

SRI RAMAKRISHNA AND ṚTA

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This article appeared in the June, 2009 issue the [Prabuddha Bharata](#). Swami Samarpanananda is stationed at the Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University at Belur Math, the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Order.

Swami Vivekananda's composition 'Hymn to Sri Ramakrishna', sung during evening prayers by thousands of devotees around the world, is special in many ways. It is a prayer that addresses the impersonal aspect of Sri Ramakrishna and, from the literary point of view, it is an acrostic poem in which the first syllables of every line, put together, form the powerful mantra *om̐ namo bhagavate rāmakṛṣṇāya*.

In this article we shall discuss the first three words of the hymn: *om̐*, *hrīṃ*, and *ṛtam*, with particular stress on the third one. These three words taken together give us an idea who and what Sri Ramakrishna is.

Om is the mystic sound that represents God. The Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas, Tantras, and other scriptures of Hinduism unanimously accept Om as the symbol of the Supreme Godhead, the non-dual Brahman. For someone who has realized Brahman the best way to describe it is through *mauna*, silence; the next best way is through Om. This is the reason why almost every mantra of the Hindus pointing at God begins with Om. This mystic sound-symbol has also found acceptance in later religious movements of India, like Sikhism.

There is a whole range of discussion on Om in many Upanishads, particularly in the *Mandukya Upanishad*, where this mystic sound is described as the key to creation and to spiritual realization. The importance of Om has been discussed in the Gita and other scriptures as well, and in recent times many books have been written on the subject. *Hrīṃ* is a *bīja*, a seed-mantra, used in Tantric rituals and practices to signify the divine power responsible for Creation.

According to Tantra, the absolute Brahman, described as *sat-cit-ekam*—the non-dual Consciousness that alone exists—requires its own inseparable Shakti, creative Power, to effectuate the Creation. Sri Ramakrishna uses the examples of the calm and wavy waters to explain the unity of absolute Brahman and Brahman associated with its creative Power. Shakti remains in potential form within Brahman, and at the time of Creation this Shakti becomes active. This activated Power, inseparable from Brahman, is signified by the *bīja* mantra *hrīṃ*.

By using two of the most potent mystic equivalents of the Godhead, Om and *hrīṃ*, Swami Vivekananda posits Sri Ramakrishna as the supreme Brahman, beyond any kind of modification, and also as Shakti, the creative Power responsible for the creation of the universe. Brahman and Shakti are like fire and its burning power, or like milk and its whiteness. The third term *ṛta* is equally profound. In the same hymn, Swamiji mentions *ṛta* again in the phrase *rāge kṛte ṛtapathe*, adding importance to the term.

General Meaning of Ṛta

In the Vedas the word *ṛta* has been used quite frequently, but in later scriptures its use dwindled. In its place words like *satya*, truth, and *dharma*, righteousness, have been used more frequently, often carrying the same connotation as *ṛta*. *Ṛta* has, of course, been also used in the Vedas to convey many different ideas. The word *ṛta* is derived from the root *ṛ*—its meaning in the Rig Veda being 'to go the right way, be pious or virtuous'; so *ṛta* means 'fixed

or settled order, law, rule'. In the Mahabharata, the Bhagavata, and some other sacred texts *ṛta* means 'true', and at times 'truth personified'.

In the *Panchatantra* and again in the Mahabharata, *ṛta* is used to mean truth in general, and also righteousness. In the *Manu Samhita* the term is used to mean the right means of livelihood for a brahmana, as opposed to, for example, agriculture which is *anṛta* for him. Sayanacharya explains the term *ṛtasya* as *avaśyam̐bhāvinaḥ karmaphalasya*¹, which means that *ṛta* is something that would always produce results.

This production of results by *ṛta* is not like the inevitable cause-and-effect relationship of the material world, according to which every cause would definitely produce an effect, but it is more like the successful harvest of a crop in which the farmer obtains the full yield instead of any other result. The *Nighantu*—a Vedic lexicon—defines *satya* as having six synonyms, one of which is *ṛta*. According to this, *ṛta* is truth and *anṛta* is the opposite, as in the mantra 'satyamidvā u tarṁ vayamindram̐ satvāma nānṛtam; let us extol Indra who is in truth, and not in untruth' (8.62.12).

