

1 SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S HARMONIZING PHILOSOPHY OF VIJÑĀNA VEDĀNTA

Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings—carefully recorded by Mahendranāth Gupta in the *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta* (hereafter *Kathāmṛta*)—have been a source of lively dialogue and debate among devotees and scholars throughout the world. His teachings on God and the universe, the meaning and purpose of human existence, and the various kinds of spiritual experience resonate with numerous Indian philosophical traditions, including Tantra, Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Dvaita Vedānta, and Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. Not surprisingly, it has proven extraordinarily difficult to determine Sri Ramakrishna's overall philosophical outlook.

Commentators from the late nineteenth century up to the present have adopted three main interpretive approaches to Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy. Many have interpreted Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views in terms of a particular philosophical sect.¹ For instance, commentators such as Svāmī Oṃkārananda, Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, and Dineś Bhaṭṭācārya argue that Advaita Vedānta was Sri Ramakrishna's ultimate standpoint.² By contrast, Mahendranāth Gupta claims that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy comes closest to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita

1. Throughout this chapter, I use the words “sect” and “sectarian” in a strictly non-normative sense. The words “sect” and “sectarian” correspond roughly to the Sanskrit words *sampradāya* and *sāmpradāyika* respectively.

2. See Svāmī Oṃkārananda, “*Brahma o Śakti abhed*,” *Udbodhan* 66.5 (1964), 227–32; Svāmī Oṃkārananda, “*Nitya o Līlā*,” *Udbodhan* 66.6 (1964), 287–96; Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, “*Svāmī Vivekānanda o Advaitavāda*,” *Udbodhan* 65.2 (1962), 73–80 and 65.3 (1962), 80–81, 138–44; Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, “*Nānā Dṛṣṭite Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*,” *Udbodhan* 82.5 (1980), 220–26; Dineś Bhaṭṭācārya, “*Darśan Cintāi Śāṅkara-Rāmānuja-Madhva-Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*,” in *Viśvacetanāi Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*, ed. Svāmī Prameyānanda et al. (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 1987), 594–609; Svāmī Prajñānānanda, *Vāṇī o Vicār: Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛter Vyākhyā o Viśleṣaṇ*, 5 vols. (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1976–82).



(K 698).³ Meanwhile, scholars such as Heinrich Zimmer and Walter Neevel have suggested that Tāntrika philosophy provides the master framework for making sense of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings.⁴

Rejecting all such efforts to classify Sri Ramakrishna as the “flag bearer” of a particular sectarian school, Narasingha Sil argues that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views are unsystematic and even inconsistent, so the very attempt to derive *any* coherent philosophical position from his teachings is doomed to fail.⁵ As Sil puts it, there is no “consistency in Ramakrishna's devotionism or spirituality because he was so enchantingly freewheeling in his god-consciousness.”⁶

Sil, in my opinion, too hastily assumes that there is no consistency or coherence in Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views. On the other hand, sectarian attempts to pigeonhole Sri Ramakrishna's teachings into one particular philosophical school have tended to be Procrustean. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna consciously

3. For helpful discussions of the extent to which Sri Ramakrishna could be considered a Viśiṣṭādvaitin, see Svāmī Prabhānanda, “*Kathāmṛte Śrīrāmakṛṣṇer Mat ki Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda*?” in *Svāmī Vivekānanda Smārak* (Kolkata: Bidhannagar Vivekananda Smarak Samity, 2012), 1–7, and Arvind Sharma, *Ramakrishna and Vivekananda: New Perspectives* (Bangalore: Sterling Publishers, 1989), 46–51.

4. Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 560–602; Walter Neevel, “The Transformation of Śrī Rāmakrishna,” in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, ed. B. L. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 53–97. Freda Matchett agrees with Neevel that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy “can be understood much more appropriately in Tantric terms than in Śāṅkara's,” but she departs from Neevel in claiming that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy represents a combination of Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Vedānta. Matchett, “The Teaching of Rāmakrishna in Relation to the Hindu Tradition and as Interpreted by Vivekānanda,” *Religion* 11 (1981), 176. Dhīreśānanda argues that Sāradānanda's biography of Sri Ramakrishna, *Līlāprasāṅga*, champions a “Śāktādvaitic” interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings (“*Nānā Dṛṣṭite Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*,” 221–22). By contrast, both Neevel and Matchett claim that Sāradānanda's *Līlāprasāṅga* endorses an Advaitic interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to adjudicate this scholarly controversy concerning how best to understand Sāradānanda's philosophical interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna.

5. Narasingha Sil, “Is Ramakrishna a Vedantin, a Tantrika or a Vaishnava? An Examination,” *Asian Studies Review* 21.2 (Nov. 1997), 212. Similarly, Amiya P. Sen claims that Sri Ramakrishna “borrowed ideas across Vedantic schools without being sensitive to the problems of their reconciliation.” “Universality and Sri Ramakrishna: An Historical and Philosophical Reappraisal,” *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 6.1 (1999), 91.

6. Sil, “Is Ramakrishna a Vedantin, a Tantrika or a Vaishnava?” 212. Also see Narasingha Sil, “Kali's Child and Krishna's Lover: An Anatomy of Ramakrishna's *Caritas Divina*,” *Religion* 29.3 (Sept. 2009), 289–98. Sil's views on this issue are based largely on his earlier psycho-biographical studies of Sri Ramakrishna, especially his book *Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1991). In this chapter, I focus on Sri Ramakrishna's recorded philosophical teachings, which can—and should—be studied apart from dubious psychoanalytic speculations about Sri Ramakrishna.



drew upon ideas from a variety of philosophical sects and often warned against sectarian bigotry and fanaticism, so it is highly unlikely that he himself would have belonged exclusively to a particular sect.

In light of Sri Ramakrishna's catholic attitude and his unique syncretic method, a number of commentators—beginning with Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples, Swami Vivekananda and Svāmī Turīyānanda, as well as Sri Aurobindo—have adopted a third approach to Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy that avoids the pitfalls of the other two interpretive approaches. At the end of the nineteenth century, Vivekananda suggested that the nonsectarian and harmonizing spirit of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings is best captured not by any particular philosophical school but by the original nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which sought to harmonize a variety of apparently conflicting philosophical views.⁷ In a remarkable Bengali letter written in 1919, Svāmī Turīyānanda pointed out deep affinities between Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy and the nonsectarian Vedānta of the *Gītā* and claimed that Sri Ramakrishna accepted the validity of all spiritual philosophies and religious doctrines.⁸ In a similar vein, Sri Aurobindo declared in 1910 that the “teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda” provide the basis for a “more perfect synthesis” of the Upaniṣads than Śaṅkara's world-denying philosophy of Advaita Vedānta.⁹

Following their lead, a number of more recent commentators—including Satis Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Tapasyananda, and Jeffery D. Long—have interpreted Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy as a harmonizing, nonsectarian form of Vedānta, which they characterize variously as “Samanvayī Vedānta,”¹⁰ “Samanvayī

7. See, for instance, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda: Mayavati Memorial Edition*, vol. 3 (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 2007), 233. For a detailed discussion of Swami Vivekananda's understanding of nonsectarian Vedānta vis-à-vis Sri Ramakrishna, see sections I and II of my article “*Asminnasya ca tadyogaṃ śāsti*: Swami Vivekananda's Interpretation of *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.19 as a Hermeneutic Basis for Samanvayī Vedānta,” in *The Life, Legacy, and Contemporary Relevance of Swami Vivekananda: New Reflections*, ed. Rita Sherma and James McHugh (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming).

8. *Svāmī Turīyānander Patra* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2005), 254–55. For an English translation of the letter, see *Spiritual Treasures: Letters of Swami Turīyananda*, trans. Swami Chetananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2000), 195–98.

9. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 13: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga, Shorter Works, 1910–1950* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1998), 10–11.

10. Satis Chandra Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies: Their Synthesis in the Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, [1963] 1985), 104–52. Swami Mumukshananda also uses the term “Samanvayī Vedānta” in his article “Vedānta: Concepts and Application through Sri Ramakrishna's Life,” in *Vedānta: Concepts and Application* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2000), 292–316.



Advaita,”¹¹ “Neo-Advaita,”¹² “Neo-Vedānta,”¹³ and “Integral Vedānta.”¹⁴ Joining forces with these scholars, I will make the case in this chapter that a nonsectarian Vedāntic framework best accounts for the catholicity, sophistication, and overall consistency and coherence of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical teachings.

In particular, I characterize Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy as “Vijñāna Vedānta,” a nonsectarian philosophy—rooted in the mystical experience of what he calls *vijñāna*—that accommodates and harmonizes various apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual disciplines.¹⁵ In the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly contrasts two types of spiritual experience: *jñāna* (“Knowledge”), the Advaitic realization of the impersonal Ātman, and *vijñāna* (“Intimate Knowledge”), a vaster, richer, and more intimate realization of God as the Infinite Reality that is both personal and impersonal, with and without form, immanent in the universe and beyond it. I contend that Sri Ramakrishna’s unique perspective of *vijñāna* holds the key to appreciating the unity and coherence of his philosophical teachings.

Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical views were based not on intellectual speculation but on his own spiritual experiences. Section I discusses briefly how his upbringing, eclectic religious practices, and numerous spiritual experiences all contributed to his mature philosophical outlook. Section II then addresses the important hermeneutic question of how to reconstruct accurately Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical views on the basis of the *Kathāmṛta*, which contains dialogues in Bengali between Sri Ramakrishna and his visitors. I delineate five basic interpretive principles that will govern my reconstructions of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical positions throughout this book. With this hermeneutic groundwork in place, section III provides a detailed reconstruction of the six main tenets of Sri Ramakrishna’s nonsectarian philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta. I hope to demonstrate that the concept of *vijñāna* provides the unifying framework for interpreting and synthesizing Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical views on the scope of reason, the nature of God, the relationship between Brahman and

11. Svāmī Śraddhānanda, *Bandi Tomāi: Rāmākṛṣṇa-Vivekānanda Bhābāñjali* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 1994), 128–41.

12. Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies*, 149–52.

13. Swami Tapasyananda, *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990), 9–33, esp. 23–33; Jeffery D. Long, “Advaita and Dvaita: Bridging the Gap—the Ramakrishna Tradition’s both/and Approach to the Dvaita/Advaita Debate,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 16.2 (Spring 2008), 49–70.

14. Swami Bhajananda, “Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna,” *University of Calcutta Journal of the Department of Philosophy* 9 (2010), 1–56, esp. 27–28.

15. I coined the term “Vijñāna Vedānta” myself, but I later discovered that Sharma used a similar term, “*Vijñānadvaita*,” to describe Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy. See Sharma, *Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, 42.



