda but also provided a pathway to living morally upright and spiritually fulfilled lives.

At the core of his religious outlook was the belief that God resides within all, and therefore, others should be treated with kindness, respect, and compassion. He emphasized the importance of the qualities of *mānavāditā* (truth), sincerity of heart (purity), and selfless service (*sevā*). His famous teaching, "*Shiva jñāna jīva sevā*"^{xi} (serving humans as a manifestation of God), holds his ethical ideal to see and serve God in all living beings. Ramakrishna's ethical philosophy emphasized universal harmony and religious tolerance, as he believed that all religions ultimately lead to the same divine truth. He practiced and acknowledged various religious paths, including Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, demonstrating that ethical and spiritual values transcend the boundaries of individual communities.

His ethical vision, centered on love, self-discipline, detachment, and devotion, continues to inspire people to live morally upright and spiritually fulfilled lives. Through his simple yet profound teachings, Sri Ramakrishna provided a timeless guide to living a life of righteousness, service, and inner peace.

Sri Ramakrishna described women as a source of strength. He treated all women with respect and dignity, viewing them as manifestations of the Divine Mother. Ramakrishna emphasizes the importance of educating women and elevating their social status through various parables involving his disciples and devotees, particularly in the context of social values. A significant example of advocating for women's education is found in the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. Sri Ramakrishna aimed to instill a profound respect for women by honoring and revering his mother.

Some of the key ethical principles in Ramakrishna's teachings include:

1. Truthfulness (Satya)

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

Ramakrishna emphasized absolute truthfulness in thought, speech, and action. He believed that sincerity and honesty purify the heart and bring one closer to God. He often remarked that a person who adheres to truth with unwavering faith will ultimately realize the Divine. For him, truth was not merely about honesty in speech but a deep, unwavering adherence to the ultimate reality God. His life and teachings reflect an extraordinary commitment to truth in every aspect. Ramakrishna often said, "*Satya is Shiva*", meaning truth itself is divine. He believed that living truthfully brought one closer to God. Ramakrishna's opinion is that "the most effective sadhana in *KaliYuga* is to embrace truth, to the truth."

2. Love and Compassion (*Karuna*)

Central to Ramakrishna's ethical teachings was the practice of love and care toward all living beings. His teachings deeply rooted in personal experience highlight the power of pure love humility and total reliance on the Divine. He believed that God resides in every individual and cheered his disciples to serve humanity as a form of worship. He taught that if we do all our work and fulfill our duties while keeping our minds centered on God, we will gradually become free from all accessories. His famous saying, "*Jiva is Shiva*" (the living being is a manifestation of God), emphasizes the ethical obligation to treat everyone with kindness and respect. The great Master showed people how to live an ethical life while engaged in the world, develop their love for God, and make spiritual progress. He stated, "To realize God, one must adopt one of these attitudes: *Santa*, *Dasya*, *Vatsalya*, or *Madhur*."^{xii} *Santa* represents a serene attitude, akin to the single-minded devotion of a wife to her husband. *Dasya* conveys the attitude of a servant toward his master, while *Sakhya* embodies the spirit of friendship. *Vatsalya* is the nurturing attitude of a mother toward her child, and *Madhur* reflects the affection of a woman toward her beloved. One can advance along the spiritual path by embracing these attitudes.

3. Renunciation and Detachment (*Tyaga* and *Vairagya*)

According to Ramakrishna, ethical living requires detachment from material desires and selfish motives. His clear message regarding *artha* is that while money is necessary, one should not become infatuated with it. Money is not the ultimate goal of life, and it does not help us see God. Therefore, there must be a balance between our needs and wants. Wanting more than what our needs justify can lead to harm, but determining one's limits can be challenging. However, if we are progressing on the path to God, our minds will guide us. *Śri Rāmākrishna* advocated for renunciation, not as a rejection of our duties but as a transcendence of ego-driven actions. By selflessly serving others, one can attain purity of heart and spiritual elevation.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

4. Devotion and Surrender (*Bhakti* and *Sharanagati*)

Ramakrishna taught that ethical conduct should stem from a deep devotion to God. True devotion leads to the surrender of personal will to the divine will, fostering humility and moral integrity. His own life demonstrated unwavering faith and surrender to the Divine Mother, serving as a model for ethical and spiritual living.

To reveal moral values, it is essential for a person to express themselves in a devotional manner. If there is inconsistency in a person's behavior, the manifestation of moral actions does not occur spontaneously. *Śri Rāmakrishna* has explored the path of devotion to experience the presence of God in the *kathamrita*. The path of devotion cultivates humility and gentleness in a person. *Ramakrishna* taught that the ultimate goal of human life is to attain God. In *KaliYuga*, he emphasized that the only way to achieve this is through devotion, which is cultivated by serving others. He believed that acts of kindness can often reveal one's ego, and therefore, he advised that one should serve all living beings with the awareness of the Shiva knowledge. For *Śri Rāmakrishna*, devotion and surrender were not mere concepts but a way of life. He lived in continuous communion with the Divine, showing that through love, faith, and surrender, one could attain the highest realization. His teachings continue to inspire millions on the path of *Bhakti* and *Sharanagati*. Sri Ramakrishna was no difference between devotion and surrender, one leads to the other. A devotee who loves God wholeheartedly naturally surrenders, and one who surrenders completely experiences divine love.