In the Vedas *ṛta* has also been used to mean *yajña*, sacrifice, *satya*, truth, and *dharma*, moral code. Many scholars believe that these terms originally referred to one and the same concept—a belief that continues till today. This has made many general readers translate *ṛta* as truth, which is not always correct, as can be seen in the following Vedic mantra: *Satyam̐ bṛhad ṛtam ugram̐ dīkṣā tapo brahma yajñah̐ pṛthivīm̐ dhārayanti*. These are the virtues that nourish and sustain this world: *satyam̐ bṛhat*, the great truth; *ṛtam ugram*, formidable order; *dīkṣā*, consecration, initiation; *tapas*, austerity; *brahma*, prayer, spiritual exaltation; and *yajña*, sacrifice.²

The distinct use of *satya* and *ṛta* in the above mantra shows that Vedic sages gave different connotations to these two terms. Therefore, *satya* and *ṛta* do not imply the same thing in all contexts. The same principle applies to the triad of *yajña*, *dharma*, and *ṛta*—they do not refer to the same concept, as can be verified from the following examples. *Śraddhayā satyamāpyate*; one attains the truth through faith.³ This attainment of truth through *śraddhā* is a unique concept never ascribed to *ṛta*. *Ṛtam̐ ca satyam̐ cābhiddhāt tapaso'dhajāyata*; from the blazing *tapas* was born *ṛtam*, eternal order, and truth.⁴

In a shanti mantra of the *Taittiriya Upanishad* we come across 'ṛtam̐ vadiṣyāmi, satyam̐ vadiṣyāmi; I shall call you righteousness, I shall call you truth'. Here also *satya* and *ṛta* are not one and the same. While commenting on this, Acharya Shankara differentiates the two by explaining that *ṛta* 'is an idea fully ascertained by the intellect in accordance with the scriptures and in conformity with practice', and *satya* 'is that which is reduced to practice through speech and bodily action'.⁵ According to this explanation, *ṛta* is an ideal state, whereas *satya* is the state of actuality.

The concept of *ṛta* as the eternal law, that deserved utmost respect, was so ingrained in the Vedic sages that they thought of two gods as its custodians. The sages believed that wherever *ṛta* is successfully observed, it is due to the sternness of the twin gods Mitra and Varuna: 'mitrah̐ satyo varuṇo dharmapatīnām; Mitra for true-speaking (*satya*), Varuna for the sway of law's (dharma's) protectors.'⁶ In this mantra, truth and dharma have been entrusted separately to Mitra and Varuna, who otherwise are together responsible for *ṛta*. This indicates that in the Vedas *ṛta* is conceived from truth and dharma conjointly.

The importance of *yajna*, sacrifice, and its close connection with *ṛta* and *satya* is hinted in this shloka: *Satyam̐ ca me śraddhā ca me jagacca me dhanam̐ ca me viśvam̐ ca me mahaśca me krīḍā ca me modaśca me jātam̐ ca me janiṣyamāṇam̐ ca me sūktam̐ ca me sukṛtam̐ ca me*

yajñena kalpantām. May my truth and my faith, and my activities and my wealth, and my world and my glory, and my play and my enjoyment, and my children and my future children, and my hymns and my pious acts prosper through sacrifice (18.5).

The power of truth and *ṛta* increases in the world through the practice of sacrifices. In the ‘Purusha Sukta’ the very act of Creation has been described as a yajna performed by the gods and in which Purusha, God, himself is sacrificed. This shloka also suggests that though these three terms— *ṛta*, *satya*, and *yajña*—are closely connected, by all means they are not the same.

Ṛta has also been used quite often to denote what today is understood by *dharma*. In fact, later scriptures replaced *ṛta* with *dharma*. Let us see some examples. *Pari cinmarto draviṇaṁ mamanyād-ṛtasya pathā namasā vivāset*; let a man think well on wealth and strive to win it by the path of law and worship.⁷ *Ṛtasya panthām na taranti duṣkṛtaḥ*; the evil doers do not travel on the path of the eternal law (9.73.6). *Ṛtavākena satyena śraddhayā tapasā suta indrāyendo pari srava*; pressed with words of law and truth, with faith and devotion, O Indu, flow towards Indra (9.113.2). *Ṛtaṁ śamsanta rju dīdhyānā*; praising the eternal law, thinking straight (the sons of Angirasa held the rank of sages) (10.67.2). As we shall see later, there is a close link between *ṛta* and *dharma*, though they are not precisely the same.