Śakti, the ontological status of the universe, the different stages in spiritual experience, and the harmony of various religious and spiritual paths. I will also indicate briefly the scriptural basis of Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta by tracing each of its six tenets to passages from the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā*. Finally, section IV argues that his philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta helps bring to light some of the major weaknesses of Paul Hacker's "Neo-Vedāntic" paradigm for interpreting modern Vedāntins such as Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo.

I. The Spiritual Basis of Sri Ramakrishna's Philosophical Outlook: His Upbringing, Religious Practices, and Mystical Experiences

Sri Ramakrishna's upbringing and environment, his various religious practices and spiritual experiences, and his spiritual and philosophical training under numerous gurus all played an important role in shaping his mature philosophical outlook.¹⁶ Sri Ramakrishna was raised in a Vaiṣṇava household, which performed daily worship not only of the family Deity Raghuvīr (an epithet of Rāmacandra, an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu) but also of Śiva. In 1855, he became the priest of the Kālī Temple at Dakshineswar, a village near Kolkata. Rānī Rāsmaṇi, the unusually broad-minded founder of the Kālī Temple, was a Śākta whose "*iṣṭa-devatā*" ("Chosen Ideal") was Kālī, but she designed the Kālī Temple with the explicit intention of personifying the harmony of the Hindu sects of Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Śaivism. Accordingly, she installed next to the Kālī Temple a row of twelve temples dedicated to Śiva as well as another temple dedicated to Rādhākānta (an epithet for Kṛṣṇa). The liberal religious outlook of his parents and of Rānī Rāsmaṇi was a formative influence on Sri Ramakrishna, who would later teach the harmony of all religious and spiritual paths.

From 1855 to 1874, Sri Ramakrishna practiced numerous spiritual disciplines in a variety of traditions, including Tantra, Vaiṣṇavism, Advaita Vedānta, Islam, and Christianity.¹⁷ He claimed to have attained God-realization for the first time in 1856, by worshipping, and praying intensely to, the Divine Mother in the form of Kālī.¹⁸ Sri Ramakrishna then went on to practice, and to attain perfection in, numerous other *bhāvas* ("attitudes toward God"), including *dāsyabhāva*

16. For the biographical details in this section, I rely primarily on *LP*.

17. For a detailed account of Sri Ramakrishna's *sādhana* period, see *LPI / DP* 144–364.

18. To avoid cumbersome locutions, when I refer to the mystical experiences Sri Ramakrishna claimed to have had, I often leave out qualifying phrases such as "claimed to have" or "reportedly." However, it should be kept in mind throughout this book that these qualifying phrases are always implied. I am not dogmatically asserting the veridicality of Sri Ramakrishna's reported mystical experiences.



(“attitude of a servant”), *vātsalyabhāva* (“attitude of a parent”), *sakhībhāva* (“attitude of a friend”), and *mādhuryabhāva* (“attitude of a lover”). From 1861 to 1863, he was instructed in Tāntrika disciplines by his first guru, Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī, a female brahmin monk who was an adept in both Tāntrika and Vaiṣṇava practices. The learned Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī also had a deep knowledge of the scriptures as well as Vaiṣṇava and Tāntrika philosophy, so Sri Ramakrishna likely learned a great deal from her about the philosophical tenets of Vaiṣṇavism and Tantra.

In 1864, Sri Ramakrishna engaged in Advaitic discipline under the guidance of the itinerant Advaitin monk Totāpurī, and he quickly attained the highest knowledge of nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, a state in which all consciousness of duality is transcended. As Sri Ramakrishna himself mentioned, Totāpurī was well versed in Advaitic philosophy and taught him the key philosophical doctrines of Advaita Vedānta.¹⁹ In 1866, after Totāpurī’s departure, Sri Ramakrishna remained in *nirvikalpa samādhi* for six months until he finally received a command from the Divine Mother to remain in “*bhāvamukha*,” a threshold state of consciousness between the relative and the Absolute (*LP* I.ii.159–78 / *DP* 303–21). Accordingly, instead of leaving his body in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, he remained in the state of *bhāvamukha*, reveling in both the personal and impersonal aspects of God and thereby realizing the equal validity of the paths of *bhakti* (devotion) and *jñāna* (knowledge).²⁰ (As we will see in section III, Sri Ramakrishna, in his later teachings, would refer to this unique spiritual state of *bhāvamukha* as “*vijñāna*.”) In the same year as his Advaitic practice, he also practiced Islamic *sādhana* under the guidance of a Muslim guru named Govinda Rāy—who was likely a Sufi—and realized God after three days.²¹ Toward the end of 1874, Sri Ramakrishna was instructed in the Bible and soon had an overwhelming vision of Jesus, who approached him and finally merged into him.²²

19. See, for instance, *K* 279–80 and 991 / *G* 297 and 915.

20. See Swami Tapasyananda’s excellent discussions of Sri Ramakrishna’s state of *bhāvamukha* in *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta*, 359–64 and *Sri Ramakrishna: Life and Teachings (An Interpretative Study)* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2008), 60–74.

21. During Sri Ramakrishna’s Islamic practice, passages from the Bengali translation of the *Qu’ran* were read out to him. He also practiced the disciplines prescribed in the *Qu’ran* and stopped worshipping Hindu deities during his Islamic practice. See *LP* I.ii.175–77 / *DP* 318–20. For an extensive account of Sri Ramakrishna’s Islamic *sādhana*, see Swami Prabhananda, *More about Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), 80–109.

22. For an account of Sri Ramakrishna’s Christian *sādhana*, see *LP* I.ii.210–12 / *DP* 356–58. Sri Ramakrishna revered Jesus as an incarnation of God and he owned a copy of the Bible, which was read out to him on occasion—especially the teachings of Jesus contained in the synoptic gospels. In general, it can be said that the form of Christianity practiced by Sri Ramakrishna was based more on the spiritual and ethical teachings of Jesus than on theological dogmas. For more details about Sri Ramakrishna’s Christian practices, see Swami Prabhananda, *More about Ramakrishna*, 110–48.



Sri Ramakrishna himself later acknowledged the importance of his eclectic religious practices and his various spiritual experiences in shaping his broad spiritual and philosophical outlook. As he put it, “I had to practice each religion for a time—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity. Furthermore, I followed the paths of the Śāktas, Vaiṣṇavas, and [Advaita] Vedāntins. I realized that there is only one God toward whom all are travelling; but the paths are different” (*K* 77 / *G* 129). Throughout this book, it is essential to bear in mind that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views were based not on intellectual reasoning but on his own religious practices and spiritual experiences.

II. Five Interpretive Principles for Reconstructing Sri Ramakrishna's Philosophical Views from the *Kathāmṛta*

While scholars have interpreted Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy in a variety of ways, they have rarely articulated the hermeneutic assumptions *underlying* their respective interpretations. As a result, commentators have tended to take Sri Ramakrishna's teachings out of the context in which they occur in the *Kathāmṛta*, without reflecting on the numerous interpretive challenges involved in gleaning Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views from conversations held in Bengali between himself and his numerous visitors and devotees. Before attempting to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy, it is essential to establish higher-order interpretive principles that will allow us both to determine accurately what he intended to convey through a particular teaching and to distinguish his own views from views to which he refers but to which he does not necessarily subscribe. Accordingly, I will now delineate five fundamental interpretive principles—IP1 through IP5—that will help us to determine Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views on the basis of the *Kathāmṛta*. Throughout the book, I will rely on these interpretive principles in order to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's positions on a variety of philosophical topics.

Interpretive Principle 1 (IP1): Instead of appealing to external philosophical doctrines or frameworks, we should strive to understand Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings on their own terms.

In accordance with the principle of interpretive charity, we should at least provisionally assume that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings are self-contained—that is, that they contain all the concepts necessary to understand them. Hence, in order to avoid eisegesis, we should—whenever possible—refrain from invoking philosophical doctrines or concepts to which Sri Ramakrishna

himself did not appeal. If a commentator *does* appeal to external doctrines or frameworks to explain Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views, then the burden is on the commentator to justify the use of these external concepts and to prove that these external concepts actually capture Sri Ramakrishna's own intentions.

Admittedly, virtually all commentators on Sri Ramakrishna's teachings claim to interpret his teachings on their own terms, so it might seem as if IP1 need not be explicitly stated. Unfortunately, however, many commentators have routinely violated IP1 by lapsing into the eisegetic practice of reading their own assumptions and conceptual frameworks into Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings. The eisegetic tendency of some Advaitic commentators has been especially egregious. Commentators such as Svāmī Oṃkārananda, Svāmī Prajñānānanda, and Dineś Bhaṭṭācārya repeatedly invoke Advaitic concepts and analogies—like the rope-snake analogy and the distinction between *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika* levels of reality—in order to explain Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings, even though Sri Ramakrishna himself never employed these Advaitic concepts.²³

It is worth noting that IP1 does not prohibit us from engaging in the comparative project of finding parallels between Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views and any number of existing philosophies, both Eastern and Western. For instance, Debabrata Sen Sarma and Swami Tadananda have fruitfully compared Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings with the philosophy of Kāśmīri Śaivism,²⁴ while Long has demonstrated affinities between Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy and both the Jaina *anekānta* doctrine and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy.²⁵ IP1 entails only that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings should be understood on their own terms *before* they are compared with other philosophies. In accordance with IP1, I strive throughout the book first to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views on the basis of his own teachings and then to analyze them from a cross-cultural perspective.

23. See, for instance, Oṃkārananda, "Brahma o Śakti abhed," 229–31; Prajñānānanda, *Vāṇī o Vicār*, vol. 1, 159–69, vol. 3, 244–60, vol. 4, 225–48; and Bhaṭṭācārya, "Darśan Cintāi Śaṅkara-Rāmānuja-Madhva-Śrīvāmakṛṣṇa," 605.

24. Debabrata Sen Sarma, "The Spiritual Life of Ramakrishna and His Gospel in the Light of Kashmir Shaivism," in *Sri Ramakrishna: Myriad Facets* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2011), 394–412; Swami Tadananda, "Kashmir Shaivism in the Light of Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings," in *Approaching Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), 195–206.

25. See, for instance, Long, "Advaita and Dvaita"; Jeffery D. Long, "(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together: Comparative Theology in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna," in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis Clooney (London: Continuum, 2010), 151–70; and Jeffery D. Long, "Anekānta Vedānta: Toward a Deep Hindu Religious Pluralism," in *Deep Religious Pluralism: Whitehead's Philosophy and Religious Diversity*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville: John Knox Westminster Press, 2005), 130–57.

Interpretive Principle 2 (IP2): The context of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings often provides crucial insight into their meaning and status.

Many commentators have tended to strip Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings of their context, ignoring the unique dialogic situation in which they were imparted. Three aspects of the context of his philosophical teachings are especially important. First, it is often helpful to know the viewpoint of the interlocutor to whom Sri Ramakrishna gives a particular teaching. In the next section, I will point to instances in the *Kathāmṛta* where a particular teaching becomes clearer when one understands the standpoint of the person with whom Sri Ramakrishna is speaking—whether, for instance, he is an Advaitin, a Vaiṣṇava Gosvāmī, or a follower of the Brāhmo Samāj.