Sri Ramakrishna was no difference between devotion and surrender, one leads to the other. A devotee who loves God wholeheartedly naturally surrenders, and one who surrenders completely experiences divine love.

Śri Rāmakrishna life itself was a perfect example of *Bhakti* and *Sharangati*, his ecstatic devotion to *kāli*, his absolute dependence on God and his childlike surrender to the Divine will. His teachings continue to inspire seekers worldwide, showing that the path of love and surrender leads to ultimate realization.

Ethical Implications in Daily Life

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

The ethics of Ramakrishna's spirituality provide a practical framework for individuals seeking to lead a life of righteousness and fulfilment. Some practical applications of his ethical teachings include:

- I. Practicing honesty in personal and professional life.
- II. Cultivating a spirit of selfless service and helping those in need.
- III. Treating all individuals with respect, irrespective of caste, creed, or social status.
- IV. Overcoming selfish desires and ego-driven pursuits through inner detachment.
- V. Maintaining devotion and gratitude toward the Divine in all circumstances.

Ramakrishna guided his householder devotees to live in the world like a mudfish, which though living in the mud, remains free from it; or like the mother turtle who swims in the water but has her mind on the bank of river where her eggs are; or like a loose woman who performs all her household duties keeping her mind always on her sweetheart. He said, "Surely you have duties to perform". Dharma or karma can be performed with the desire for results or without any desire for results. The former is referred to as sakama karma, while the latter is known as niskama karma. Sakama karma can be tied to moral actions but often involves attachment to worldly pursuits, leading us to forget God. In contrast, niskama karma is considered superior. The central message of the Bhagavad Gita emphasizes working selflessly, a principle also highlighted in other Hindu scriptures.^{xiii} However, Sri Ramakrishna pointed out the challenges of this ideal, stating, "It is very difficult... You may think you are working with a detached spirit, but attachment can quietly creep into your mind." Consequently, Ramakrishna advised household devotees to give God the power of attorney over their actions. By completely surrendering themselves and the results of their actions to God, they can trust that God will protect and guide them in every way. Thus, we find Professor S.C. Chatterjee stating that for Sri Ramakrishna, neither wealth, enjoyment, nor even moral and religious work—whether interested or disinterested can be considered the true end of man's life. These are merely means to the ultimate end, which is the realization of God. Of course, we may pursue other goals in life, such as wealth, enjoyment, and virtuous deeds; however, we should subordinate all of these to the final and true objective: God realization. We ought to regulate our lives in such a way that the pursuit of these other goals aids rather than hinders our quest for the true and highest purpose of life. This highest end is often referred to as liberation (mukti). Sri Ramakrishna believed that one day, all individuals will attain liberation, stating, "Our life in the world is the training ground for the attainment of liberation."^{xiv}

Conclusion

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

Ramakrishna's spirituality offers an integrated vision where ethical conduct and spiritual realization go hand in hand. His teachings remind us that true morality is not about mere rule-following but about the inner transformation that leads to divine love, compassion, and selfless service. By embodying these ethical values in our daily lives, we can move toward both personal fulfillment and social harmony, fulfilling the essence of his spiritual wisdom. Sri Ramakrishna emphasized unity at a transcendent level and harmony at an empirical level, which forms the essence of his message about the harmony of religions. He understood that establishing this harmony does not require complex theories. Instead, it simply involves allowing people to follow their own religions or sects without disturbing others. The most important characteristic of a monk, according to Sri Ramakrishna, is his love for all beings. Whatever work he performs is for the benefit of others, and he never thinks of his own needs. His love and compassion for others come as naturally to him as breathing does to us.

In Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual practice, he did not exhibit any inferiority complex toward any particular religion. He maintained the same respectful attitude toward all religions, including Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. He showed the same regard for the idol worship of various gods and goddesses in Hinduism while also honoring the worship of the formless divine. It is noteworthy that Sri Ramakrishna's religious sentiments beautifully present morality through his saying, "As many opinions as there are paths."^{xv}

For him, genuine devotion to God is incomplete without love for all beings. His teachings continue to inspire people to foster a heart full of kindness and selfless love. Sri Ramakrishna perfectly manifested this quality in his own life. His body, mind, nerves, and sense organs were entirely focused on one great thought the thought of God. Science has changed in various degrees, including the mind of man. Technology has changed his life, and the tempo of this change is getting faster and faster. but the subconscious psyche of man is slow to move and it is impossible for it to catch up with the break-neck pace of modern life and Human values are being lost under the shape of modernity, anxious men by diverting their attention from the uncertainties of change to the certainty of the changeless. We need a new spiritual impetus; a new force that would allow us to overcome the challenges that lie ahead. Sri Ramakrishna humanized God and divinized man. Ramakrishna's universal heart saw Godhood in all. Sri Ramakrishna transcended the entire sectarian outlook and thus paved the way for the Universal Brotherhood.

References:

ⁱ (Bilimoria, Prabhu, & sharma, 2007, p. 34)

ⁱⁱ (Vivekananda, 2013, p. 281)

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

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iv (Shyam, 2017, p. 25)
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vii (Sarkar, 1999, p. 23)
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ix (Nikhilananda, The Gospel Of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 37)
x (DasGupta, 2003, p. 73)
xi (Nikhilananda, The Gospel Of Sri Ramakrishna, p. 250)
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xiii (Chapple, 2009)
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xv (Sarkar, 1999, p. 35)