Ṛta: The Eternal Law that Regulates Everything

Coming closer to understanding *ṛta*, we find that the Vedas use the term to mean the divine law that makes everything in the universe behave the way it should: ‘*Ṛtasya raśmim-anuyacchamānā bhadraṁ bhadraṁ kratum-asmāsu dhehi*; obedient to the rein of the law eternal, give us every blissful thought’ (1.123.13). The eternal law, in producing the cosmic order, also produces beauty, symmetry, and symphony. Living beings and the world of matter participate in a beautiful orderly life through the power of the eternal and sacred law, *ṛta*, working in and through them:

*Ṛtasya hi śurudhaḥ santi pūrvīr-
ṛtasya dhītirvijinānī hanti;
Ṛtasya śloko badhirā tatarda
karṇā budhānaḥ śucamāna āyoḥ.*

The eternal law has varied food that strengthens;
thought of the eternal law removes transgressions.
The praise-hymn of the eternal law, arousing, glowing,
has opened the deaf ears of the living.

*Ṛtasya dr̥ḥhā dharuṇāni santi
purūṇi candrā vapuṣe vapūṁṣi;
Ṛtena dīrgham-iṣaṇanta pṛkṣa
ṛtena gāva ṛtamā viveśuḥ.*

Firm-seated are the eternal law’s foundations;
In its fair form are many splendid beauties.
By the holy law long lasting food they bring us;
by the holy law have cows come to our worship.

*Ṛtaṁ yemāna ṛtamid vanoty-
ṛtasya śuṣmasturayā u gavyuḥ;
Ṛtāya pṛthvī bahule gabhīre
ṛtāya dhenū parame duhāte.*

Fixing the eternal law he, too, upholds it;
Swift moves the might of law and wins the booty.
To the law belong the vast deep earth and heaven:
milchkin supreme, to the law their milk they render (4.23.8–10).

*Madhu vātā ṛtāyate madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ;
mādhvīrnaḥ santvoṣadhīḥ.*

The winds waft nectar, the rivers pour nectar for the person who keeps the law: so may the plants be honeyed for us (1.90.6).

As mentioned earlier, Mitra and Varuna are held jointly responsible for the upkeep of *ṛta*, for which they are praised by the sages. It is further stressed that both individuals and society gather strength by adjusting to *ṛta*, the divine law:

*Tā vām viśvasya gopā devā deveṣu yajniyā, ṛtāvānā
yajase pūṭadkṣasā;*

I worship you—gods, holiest among the gods—who guard this all; you, faithful to the law, whose power is sanctified (8.25.1).

*Ṛtāvānā ni ṣedatuḥ sāmṛājyāya sukratū, dhṛtavratā
kṣatriyā kṣatram-āśatuḥ;*

They, true to the law, exceeding strong, have set themselves down for sovereignty; valiant heroes, whose laws stand fast, they have obtained their sway (8.25.8). Here it is stressed that strength comes to one who is true to the law. And the same applies to social laws, which the king is the guardian of.

What Mitra and Varuna are to the divine law, the king or the government is to society. If it is important to observe the commands of religion, it is equally important to follow the social code of conduct as set by the community. To gain worldly prosperity and also spiritual well-being one has to hold on to the law, both divine and social, which are but aspects of *ṛta*. *Ṛta* has also been perceived as the supreme Reality in the form of *ṛta-sat*—dweller in *ṛta*.⁸

God and his laws are inseparable, and by observing the injunctions of the scriptures one follows God's commands. This identity of the law and the law-giver can be further seen in the following mantra:

*Ayamasmi jaritaḥ paśya meha viśvā
jātānyabhyasmi mahnā;
Ṛtasya mā pradiśo vardhayantyādardiro
bhuvanā dardarīmi.*

Indra says: 'I exist, O singer! Look upon me here; all that exists I surpass in splendour. The eternal law's commandments make me mighty. When I rend, I rend asunder the worlds' (8.89.4). This mantra depicts the sage filled with the realization of the Divine—here Indra stands for the Divine—in the form of splendour and *ṛta*; while later spiritual aspirants had the vision of the Divine in anthropomorphic forms. This concept of the Divine in the form of law is common to Judaism and Buddhism as well.