Second, it is important to determine whether something the interlocutor said or asked prompted Sri Ramakrishna to give the teaching. For instance, in the entry from 21 September 1884, Sri Ramakrishna points out that after Pratāp Hājṛā once dismissed Śakti as a lower reality than Brahman, Sri Ramakrishna responded that “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable,” thus strongly suggesting that the primary thrust of this teaching is to assert the reality of Śakti (*K* 568 / *G* 550).

Third, the verbal cues Sri Ramakrishna uses to frame many of his teachings help us to determine whether the teaching represents his own view or the view of another person or sect which he may or may not accept. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna almost invariably prefaces his teachings on Advaita Vedānta by adding a verbal cue such as “Vedāntavādīs say . . .” or “Jñānīs say . . .,” thereby indicating that these teachings do not necessarily represent his own view. In fact, the verbal cues used in certain contexts sometimes indicate that he *contrasts* the Advaitic standpoint with his own standpoint. In the entry from 26 October 1884, Sri Ramakrishna states, “In the light of Vedāntic reasoning, the world is illusory, unreal as a dream. The Supreme Soul is the Witness—the witness of the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep” (*K* 691 / *G* 651). Shortly thereafter, he asserts, “But for my part I accept everything: *Turiya* and also the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep. I accept all three states. I accept all—Brahman and also *māyā*, the universe, and its living beings” (*K* 691 / *G* 652). Notice that the thrice-repeated verbal cue “I accept” clearly indicates that this teaching—and not the Advaitic view he previously stated—represents the view he actually holds.

Verbal cues such as this one—which appear frequently in the *Kathāmṛta*—are extremely important in helping us to determine Sri Ramakrishna's own philosophical views. If a verbal cue such as “But for my part . . .” (*K* 691 / *G* 652), “This is my final and most mature opinion” (*eṭi pākā mat*) (*K* 228 / *G* 257), “the teachings of this place” (*ekhānkār mat*) (*K* 568 / *G* 550), “Do you know my attitude?” (*K* 577 / *G* 559), or “I have come to the final realization that . . .” (*śeṣ ei bujhechi*) (*K* 594 / *G* 638) frames a particular teaching, then we can be certain that the teaching represents Sri Ramakrishna's own view.



Interpretive Principle 3 (IP3): Any adequate interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings must take into account Sri Ramakrishna's avowed nonsectarianism, his catholic acceptance of all sectarian views and religious faiths as effective spiritual paths.

At various places in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna expresses his acceptance of all sects and spiritual paths. For instance, he declares:

I have practised all the disciplines; I accept all paths. I respect the Śāktas, the Vaiṣṇavas, and also the Vedāntins. Therefore people of all sects come here. And every one of them thinks that I belong to his school. I also respect the modern Brahmajñānīs. (*K 552 / G 538*)

Here, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly indicates his acceptance of “all paths,” including the Śāktas who worship Kālī, the Vaiṣṇavas who worship Kṛṣṇa, the “modern Brahmajñānīs”—by which he means the followers of the Brāhmo Samāj—who accept the personal but formless God, and the Advaita Vedāntins, who accept only the impersonal Brahman.²⁶ Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna cannily anticipates later attempts by various commentators to pigeonhole him into a particular sect: as he puts it, every follower of a sect who visits him “thinks that I belong to his school.” It is precisely because Sri Ramakrishna did not affiliate himself exclusively with any particular sect that he was able to accept *all* sects and make everyone feel as if he belonged to their sect alone.

Accordingly, IP3 rules out any attempt to pigeonhole Sri Ramakrishna into a particular exclusivistic sect—be it Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Vaiṣṇavism, or Tantra—since any such sectarian interpretation would fail to account for Sri Ramakrishna's uncompromisingly nonsectarian attitude. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “A person who has harmonized everything is indeed a real man. Most people are one-sided. But I find that all opinions point to the One. All views—the Śākta, the Vaiṣṇava, the Vedānta—have that One for their center. He who is formless is also with form, and it is He who appears in different forms” (*K 494 / G 490*). Similarly, he declares on another occasion that “Śaṅkara's Advaitic explanation of Vedānta is true, and so is the Viśiṣṭādvaitic interpretation of Rāmānuja” (*K 778 / G 733*). It is clear from such statements that an essential aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical outlook is his conscious harmonization of various sectarian views on the basis of a maximally capacious understanding of God as both personal and impersonal, both with and without form. In light of this fact,

26. It should be noted that when Sri Ramakrishna refers to “Vedāntins” in the *Kathāmṛta*, he means the followers of Advaita Vedānta, who take the universe to be unreal.





any interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings that fails to take into account his nonsectarian outlook is seriously deficient.

Interpretive Principle 4 (IP4): 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.

One of the greatest challenges in determining Sri Ramakrishna's overall philosophical framework is his eclectic method of employing concepts and terms from a wide variety of philosophical sects, including Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Vaiṣṇavism, Tantra, and Śāktism. For instance, when explaining his teaching that the universe is a real manifestation of God, Sri Ramakrishna often explicitly appeals to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaitic position that "Brahman, or the Absolute, is qualified by the universe and its living beings" (*K* 778 / *G* 733). Gupta, the author of the *Kathāmṛta*, infers from such statements that Sri Ramakrishna was a Viśiṣṭādvaitin: "Ṭhākur [Sri Ramakrishna] does not say that this universe is unreal like a dream. He says, 'If we say so, then the weight of the bel-fruit will fall short.' His view is not the doctrine of *māyā* [of Advaita Vedānta] but the doctrine of Viśiṣṭādvaita" (*K* 698).²⁷ Noticing certain fundamental differences between Sri Ramakrishna's views and those of Śāṅkara, Gupta concludes that Sri Ramakrishna was a Viśiṣṭādvaitin.

By contrast, some commentators have claimed that Sri Ramakrishna was an Advaitin, partly on the basis of his teachings on *nirvikalpa samādhi*. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna states, "On attaining the Knowledge of Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, one realizes Brahman, the Infinite, without form or shape and beyond mind and words" (*K* 181 / *G* 218). According to Svāmī Oṃkārananda, since "Śakti does not exist" in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, Sri Ramakrishna's acceptance of the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* implies his acceptance of the Advaitic view that Śakti is unreal from the ultimate standpoint.²⁸ Meanwhile, Neevel emphasizes Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti and the reality of the universe as a manifestation of God, on the basis of which he concludes that Sri Ramakrishna accepted a "basically tantric framework of concepts and values."²⁹

However, all such sectarian interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views are based on the simplistic hermeneutic assumption that Sri Ramakrishna's approving reference to a doctrine or spiritual experience of a particular philosophical school makes him a card-carrying member of that school. If this assumption were true, Sri Ramakrishna would be guilty of flagrant contradiction, since

27. Nikhilananda omits this passage from his translation of the *Kathāmṛta*.

28. Oṃkārananda, "*Brahma o Śakti abhed*," 230.

29. Neevel, "The Transformation of Śrī Rāmakrishna," 78.





he refers approvingly to numerous *conflicting* sects. For instance, Advaita Vedānta accepts the reality of *nirguṇa* Brahman, while Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta does not. If Sri Ramakrishna's approving references to both these sects meant that he was at once an Advaitin and a Viśiṣṭādvaitin, he would be committed to the outright contradiction that *nirguṇa* Brahman both exists and does not exist.

In fact, Sri Ramakrishna's stance toward various philosophical sects is much more nuanced and dialectical than sectarian interpreters assume: he accepts what he takes to be the *spiritual core* of each philosophical sect without necessarily accepting all the specific doctrines of that sect.³⁰ Hence, while Sri Ramakrishna recognizes that different philosophical sects are often mutually exclusive at the level of doctrine, he strives to harmonize these sects at the level of spiritual experience.³¹ From Sri Ramakrishna's nonsectarian perspective, each philosophical sect is based on a unique spiritual truth, so the core spiritual truths of all these schools are complementary rather than conflicting.

Following Tantra and Śāktism, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that the impersonal Brahman and the dynamic Śakti are complementary aspects of one and the same Divine Reality (*K* 861 / *G* 802).³² However, in contrast to sectarian Tāntrikas who conceive the ultimate reality as Śiva, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that one and the same "Saccidānanda" ("Truth-Consciousness-Bliss")—the well-known Vedāntic epithet for the Supreme Reality—is called by various names such as

30. For a rigorous and detailed defense of this argument, see the final two chapters of Chatterjee's *Classical Indian Philosophies* (77–152).

31. Sri Ramakrishna gained knowledge of a wide variety of Indian scriptures and traditional Indian philosophies through numerous oral sources, including the spiritual and philosophical instructions he received from his gurus, the philosophical discourses of learned pandits who visited him in Dakshineswar, and scriptural and philosophical texts that were read aloud to him. One of the few books Sri Ramakrishna himself owned and recommended to others—and which was read out to him on numerous occasions—was Bipin Bihārī Ghoṣāl's *Mukti o tāhār Sādhan* (*Liberation and Spiritual Practice*) (Kolkata: Udbodhan, [1881] 1987), an eclectic Bengali compilation of passages from various Indian philosophical texts. Ghoṣāl provides excerpts from a wide range of Indian scriptures and philosophical texts, including three Upaniṣads (Kaṭha, Praśna, and Muṇḍaka), the *Bhagavad Gītā*, two major texts from the Vaiṣṇava tradition (the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*), four texts from the Tāntrika tradition (*Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, *Kulārṇava Tantra*, *Jñānasaṅkalini Tantra*, and *Śivasamhitā*), and many texts from the Advaitic tradition, including *Aṣṭāvakra Samhitā* (a copy of which Sri Ramakrishna owned), *Pañcadaśī*, *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, and *Ātmabodha*.

32. Sri Ramakrishna's knowledge of Tantra and Śāktism derived primarily from his own varied spiritual experiences, especially his realization of *vijñāna*, which revealed to him that Brahman and Śakti are inseparable and that the universe is a real manifestation of Śakti. However, he also learned Tāntrika principles from his Vaiṣṇava Tāntrika guru, the Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī, and from a book he owned, Ghoṣāl's *Mukti o tāhār Sādhan*, which includes numerous passages from Tāntrika texts.





“Śiva,” “Kālī,” and “Kṛṣṇa” (*K* 422 / *G* 423).³³ Following Advaita Vedānta, Sri Ramakrishna conceives the “eternal” (*nitya*) aspect of the Infinite Reality as the Advaitic *nirguṇa* Brahman, which is realized in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*.³⁴ However, he rejects the Advaitic doctrine that the universe, living beings, and the personal God are not ultimately real.³⁵ Following Viśiṣṭadvaita, he accepts the reality of God’s “*līlā*,” God’s sportive manifestation as the individual soul and the universe. However, while Rāmānuja conceives the Supreme Reality as only personal (*saguṇa*), Sri Ramakrishna teaches that the Supreme Reality is *both*

33. Although the early Upaniṣads do not refer to the full term *saccidānanda*, they do frequently refer to Brahman separately as *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*. See, for instance, Taittirīya Upaniṣad II.i.1 and Chāndogya Upaniṣad VI.ii.1. The Tejobindu Upaniṣad III.1–III.12 contains one of the earliest references to *saccidānanda*.

34. Sri Ramakrishna’s understanding of Advaita Vedānta comes closer to Gauḍapāda’s Advaita and the post-Śāṅkaran Yoga-oriented Advaita tradition than to Śāṅkara’s Advaita. While Śāṅkara grants empirical (*vyāvahārika*) reality to the universe, Gauḍapāda frequently claims that the universe is as unreal as a dream, as in *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* II.31 and III.29. When explaining Advaitic doctrine, Sri Ramakrishna follows Gauḍapāda in likening the universe to a dream (*K* 691 / *G* 651–52), and he conspicuously refrains from invoking Śāṅkara’s distinction between *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika* levels of reality. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly insists that *nirvikalpa samādhi* is necessary for—indeed, virtually equivalent to—*brahmajñāna* (see, for instance, *K* 83 / *G* 133). Sri Ramakrishna’s close alignment of *brahmajñāna* with *nirvikalpa samādhi* is in line with prominent post-Śāṅkaran Advaitic texts such as *Pañcadaśī* and *Vedāntasāra*, both of which stress the importance of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. There were at least five sources for Sri Ramakrishna’s distinctive understanding of Advaita. First, and most importantly, his teachings on Advaita derived from his own Advaitic practices and his repeated experience of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Second, his Advaita guru Totāpurī taught Sri Ramakrishna an Advaitic doctrine—closer to Gauḍapāda’s than to Śāṅkara’s—that emphasizes the dream-like nature of the world, the need for constant meditation on the Ātman, and the importance of *nirvikalpa samādhi* for the attainment of *brahmajñāna* (see, for instance, *K* 279–80 / *G* 297 and *K* 991 / *G* 915). Third, Sri Ramakrishna owned a copy of the Advaitic book *Aṣṭāvakra Saṃhitā*, which strongly emphasizes the path of *vicāra* (“intellectual reasoning”) and the illusoriness of the world. Fourth, Sri Ramakrishna also might have been influenced by various Advaitic texts quoted in Ghoṣāl’s *Mukti o tāhār Sādhan*, such as *Pañcadaśī* (which stresses *nirvikalpa samādhi*) and the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* (which repeatedly likens the world to a dream). Fifth, Sri Ramakrishna’s knowledge of Advaita was likely enriched by his conversations with the numerous Advaita pandits he encountered in Dakshineswar over the course of several decades.

35. Some scholars argue against a non-realist interpretation of Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. See, for instance, Bradley Malkovsky, *The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkarācārya* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 45–67. According to Malkovsky, “one can find passages in Śaṅkara’s writings that may be used in support of either a realist or illusionistic interpretation of his ontology” (*The Role of Divine Grace*, 50). Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to refute Malkovsky’s interpretation of Śāṅkara, but see note 53, where I argue that Śāṅkara’s interpretation of *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.12 strongly indicates a non-realist understanding of *saguṇa* Brahman. Numerous scholars also support my position that Śāṅkara consistently held that the personal God and the universe are unreal from the absolute (*pāramārthika*) standpoint. See, for instance, Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1939), 365–412, and M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1932] 1993), 336–82.





personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*). Following Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, Sri Ramakrishna teaches the equal validity of various attitudes toward God, including the attitudes of servant (*dāsya*), friend (*sakhya*), parent (*vātsalya*), and lover (*mādhurya*). However, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas take the Supreme Reality to be the personal God Kṛṣṇa, and they maintain that the *nirguṇa* Brahman is only Kṛṣṇa's "peripheral brilliance" (*tanubhā*). Sri Ramakrishna, in contrast to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, maintains that the Supreme Reality is equally *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* and refrains from subordinating the impersonal aspect of the Supreme Reality to the personal aspect, or vice versa.

A pattern has clearly emerged: while Sri Ramakrishna embraces the spiritual core of numerous sectarian philosophies, he does not accept all the doctrines of *any* of these sects. Therefore, instead of trying to pigeonhole Sri Ramakrishna's views into a particular sectarian framework, we should strive to honor his unique nonsectarian method of harmonizing the complementary spiritual truths embodied in various sects.

Interpretive Principle 5 (IP5): Sri Ramakrishna's various philosophical teachings should be synthesized on the basis of a foundational concept or framework taught and accepted by Sri Ramakrishna himself.

Many commentators have attempted to establish the consistency of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views by invoking an external philosophical framework, be it Tāntrika, Advaitic, Viśiṣṭādvaitic, or Vaiṣṇava.³⁶ However, this eisegetic interpretive method clearly violates IP1, which prohibits any unjustified appeal to an external framework in order to explain Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings. A more promising and noneisegetic means of establishing the consistency and coherence of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views is to find a foundational concept or framework *internal* to his teachings that lends philosophical coherence to all of his apparently disparate teachings. In accordance with IP5, I will argue in the next section that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna* provide precisely such an immanent framework for establishing the coherence and interconnectedness of his various philosophical teachings. In the course of this book, I will show that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical framework of *vijñāna* holds the key to understanding his views on God, religious diversity, mystical experience, and the problem of evil.

36. See references in notes 2–4.



III. The Central Tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta

Sri Ramakrishna's realization of God through various religious paths and his unique spiritual state of *bhāvamukha* formed the experiential basis for his later teachings, which we find in the *Kathāmṛta*. Although he almost never refers to “*bhāvamukha*” in the *Kathāmṛta*, he refers repeatedly to the spiritual state of “*vijñāna*,” which—as we will see shortly—is a synonym for *bhāvamukha*. Tellingly, Sri Ramakrishna indicates that his notion of *vijñāna* can be found in scriptures such as the Upaniṣads, the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*.³⁷ Pursuing Sri Ramakrishna's hint, I will argue that his *vijñāna*-based philosophy is best understood in terms of the nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā*. Accordingly, in the course of this section, I will not only outline the six fundamental tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta but also indicate briefly their scriptural basis in the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā*.

Vijñāna Vedānta I (VV1): After attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, ordinary people leave their body within twenty-one days, but certain divinely commissioned people known as *īśvarakoṭis* are able to return from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and attain *vijñāna*—a spiritual state even greater than *brahmajñāna*—in which perfect *jñāna* and perfect *bhakti* are combined.

At numerous points in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna distinguishes two categories of people: while “*jīvakotiṣ*” are “ordinary people” (*sādhāraṇa lok*), “*īśvarakoṭis*” belong to a spiritual elite consisting only in “Incarnations of God and those born as a part of one of these Incarnations” (*avatār vā avatārer aṃśa*) (*K* 800 / *G* 749). According to Sri Ramakrishna, *īśvarakoṭis* are capable of a much greater spiritual attainment than *jīvakotiṣ*:

When the *kuṇḍalinī* rises to the *sahasrāra* and the mind goes into *samādhi*, the aspirant loses all consciousness of the outer world. He can no longer retain his body. If milk is poured into his mouth, it runs out again. In that state, death occurs within twenty-one days. . . . But the *īśvarakoṭis*, such as the Incarnations of God, can come down from this state of *samādhi*. They can descend from this exalted state because they like to live in the company of devotees and enjoy the love of God. God retains in them the “ego

37. At *K* 985 / *G* 910, Sri Ramakrishna remarks that the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* is taught in the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and “Vedānta” (by which he presumably means the Upaniṣads). At *K* 390 / *G* 393 and in many other places in the *Kathāmṛta*, he points out that the idea of *vijñāna* is also found in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*.



of Knowledge” [*vidyār āmi*] or the “ego of Devotion” [*bhakter āmi*] so that they may teach people. Their minds move between the sixth and the seventh planes. They run a boat-race back and forth, as it were, between these two planes. (*K 505 / G 500*)

While ordinary *jīvas* leave their body within twenty-one days of attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, *īśvarakoṭis* are able to “come down” from the state of *samādhi* in order to help others, shuttling back and forth between the empirical and absolute planes of consciousness.³⁸ Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings on the unique spiritual state of the *īśvarakoṭis* are clearly based on his own experience of remaining in *nirvikalpa samādhi* for six months and then returning to the empirical plane after receiving the divine command to “remain in *bhāvamukha*.” In the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna refers to the *īśvarakoṭi*’s state of *bhāvamukha* as “*vijñāna*,” a stage “beyond even *brahmajñāna*” (*K 266 / G 287*).³⁹

Sri Ramakrishna frequently explains the difference between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* by means of the metaphor of the staircase and the roof:

The *jñānī* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, “Not this, not this.” Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijñānī*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more [*kintu vijñānī jini viśeṣrūpe tāhār saṅge ālāp karen tini āro kichu darśan karen*]. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized as Brahman through the eliminating process of “Not this, not this” is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*. A man cannot live on the roof for a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in *samādhi*

38. Sri Ramakrishna’s claim that ordinary souls leave their body in *samādhi* within twenty-one days seems to be based on his own six-month immersion in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, during which time his body was kept alive by a *sādhu* who occasionally forced milk down his throat. He also indicates, however, that he learned a similar teaching from a *brahmacārin* (celibate spiritual aspirant): “A *brahmacārin* once said to me, ‘One who goes beyond Kedar cannot keep his body alive.’ Likewise, a man cannot preserve his body after attaining *brahmajñāna*. The body drops off in twenty-one days” (*K 346 / G 354*). Sri Ramakrishna’s conception of the *īśvarakoṭi* is not so easy to trace historically. As far as I am aware, the term *īśvarakoṭi* is not found in any of the major Indian scriptures or philosophical schools. Śāradānanda suggests that Sri Ramakrishna’s concept of the *īśvarakoṭi* resembles the Sāṃkhyan concept of the *prakṛtilīna puruṣa* and the Vedāntic concept of the *adbhikārika*. See *LP II.i.71–73 / DP 617–19*.