Another interesting shloka hints that God himself reveals the mantras in the hearts of the sages, and that *ṛta*—here it might mean 'rites'—can be born anew. It seems that there is no end to the discovery of new laws pervading the universe: 'vyūrṇoti hṛdā matim navyo jāyatām-ṛtam; he reveals the hymn in the heart, let *ṛta* be born anew' (1.105.15).

It is the Divine that reveals the law to the sages, and when these revelations are recorded and handed over from generation to generation they become known as scriptures. Therefore, the rishis have emphasized the need to live up to the words and spirit of the scriptures for individual and social upliftment, both material and spiritual. This is emphasized in every religion. And since everything in the universe is regulated by this principle of *ṛta*, it is the duty of every religion to keep an eye on the proper flow of the world order. Whenever something is done against this universal rhythm it is considered *anṛta*, opposite to the natural law. This violation of *ṛta* destabilizes the inner order of things.

Ṛta, Vedanta, and Sri Ramakrishna

According to Vedanta, *tattva* is ‘that which is’; *satya* has the same meaning too; whereas *dharma* means ‘that which holds’. Conversely, the nature of *ṛta* is connected with ‘is-ness’ and with ‘holding together’ as well. This means that in essence *ṛta* is one with *satya* and *dharma* taken together. In a wider sense *tattva*, *satya*, *dharma*, and *ṛta* are intrinsically interconnected, though their applied connotations are different. As we have seen, in the Vedas *ṛta* has been identified with different ideas according to context.

These different connotations are not contradictory but complementary in nature. Material sciences attempt to access *ṛta* from the perspective of the physical universe; the science of *yajna* is a similar pursuit from the perspective of religion; *ṛta* translated into social conduct is considered *dharma*; and the philosophical dimension of *ṛta* is called *satya*. Creation is brought about through certain principles, although the Creator itself is beyond these principles.

The fundamental principles underlying this Creation, and also permeating it, are collectively called *ṛta*, which is one with the Divine. As quoted earlier, the way to power, peace, and goodness lies in abiding by *ṛta*, in observing those fundamental principles experienced by the sages and later recorded in the scriptures. As *ṛta* is one with the Divine, for those who consider Sri Ramakrishna a manifestation of the Divine, he is *de facto* a personification of *ṛta*, the one who marks the path to *ṛta* and gives strength to follow that path. Swami Vivekananda says that Sri Ramakrishna is Om—the mystic, non-dual equivalent of Brahman; *hrīṃ*, the creative Power associated with Brahman; and *ṛta*, the divine law operating in the universe.

The practical aspect of this philosophical conception evolves in an integrated process of *sadhana*. The constant attempt to adjust, to attune oneself to *ṛta* in every action is known as *karma yoga*; the identification with Om, the sound-symbol of the Real—an identification that in itself rejects the unreal—is the practice of *jñāna yoga*; and *hrīṃ*, the mystical syllable associated with the human representation of the Divine, is the *bīja-mantra* that arouses devotion in the longing soul—being intimately related to it is the path of *bhakti yoga*.

Om hrīṃṛtam is not only a philosophically profound statement, it also leads to spiritual awakening. The way to the principle that is Sri Ramakrishna, therefore, lies in holding on to *ṛta* and being upright and attuned to the universe, to flow with Om and discriminate between the Real and the unreal, and to surrender to *hrīṃ* and manifest the creative Power lying in the heart.

References

1. Rig Veda, 1.1.8.
2. Atharva Veda, 12.1.1.
3. Yajur Veda, 19.30.
4. Rig Veda, 10.190.1.
5. *Eight Upaniṣads*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 1.247.

6. Yajur Veda, 9.39.
7. Rig Veda, 10.31.2.
8. Yajur Veda, 10.24 and Rig Veda, 4.40.5.