39. See Tapasyananda’s helpful discussion of the connection between *vijñāna* and *bhāvamukha* in *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta*, 359–64.





come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings. . . . This is known as *vijñāna*. (K 50–51 / G 103–4)

Sri Ramakrishna describes the *jñānī* in Advaitic terms as one who attains *brahmajñāna* by reasoning that Brahman alone is real and the universe is unreal. The *vijñānī*, however, goes beyond even *brahmajñāna* by attaining the more expansive realization that Brahman “has become the universe and its living beings.”⁴⁰ As Sri Ramakrishna puts it elsewhere, while the *jñānī* dismisses the universe as a “framework of illusion” (*dhokār ṭāṭī*), the *vijñānī* embraces the universe as a “mansion of mirth” (*majār kuṭī*) (K 479 / G 478). The Advaitic *jñānī* realizes that *nirguṇa* Brahman alone is real, while the *vijñānī* attains the greater realization that the “Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*.”

That Sri Ramakrishna considers the *vijñānī* to be superior to the *jñānī* is clear from the fact that he repeatedly contrasts the spiritual selfishness of *jñānīs* with the spiritual compassion of *vijñānīs*. Sri Ramakrishna likens *jñānīs*, who seek only their own salvation, to “a hollow piece of drift-wood” that “sinks if even a bird sits on it” (K 482 / G 479). By contrast, *vijñānīs* like Nārada, who strive to help others achieve spiritual enlightenment, “are like a huge log that not only can float across to the other shore but can carry many animals and other creatures as well” (K 482 / G 479).⁴¹ Tellingly, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly declares himself to be a *vijñānī*: “I do not have the nature of a *jñānī*. . . . The Divine Mother has kept me in the state of a *bhakta*, a *vijñānī*” (K 391 / G 393).

Sri Ramakrishna explains that the “superior devotee” (*uttam bhakta*)—another name for the *vijñānī*—“sees that God alone has become everything,” and he then immediately adds, “Read the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata*, and the Vedānta, and you will

40. In conversation, Swami Krishnasakhananda pointed out to me that Sri Ramakrishna describes the *vijñānī* as “coming down” from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, which seems to imply that *vijñāna* is a lower state than *brahmajñāna*. Throughout this chapter, I have been careful not to claim that *vijñāna* is a “higher” state than *brahmajñāna*, since Sri Ramakrishna never made such a claim. However, Sri Ramakrishna *did* explicitly claim that *vijñāna* is “beyond even” *brahmajñāna* (K 266 / G 287), and he repeatedly affirmed that *vijñāna* is a much rarer, more intimate, and more comprehensive realization of the Divine Reality than *brahmajñāna*. Perhaps, then, we can say that Sri Ramakrishna took Advaitic *brahmajñāna* to be the *highest* spiritual experience but took *vijñāna* to be a *greater*—that is, fuller and more intimate—state than *brahmajñāna*. This seems to be Sharma’s view: “[T]hough Ramakrishna is one with *Advaita Vedānta* in accepting the realization of *nirguṇa Brahman* as the summit of religious experience, he does not regard it as the final religious experience. For him the religious experience of coming back to the world to realize the identity of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa Brahman* is a desirable next step” (*Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, 40).

41. I agree with Sharma that “Ramakrishna thinks more highly of the *vijnani* than the *jnani*” (*Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, 40).





understand all this” (*K* 985 / *G* 910).⁴² Here, Sri Ramakrishna himself hints that his teachings on *vijñāna* can be found in the Vedāntic scriptures. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo has made a convincing case that the *Gītā* employs the term *vijñāna* in a manner that comes remarkably close to Sri Ramakrishna’s use of the term.⁴³ For instance, in his discussion of *Gītā* 7.2—which begins, “I will speak to you of *jñāna* and *vijñāna*”—Sri Aurobindo interprets *jñāna* as the “essential” knowledge of the impersonal Ātman, “the one immutable Self and silent Spirit,”⁴⁴ while he interprets *vijñāna* as the “comprehensive” or “integral” realization that “the Divine Being is all.”⁴⁵

In the remainder of this section, I will attempt to demonstrate that Sri Ramakrishna’s concept of *vijñāna*, when understood in all its ramifications, provides the master framework within which all of his major philosophical teachings should be understood. In particular, I will argue that the five remaining tenets of Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual philosophy—VV2 through VV6—all derive from the unique standpoint of *vijñāna* embodied in VV1.

Vijñāna Vedānta 2 (VV2): Since the rational intellect is inherently limited, spiritual experience is the only reliable basis for arriving at supersensuous spiritual truths. On the suprarational basis of *vijñāna*, we can affirm truths about God that appear to be contradictory or illogical to the rational intellect.

Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly teaches that the rational intellect can never grasp the supersensuous truths of the spiritual domain. He has two favorite analogies to illustrate this teaching. At several places in the *Kathāmṛta*, he highlights our inability to “comprehend the nature of God” (*K* 341 / *G* 351) or to “understand God’s ways” by means of the rhetorical question, “Can a one-seer pot hold ten seers of milk?” (*K* 229 / *G* 257). By likening the finite mind to a “one-seer pot,” Sri Ramakrishna points to the fundamental limitations of the rational intellect and its inherent incapacity to grasp spiritual realities.

Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna often teaches: “You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes; what need is there of knowing how many thousands of branches and millions of leaves there are in the orchard?” (*K* 907 / *G* 841). It is significant that

42. Sri Ramakrishna uses the terms *īśvarakoṭi*, *vijñāni*, and *uttam bhakta* interchangeably throughout the *Kathāmṛta*. That these three terms are synonymous is clear from the fact that he employs the same staircase-roof analogy to explain the spiritual state of all three.

43. See Ayon Maharaj, “Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*: Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and the Secret of *Vijñāna*,” *Philosophy East and West* 65.4 (October 2015), 1209–33.

44. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 19: *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), 264.

45. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 266.





this teaching was almost invariably given as a rebuke to visitors who asked particular questions about supersensuous matters, such as “Sir, is a man born again?” (*K* 907 / *G* 841), “Sir, what do you think of Theosophy and Spiritualism? Are these true?” (*K* 879 / *G* 819), and “Sir, if God alone does everything, how is it that a person is punished for his sins?” (*K* 976 / *G* 901). In the entry from 3 July 1884, Sri Ramakrishna clarifies that his mango-orchard analogy is meant to encourage us to strive to realize God through spiritual practice instead of engaging in “futile reasoning” about rationally insoluble metaphysical questions (*K* 501 / *G* 496).

In fact, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly approves of two spiritually beneficial forms of reasoning. First, he strongly encourages people to practice what he calls *sadasadvicāra*, reasoning “about the true and the false, about what is permanent and what is transitory” (*K* 501 / *G* 496). Second, in a fascinating exchange with Narendra (who would go on to become Swami Vivekananda), Sri Ramakrishna enthusiastically embraces a form of philosophical reasoning that acknowledges its own constitutive limitations:

Narendra said to M. [Gupta] that he had been reading a book by Hamilton, who wrote: “A learned ignorance is the end of philosophy and the beginning of religion.”

MASTER [SRI RAMAKRISHNA] (TO M.): “What does that mean?”

Narendra explained the sentence in Bengali. The Master beamed with joy and said in English, “Thank you! Thank you!” (*K* 255 / *G* 278)

Narendra, a student of Western philosophy at Scottish Church College, paraphrases the Scottish philosopher William Hamilton’s statement in *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic* (1859), “A learned ignorance is thus the end of philosophy, as it is the beginning of theology.”⁴⁶ According to Hamilton, philosophical reasoning should terminate in epistemic humility, an acknowledgment of the inherent limitations of reason. Interestingly, several sentences before making this statement, Hamilton remarks that philosophy has two main tasks: first, to admit “the weakness of our discursive intellect,” and second, to demonstrate “that the limits of thought are not to be assumed as the limits of possibility.”⁴⁷

Sri Ramakrishna’s enthusiastic approval of Hamilton’s statement about “learned ignorance” and his own frequent teachings on the limitations of the rational intellect suggest that he shares Hamilton’s metaphilosophical pessimism

46. William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, vol. 1 (Boston: Gould & Lincoln, 1859), 25.

47. Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, 25.





about reason. Indeed, it is precisely the point of Sri Ramakrishna’s “one-seer pot” analogy to illustrate what Hamilton calls the “weakness of our discursive intellect.” Moreover, in an entry from 22 October 1885, Sri Ramakrishna gently chides Dr. Sarkār for assuming—contrary to Hamilton—that the limits of thought *are* the limits of possibility: “It is not mentioned in his [Dr. Sarkār’s] ‘science’ that God can take human form; so how can he believe it?” (*K* 934 / *G* 864). In a Hamiltonian vein, Sri Ramakrishna points out that our inability to understand how God can incarnate as a human being, far from casting doubt on the possibility of *avatāra*-hood, only attests to the limitations of thought itself.

As his explicit approval of Hamilton’s statement indicates, Sri Ramakrishna believes that intellectual reasoning can be spiritually beneficial if it humbly acknowledges its own limitations and thereby opens itself to faith in spiritual realities that lie beyond the reach of the intellect:

It is very difficult to understand that God can be a finite human being and at the same time the all-pervading Soul of the universe. The *līlā* belongs to the same Reality to which the *nitya* belongs [*jārī nitya, tāhārī līlā*]. How can we say emphatically with our small intelligence that God cannot assume a human form? Can we ever understand all these ideas with our little intellect? Can a one-seer pot hold four seers of milk? Therefore one should trust in the words of holy men and great souls, those who have realized God. (*K* 934 / *G* 864)

According to Sri Ramakrishna, since we cannot rationally comprehend how God can be both *nirguṇa* and *sagūṇa* or how the *nitya* and the *līlā* can be complementary aspects of the same Reality, we should have faith in the testimony of “great souls” who have directly confirmed these spiritual truths through suprarational realization. In other words, Sri Ramakrishna’s Hamiltonian pessimism about reason goes hand in hand with VV1: Sri Ramakrishna—unlike Hamilton—bases his positive assertions about the nature of God and spiritual experience on his own experience of *vijñāna*. In light of Sri Ramakrishna’s principled pessimism about reason, it would be beside the point to object that Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings about God and spiritual experience are illogical or contradictory. For Sri Ramakrishna, spiritual truths that might *seem* contradictory or illogical to the rational intellect are validated on the experiential basis of *vijñāna*. As we will see in chapter 2, this aspect of Sri Ramakrishna’s thought bears striking affinities with the views of the contemporary theologian Benedikt Paul Göcke, who claims that God can possess various attributes and aspects that appear contradictory to the finite human mind.

Sri Ramakrishna’s insistence on the inability of the intellect to grasp spiritual truths finds scriptural support in many of the Upaniṣads. For instance, Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.9.1 declares that Brahman is “that from which speech, along with





mind, turn back, having failed to reach it.”⁴⁸ Just as Sri Ramakrishna teaches that supersensuous truths can be understood only through direct spiritual experience and not through intellectual reasoning, Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.2.23 declares: “This Ātman cannot be known through much study, nor through the intellect, nor through much hearing. It can be known through the Ātman alone to which the aspirant prays; the Ātman of that seeker reveals Its true nature.”⁴⁹ Moreover, the Upaniṣads, when characterizing the nature of Brahman, often revel in the language of paradox. The fifth *mantra* of the Īśā Upaniṣad, for instance, makes a number of paradoxical assertions about the Ātman which defy rational explanation: “That moves, That does not move; That is far off, That is very near; That is inside all this, and That is also outside all this.”⁵⁰

All the remaining tenets of Vijñāna Vedānta—namely, VV3 through VV6—should be understood from the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* and not from the limited standpoint of the rational intellect.

Vijñāna Vedānta 3 (VV3): The Infinite Divine Reality is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it, and much more besides.

At the foundation of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual philosophy is a startlingly expansive conception of God as the “Infinite Reality” (“*ananta*”) whose inexhaustible plenitude is beyond our comprehension (*K* 181 / *G* 218). Since God is infinite and illimitable, we should never limit God to what our finite intellects can grasp of Him. Sri Ramakrishna elaborates the infinitude of God as follows: “That Reality which is the *nitya* is also the *līlā*. . . [E]verything is possible for God. He is formless, and again He assumes forms. He is the individual and He is the universe. He is Brahman, and He is Śakti. There is no limit to God. Nothing is impossible for Him” (*jāhāri nitya tāhāri līlā. . . tāhāte sab sambhabe. sei tinī nirākār sākār. tinī svarāṭ virāṭ. tinī brahma, tinī śakti*) (*K* 997 / *G* 920). To the rational intellect, such contradictory attributes as personality and impersonality, form and formlessness cannot possibly belong to God at the same time. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that VV3 follows from VV2: since God's infinite nature cannot be confined within the narrow walls of our rational understanding, we should humbly accept that “everything is possible for God.”

48. Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, vol. 1, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), 387.

49. Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 157.

50. Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 12.





Sri Ramakrishna explicitly teaches the infinitude and illimitability of God from the standpoint of *vijñāna*: “The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*. . . . The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is Brahman is also Bhagavān; That which is beyond the three *guṇas* is also Bhagavān endowed with the six divine attributes” (*Vijñānī dekhe, jini nirguṇ, tinī saguṇ. . . . Vijñānī dekhe, jini brahma tinī bhagavān; jini guṇātīt, tinī ṣaḍaiśvaryapūrṇa bhagavān*) (*K 51 / G 104*). While the ordinary *jīva* is usually only capable of realizing God in a single limited aspect, the *vijñānī* realizes God in multiple aspects or forms, so a *vijñānī* alone—like Sri Ramakrishna himself—can authoritatively declare, on the basis of direct spiritual experience, that God is both personal and impersonal,⁵¹ both with and without form, both immanent and transcendent.

Hence, it is from the standpoint of *vijñāna* that we have to understand Sri Ramakrishna’s numerous teachings on the infinite and illimitable nature of God. Interestingly, one of the most frequent ways he conveys God’s infinitude is to employ relative-correlative grammatical clauses—which the Bengali language inherited from Sanskrit—such as “*jini saguṇ, tinī nirguṇ*” (“That which is *saguṇa* is also *nirguṇa*”) (*K 246 / G 271*), “*jini brahma, tinī bhagavān*” (“That which is Brahman is also Bhagavān”) (*K 51 / G 104*), “*jini brahma, tinī śakti*” (“That which is Brahman is also Śakti”) (*K 379 / G 382*), “*jini nirākār, tinī sākār*” (“That which is with form is also without form”) (*K 364 / G 370*), “*jārī rūp, tinī arūp*” (“That which has form is also without form”) (*K 246 / G 271*), and “*jārī nitya, tāhārī līlā*” (“The *līlā* belongs to That to which the *nitya* belongs”) (*K 380 / G 382*). I believe there are two main reasons why Sri Ramakrishna so frequently employs this relative-correlative grammatical structure. First, the relative-correlative grammatical structure helps convey the infinitude of God by ascribing certain attributes to the grammatical subject without explicitly naming or rigidly defining it. For instance, the grammar of the statement “*jini saguṇ, tinī nirguṇ*” implies a grammatical subject to which the attributes of *saguṇatva* and *nirguṇatva* apply but

51. To avoid any misunderstanding, I define here how I use the terms “personal” and “impersonal” throughout this book. The personal God (*saguṇa* Brahman) is the omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving God of theism who creates and governs the universe, who is responsive to our prayers, and with whom we are capable of having a loving relationship. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “It is enough to feel that God [*īśvara*] is a Person [*vyakti*] who listens to our prayers, who creates, preserves, and destroys the universe, and who is endowed with infinite power” (*K 100 / G 149*). The impersonal Reality (*nirguṇa* Brahman) is the nondual Brahman *without* any attributes—including even the omni-attributes of the theistic God. It should be obvious that “impersonal” does not imply “subpersonal.” The impersonal Brahman, far from being insentient like a stone, is the Supreme Reality *beyond* even divine personality. We cannot enter into a loving relationship with the impersonal nondual Brahman, since any such relationship would imply subject-object duality; rather, we can only realize our *identity* with the impersonal Brahman.



which is not *exhausted* by these attributes, thereby indicating that God is both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* and yet remains beyond both *saguṇatva* and *nirguṇatva*. Accordingly, at various points in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna declares that “God is with form, without form, and much more besides” (*tini sākār, nirākār, ābār kato ki*) (*K* 602 / *G* 577).

Second, the open-endedness of the relative-correlative construction allows Sri Ramakrishna to ascribe various attributes to God without committing himself to any narrow or sectarian doctrine about the nature of God. As VV2 indicates, while we can never rationally comprehend *how* God can be, say, both personal and impersonal or both with and without form, the *vijñānī* attains a direct supra-rational *experience* of the truth of these various aspects or attributes of God. By employing relative-correlative clauses to describe God, Sri Ramakrishna is able to affirm the reality of numerous aspects and attributes of God without attempting the impossible task of providing a rational explanation of how God can have these seemingly contradictory aspects and attributes.

Sri Ramakrishna frequently conveys the infinitude of God by comparing God to an infinite ocean that freezes into ice at certain places:

The *bhaktas*—the *vijñānīs*—accept both the impersonal and the personal God [*nirākār-sākār*], both God without form and God with form [*arūp-rūp*]. In a shoreless ocean—an infinite expanse of water—visible blocks of ice are formed here and there by intense cold. Similarly, under the cooling influence of *bhakti*, as it were, the Infinite appears before the worshipper as God with form. Again, with the rising of the sun of knowledge [*jñān-sūrya*], those blocks of ice melt and only the infinite ocean remains. (*K* 861 / *G* 802)

Superficially, this analogy might seem to support the Advaitic view that *saguṇa* Brahman is ontologically inferior to *nirguṇa* Brahman. Oṃkārananda, for instance, argues that since the ice “melts” with the rising of the “sun of knowledge,” Sri Ramakrishna’s analogy indicates that *saguṇa* Brahman has only “relative or *vyāvahārika* reality.”⁵² However, Oṃkārananda overlooks the fact that Sri Ramakrishna explicitly frames this analogy not from the Advaitic standpoint of the *jñānī* but from the vaster standpoint of the *vijñānī*, who realizes that God is *both* personal and impersonal, *both* with and without form. By means of this analogy of the infinite ocean, Sri Ramakrishna teaches that the personal God of the *bhaktas* and the impersonal Brahman of the *jñānīs* are equally real, since they

52. Oṃkārananda, “*Nitya o Līlā*,” 293.



are complementary aspects of one and the same impersonal-personal Infinite Reality.⁵³

In his explanation of this analogy of the ocean on 27 December 1883, Sri Ramakrishna makes absolutely clear that *saguṇa* Brahman and *nirguṇa* Brahman are on an ontological par: “One who follows the path of knowledge [*jñāna*]⁵⁴—the path of discrimination—does not see the form of God anymore. To him, everything is formless. With the rising of the sun of knowledge, the ice form melts into the formless ocean. But mark this, form and formlessness belong to one and the same Reality [*jārī nirākār, tāri sākār*]” (*K* 364 / *G* 370). For Sri Ramakrishna, the infinite ocean corresponds to the *nirguṇa* aspect of the Infinite Reality realized by *jñānīs* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, while the ice formations correspond to the *saguṇa* and *sākāra* aspects of the same Infinite Reality, realized by *bhaktas*. Oṃkārananda clearly lapses into eisegesis by reading the Advaitic *vyāvahārika-pāramārthika* framework into Sri Ramakrishna’s analogy, since the very point of Sri Ramakrishna’s analogy is to teach, on the contrary, that *saguṇa* Brahman and *nirguṇa* Brahman are equally real.

Sri Ramakrishna also indicates the ontological parity of the personal God of *bhaktas* and the impersonal Absolute of *jñānīs* by means of his favorite teaching, “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable” (*brahma o śakti abhed*). At numerous places in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly identifies the doctrine that “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable” as his own view—“the teaching of this

53. In *Ramakrishna and Vivekananda* (38–45), Sharma notes this key difference between Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy and Advaita Vedānta. Ankur Barua has suggested to me in conversation that I might be misrepresenting Advaita by ascribing to it the position that *saguṇa* Brahman is ontologically inferior to *nirguṇa* Brahman. As Barua puts it, “an Advaitin could respond to Ramakrishna that what Ramakrishna seeks to indicate through *vijñāna* is already encapsulated in the pointer of the transpersonal Brahman of Advaita—the Brahman which cannot be conceptualised or named or encompassed somehow incorporates in its metaphysical plenitude the personalist dimensions of the divine.” While I have no objection to Barua’s preference for the term “transpersonal Brahman” to “impersonal Brahman,” I believe Barua overlooks a key ontological difference between the positions of Advaita Vedānta and Sri Ramakrishna. For the Advaitin, the transpersonal nondual Brahman alone is ontologically real, while the personal God of theism is *empirically* real but *ontologically* unreal. Śaṅkara, for instance, clearly adopts this position in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.12, where he 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. See Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahmasūtram: Śāṅkarabhāṣyopetaṃ* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 35; Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 64. Crucially, Śaṅkara claims that the *upāśya* Brahman is associated with unreal “*upādhis*” (limiting adjuncts), while the *jñeya* Brahman is entirely devoid of *upādhis*. Accordingly, the Advaitin takes the personal God of theism to be ontologically unreal. By contrast, Sri Ramakrishna takes the personal God and the impersonal nondual Reality to be *equally real* aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality.



place”—and contrasts it with the Advaitic position that Śakti is unreal. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna remarks:

Once, while listening to the various incidents of the life of Caitanya, Hājṛā said that these were manifestations of Śakti, and that Brahman, the All-pervasive Spirit [*Vibhū*], had nothing to do with them. But can there be Śakti without Brahman? Hājṛā wants to nullify the teaching of this place [*ekhānkār mat*]. I have realized that Brahman and Śakti are inseparable, like water and its wetness, like fire and its power to burn. Brahman dwells in all beings as the *Vibhū*, the all-pervasive Consciousness. (*K* 568 / *G* 550)

Three features of this passage are worth noting. First, Sri Ramakrishna ascribes to Hājṛā the position that Śakti is a lower reality than the pure all-pervasive Consciousness. Second, he explicitly contrasts Hājṛā's position with his *own* view—“the teaching of this place”—that “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable.” Third, Sri Ramakrishna indicates that his insight into the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti is based on his own experience of *vijñāna*, his direct realization that “Brahman dwells in all beings.”

Similarly, in the entry from 27 October 1882, Sri Ramakrishna contrasts the Advaitic “*jñāni's*” view that “Śakti is unreal, like a dream” with his own view that “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable” (*K* 84 / *G* 134). Therefore, the main point of his teaching that Brahman and Śakti are “inseparable” is to grant equal ontological status to both Brahman and Śakti. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, “That which is Brahman is also Śakti” (*jñī brahma, tinī śakti*): in other words, the static Brahman and the dynamic Śakti are equally real aspects of one and the same Divine Reality (*K* 379 / *G* 382). As he puts it, “When God is actionless [*niṣkriya*], I call God ‘Brahman’; when God creates, preserves, and destroys, I call God ‘Śakti’” (*K* 861 / *G* 802).

Tellingly, all of the analogies Sri Ramakrishna employs to illustrate the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti also indicate their ontological parity. For instance, he compares the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti to fire and its power to burn (*K* 55 / *G* 108), milk and its whiteness (*K* 84 / *G* 134), the sun and its rays (*K* 84 / *G* 134), a gem and its brightness (*K* 254 / *G* 277), water and its wetness (*K* 269 / *G* 290), a snake and its wriggling motion (*K* 269 / *G* 290), and still water and agitated water (*K* 254 / *G* 277). In his explanation of these analogies, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly emphasizes their bidirectionality. For instance, he explains his favorite analogy of fire and its power to burn as follows: “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable, like fire and its power to burn. When we talk of fire, we automatically mean also its power to burn. Again, the fire's power to burn implies the fire itself. If you accept the one, you must accept the other” (*K* 55 / *G* 108). Notice that he insists here on the analogy's bidirectionality: the concept of fire



entails its power to burn, and the fire's power to burn entails the concept of fire. Like fire and its power to burn, Brahman and Śakti mutually entail each other.

The bidirectionality of all these analogies clearly rules out an Advaitic interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti. According to Advaita, Śakti is ontologically dependent on *nirguṇa* Brahman, but *nirguṇa* Brahman is not ontologically dependent on Śakti, since Śakti is ultimately unreal. Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, teaches the mutual ontological dependence of Brahman and Śakti.⁵⁴ As he puts it, "one cannot think of Brahman without Śakti, or of Śakti without Brahman. One cannot think of the *nitya* without the *līlā*, or of the *līlā* without the *nitya*" (*K* 85 / *G* 134).

Sri Ramakrishna points out that his teachings on the infinitude of God are corroborated by the Vedas: "The Vedas teach that God is both with and without form, both personal and impersonal" (*K* 152 / *G* 191). Pursuing Sri Ramakrishna's hint, both Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo have shown that many of the Upaniṣads—such as Īśā, Kena, and Chāndogya—teach that God is at once personal and impersonal.⁵⁵ Similarly, George Thibaut argues that the Upaniṣads treat *nirguṇa* Brahman and *sagūṇa* Brahman as equally real and hence do not support Śaṅkara's thesis that *sagūṇa* Brahman is a "lower" reality.⁵⁶ More recently, Jaideva Singh has argued that the Upaniṣads accept the reality of both *nirguṇa* Brahman, "about which we can speak only in negative terms," and *sagūṇa* Brahman, "the dynamic, creative Brahman known as *Sachchidananda*."⁵⁷ According to Sri Aurobindo, the *Gītā* also teaches that God is the infinite "*Puruṣottama*" who is both personal and impersonal, both immanent in the universe and beyond it.⁵⁸

Vijñāna Vedānta 4 (VV4): There are two levels of Advaitic realization: while the *jñānī* realizes the acosmic nondual reality of *nirguṇa* Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* returns from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and

54. A major problem with Oṃkārananda's Advaitic interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" is that he fails to acknowledge the mutual ontological dependence of Brahman and Śakti. See Oṃkārananda, "*Brahma o Śakti abhed*," 230–31.

55. For Vivekananda's lectures on the Īśā and Chāndogya Upaniṣads, see *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2, 144–54 and 309–27. See also Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 17: *Isha Upanishad* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2003) and *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 18: *Kena and Other Upanishads* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001).

56. Śaṅkarācārya, *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya: Part I*, trans. and ed. George Thibaut (Oxford: Clarendon, 1890), cii–cxvi.

57. Jaideva Singh, *Vedānta and Advaita Shaivagama of Kashmir: A Comparative Study* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1985).

58. See Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the term *Puruṣottama* in chapter 15 of the *Gītā* in his *Essays on the Gita*, 435–49.



attains the richer, world-affirming nondual realization that God has become everything.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, the aim of the *jñānī* is to attain *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Like a “salt doll” melting into the ocean, the “I” of the *jñānī* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* merges completely into nondual Brahman (*K 50 / G 103*). Hence, from the *jñānī*'s standpoint, “Brahman alone is the reality, and all else is unreal” (*K 84 / G 133*). The *jñānī*'s realization of nondual Brahman is clearly acosmic, since *jīva*, *jagat*, and *īśvara* (or *saguṇa* Brahman)—all of which imply subject-object duality—are not perceived. This *jñānī*, in other words, is a Śāṅkara Advaitin.

The *vijñānī*, however, returns to the empirical plane after the attainment of *brahmajñāna* and sees the universe anew as a “mansion of mirth”:

Who is the best devotee of God [*uttam bhakta*]? It is he who sees, after the realization of Brahman, that God alone has become all living beings, the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles. One must reason at first, saying “Not this, not this,” and reach the roof. After that, one realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof—namely, brick, lime, and brick-dust. The *bhakta* realizes that it is Brahman alone that has become all these: the living beings, the universe, and so on. Mere dry reasoning—I spit on it! I have no use for it! [Sri Ramakrishna spits on the ground.] Why should I make myself dry through mere reasoning? . . . *Caitanya* [Consciousness] is awakened after *advaitajñāna* [knowledge of Advaita]. Then one perceives that God alone exists in all beings as Consciousness. After this realization comes *Ānanda* [Bliss]. *Advaita, Caitanya, Nityānanda*. (*K 247 / G 271–72*)

Whereas the *jñānī* attains “*advaitajñāna*” in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī*—the “*uttam bhakta*”—goes on to attain the even greater realization that Consciousness (“*caitanya*”) pervades the entire universe, which in turn results in “*nityānanda*,” a state of divine bliss in which one sees and experiences nothing but God.

Interestingly, Sri Ramakrishna elsewhere clarifies that the *vijñānī*'s realization of God in everything is a distinct form of Advaitic realization: “The *bhakta* also has a realization of oneness [*ekākār jñān*]; he sees that there is nothing but God. Instead of saying that the world is unreal like a dream, he says that God has become everything” (*K 740 / G 700*). After attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* returns to the relative plane and realizes that God is not only *nirguṇa* but also *saguṇa* and that God, as Śakti, has become *jīva*, *jagat*, and the twenty-four cosmic principles.⁵⁹ At one point, Sri Ramakrishna's invokes the

59. Accordingly, Sharma aptly characterizes Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy as “*Vijñānavaita*” (*Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, 42).



analogy of wax to explain his own vision of the universe from the standpoint of *vijñāna*: “Do you know what I see right now? I see that it is God Himself who has become all this. . . . I had a similar vision once before, when I saw houses, gardens, roads, men, cattle—all made of One Substance; it was as if they were all made of wax [*sab momer*]” (*K* 1022 / *G* 941–92). The analogy of wax aptly captures the fact that the *vijñānī* realizes not only that Brahman is *immanent* in all creation but also that all names and forms are themselves nothing but the same Brahman.

It is also evident from Sri Ramakrishna’s question, “Why should I make myself dry through mere reasoning?” that he prefers the *vijñānī*’s richer, world-affirming Advaitic realization to the “dry” *jñānī*’s world-negating Advaitic realization. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the world-denying outlook of Advaita Vedānta is based on a valid but intermediate stage of spiritual realization, which is surpassed by the *vijñānī*’s realization that God alone exists and that everything in the universe is God sporting in various forms.

Sri Ramakrishna’s Vijñāna Vedānta, then, 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.

As numerous commentators have noted, there are many passages in the Upaniṣads that lend strong support to Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings on the world-affirming Advaitic realization of the *vijñānī*. For instance, both Svāmī Śraddhānanda and Chatterjee have pointed out that “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” (“All this is indeed Brahman”), the well-known statement from Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.1, is much more convincingly interpreted from Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint of *vijñāna* than from Śaṅkara’s world-negating Advaitic standpoint.⁶⁰ As Chatterjee points out, Advaitins deny the reality of the universe, so they have to maintain that “there is no all but only Brahman,” thereby distorting the natural meaning of the Upaniṣadic statement.⁶¹ By contrast, from Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” means that everything in the universe actually *is* “Brahman in different forms.”⁶²

60. See Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies*, 112–13 and Śraddhānanda, 135–41.

61. Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies*, 112. See also Śaṅkara’s interpretation of “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.3.1.

62. Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies*, 112.





Similarly, Sri Aurobindo argues that the *Gītā*, far from dismissing the world as unreal, in fact teaches “real Advaita,” the “utmost undividing Monism” which “sees the one as the one even in the multiplicities of Nature,”⁶³ as in 7.19, which declares that “Vāsudeva is everything” (*vāsudevaḥ sarvam*). Sri Aurobindo's conception of the “real Advaita” of the *Gītā* bears obvious affinities with—and, indeed, is partly indebted to—Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on the world-affirming Advaitic realization of the *vijñānī*.⁶⁴

Vijñāna Vedānta 5 (VV5): The *vijñānī*, who accepts the reality of both the *nitya* and the *līlā*, is able to adopt various attitudes toward—and attain various forms of union with—God on different planes of consciousness, all of which are true.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, the Advaitic *jñānī* only accepts the reality of the “*nitya*”—that is, *nirguṇa* Brahman—and therefore dismisses the “*līlā*,” God's sportive manifestation as *jīva* (“soul”) and *jagat* (“universe”), as unreal. *Jñānīs*, as he puts it, “arrive at the *nitya*, the Indivisible *Saccidānanda*, through the process of ‘*neti, neti*.’ They reason in this manner: ‘Brahman is not the *jīvas*, nor the *jagat*, nor the twenty-four cosmic principles’” (*K* 479 / *G* 476). By contrast, *vijñānīs*, “after attaining the *nitya*, realize that Brahman has become all this—the *jīvas*, the *jagat*, and the twenty-four cosmic principles” (*K* 479 / *G* 477). Sri Ramakrishna describes the unique state of the *vijñānī* as follows: “The *vijñānī* always sees God. . . . He sees God even with his eyes open. Sometimes he comes down to the *līlā* from the *nitya*, and sometimes he goes up to the *nitya* from the *līlā*” (*K* 479 / *G* 477). While the *jñānī* realizes the *nitya* only in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* has the more comprehensive realization that both the *nitya* and the *līlā* are real aspects of God, so the *vijñānī* comes down from the plane of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and sees that it is God alone who sports in the form of *jīva* and *jagat*.

Shortly thereafter, Sri Ramakrishna makes clear that he prefers the *vijñānī*'s many-sided and all-embracing attitude to the *jñānī*'s one-sided acceptance of the *nitya* alone: “A mere *jñānī* trembles with fear. . . . A mere *jñānī* is one-sided and monotonous [*ekgḥeye*]. He always reasons, ‘It is not this, not this. The world is like a dream.’ But I have raised both my hands. Therefore, I accept everything. . . . I am not afraid of anything. I accept both the *nitya* and the *līlā*” (*K* 482 / *G* 479). Explicitly adopting the standpoint of the *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna accepts the reality of both the *nitya* and the *līlā* and is hence able to move fearlessly from the *nitya* to the *līlā* as well as from the *līlā* to the *nitya*. Elsewhere, he declares

63. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 448.

64. See Maharaj, “Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.”





unequivocally that “the *līlā* is real” and that “it is good to remain on the plane of the *līlā* after reaching the *nitya*” (*K* 205 / *G* 238). Employing the analogy of a flute, Sri Ramakrishna states that while the *jñānī* produces “only a monotone on his flute,” the *viññānī* creates “waves of melodies in different *rāgas* and *rāginīs*.” He then explains that the *viññānī* is able to enjoy various relationships with God: “Why should I produce only a monotone when I have an instrument with seven holes? Why should I say nothing but, ‘I am He, I am He’? I want to play various melodies on my instrument with seven holes. Why should I say only, ‘Brahman! Brahman!’? I want to call on God through all the moods—through *śānta*, *dāsyā*, *sakhya*, *vātsalya*, and *madhura*. I want to make merry with God. I want to sport with God” (*K* 1098–99 / *G* 1009–10).

From the subjective standpoint, Sri Ramakrishna explains that the *viññānī* or *īśvarakoṭi*, in contrast to the ordinary *jīva*, is able to commune with God on various planes of consciousness:

The gross, the subtle, the causal, and the Great Cause [*sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, *kāraṇa*, *mahākāraṇa*]. Entering the *mahākāraṇa*, one becomes silent; one cannot utter a word. But an *īśvarakoṭi*, after attaining the *mahākāraṇa*, can return again. Incarnations of God, and others like them, belong to the class of the *īśvarakoṭis*. They climb up, and they can also come down. (*K* 581–82 / *G* 562)

The *mahākāraṇa* plane of consciousness corresponds to the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, from which the ordinary *jīva* is unable to return to the relative plane. By contrast, the *īśvarakoṭi* can descend from the *mahākāraṇa* plane to the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes, thereby communing with God on all planes of consciousness. The *jñānī* accepts the *mahākāraṇa* plane alone as real and dismisses the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes as unreal. The *viññānī* or *īśvarakoṭi*, however, accepts all four planes of consciousness as true, since the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes belong to the realm of God’s *līlā*, which is also real.

Sri Ramakrishna frequently mentioned that Hanumān was a *viññānī* who revelled in adopting multiple attitudes toward his chosen deity, Rāma:

God keeps in many people the “ego of a *jñānī*” or the “ego of a *bhaktā*” even after they have attained *brahmajñāna*. Hanumān, after realizing God in both His personal and His impersonal aspects, cherished toward God the attitude of a servant, a devotee. He said to Rāma: “O Rāma, sometimes I think that You are the whole and I am a part of You. Sometimes I think that You are the Master and I am Your servant. And sometimes, Rāma, when I contemplate the Absolute, I see that I am You and You are I.” (*K* 483 / *G* 480)



Sri Ramakrishna paraphrases here a well-known Sanskrit verse: “When I identify with the body, I say, ‘I am Your Servant.’ When I identify with the *jīvātman*, I say, ‘I am a part of You.’ And when I identify with the Supreme Ātman, I say, ‘I am You’” (*dehabuddhyā dāso’ham, jīvabuddhyā tvadaṃśakah; ātmabuddhyā tvamevāham iti me niscitā matiḥ*). It might be tempting to interpret this verse in terms of Śāṅkara Advaita: while the attitudes of the *bhakta* are valid from the *vyāvahārika* standpoint—so long as one ignorantly identifies with the body or *jīvātman*—only the *jñānī*'s attitude of absolute identity with God is true from the *pāramārthika* standpoint, since it is based on the knowledge of one's true nature as the nondual Ātman. However, the contexts in which Sri Ramakrishna invokes Hanumān's statement to Rāma rule out this Advaitic interpretation. Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna refers to Hanumān repeatedly as an “*īśvarakoṭī*” who has reached the state of *vijñāna* after attaining Advaitic *brahmajñāna*.⁶⁵ Hence, from Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, Hanumān's remark to Rāma embodies not the one-sided attitude of the *jñānī* but the all-embracing attitude of the *vijñānī*, who is able to descend from the *nitya* to the *līlā* and ascend from the *līlā* to the *nitya* at will. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna declares, on the basis of his own spiritual experience, that the *vijñānī*'s ability to enjoy and commune with God in various ways is the summit of spiritual realization: “I have come to the final realization that God is the Whole and I am a part of Him, that God is the Master and I am His servant. Furthermore, I think every now and then that He is I and I am He” (*K 594 / G 638*).

Sri Ramakrishna's acceptance of various relationships with God as equally true finds support in the Upaniṣads, which express the relation between the *jīva* and Brahman in numerous ways, without favoring one particular relationship as the only ultimately true one. For instance, while Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 2.5 characterizes *jīvas* as “children of Immortality” (*amṛtasya putrāḥ*),⁶⁶ Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.7.15 describes Brahman as the “*antaryāmi*” (Inner Controller) inhabiting “all beings,” who constitute the “body” (*śarīram*) of Brahman.⁶⁷ Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad employs two striking analogies to explain the relationship between the *jīvas* and Brahman: according to 2.1.1, *jīvas* emerge from Akṣara Brahman like “sparks” (*visphulingāḥ*) from a fire,⁶⁸ while in 3.1.1, the *jīva* and Brahman are

65. See Sri Ramakrishna's references to Hanumān as an “*īśvarakoṭī*” or a “*vijñānī*” in the *Kathāmṛta* entries from 3 Aug. 1884, 14 Dec. 1884, 1 Mar. 1885, 12 Apr. 1885, 24 Apr. 1885, 15 Jul. 1885, 18 Oct. 1885.

66. Śāṅkarācārya, *Īśādi nau upaniṣad: Śāṅkarabhāṣyārtha* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2011), 1199.

67. Śāṅkarācārya, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2009), 352.

68. Śāṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, vol. 2, 107.



likened to “two birds that are intimately akin” (*dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā*).⁶⁹ By contrast, the well-known *mahāvākyas* from Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7 (*tat tvam asi*)⁷⁰ and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10 (*ahaṃ brahmāsmi*) seem to express the absolute identity of the *jīva* and Brahman.⁷¹

Sri Aurobindo argues that the *Gītā* also teaches numerous modes of uniting with Brahman, all of which are true and salvific. For Sri Aurobindo, “The liberation of the Gita . . . is all kinds of union at once”—including *sāyujya*, *sālokya*, *sādṛśya*, and *sāmīpya*—since we can achieve absolute Advaitic identity with the *nirguṇa* aspect of God, but we can also attain various forms of union with God’s other aspects, *sagūṇa* and otherwise.⁷² As Sri Aurobindo puts it, “the Gita envelops” all these forms of union with God “in its catholic integrality and fuses them all into one greatest and richest divine freedom and perfection.”⁷³

Vijñāna Vedānta 6 (VV6): Various religious faiths and spiritual philosophies are salvifically efficacious paths to realizing God.

As I will demonstrate at length in chapter 3, Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* furnishes the basis for a robust religious pluralism. He makes this clear in the following remark: “The *vijñāni* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *sagūṇa*. . . . The *jñāni*’s path leads to Truth, as does the path that combines *jñāna* and *bhakti*. The *bhakta*’s path, too, leads to Truth. *Jñānayoga* is true, and *bhaktiyoga* is true. God can be realized through all paths” (*K 51 / G 103–4*). From the *vijñāni*’s standpoint, the personal (*sagūṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*) aspects of the Infinite Reality are equally real, so both theistic and nontheistic spiritual paths have equal salvific efficacy.

In other words, VV6 follows directly from VV3: since God is infinite—both personal and impersonal, with and without form, immanent and transcendent—there must be correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and ultimately realizing God. As Sri Ramakrishna succinctly puts it, “God is infinite, and the paths to God are infinite” (*tini ananta, patho ananta*) (*K 511 / G 506*). For Sri Ramakrishna, the infinite impersonal-personal God is conceived and worshipped in different ways by people of varying temperaments, preferences, and worldviews. Hence, a sincere practitioner of any religion can realize God in

69. Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 2, p. 137.

70. Śaṅkarācārya, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 468.

71. Śaṅkarācārya, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 100.

72. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 398.

73. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 398.



the particular form he or she prefers. Nontheistic spiritual practitioners, such as Advaitins and most Buddhists, can realize the impersonal aspect of the Infinite Reality. Sri Ramakrishna adds, however, that *bhaktas* who believe in the personal God—whether Hindu, Christian, Muslim, or otherwise—can realize the same Infinite Reality as “eternally endowed with form and personality” (*nitya sākār*) (*K* 152 / *G* 191).⁷⁴ From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, both theistic and nontheistic spiritual practitioners attain the goal of God-realization, even though they end up realizing different aspects or forms of one and the same Infinite Reality.

There are numerous scriptural sources for Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on religious pluralism. Sri Ramakrishna's idea that all religions and spiritual philosophies concern one and the same God, but in different forms and called by different names, can be traced as far back to the well-known statement from Ṛg Veda 1.64.46, “*ekaṃ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*” (“The Reality is one; sages speak of It variously”). Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that numerous spiritual doctrines and paths are equally valid means of realizing God finds support in verses of the *Gītā* such as 13.24, “Some realize the Ātman within themselves through *dhyānayoga*; others through *sāṃkhyayoga*, and still others through *kar-mayoga*.” What is perhaps unprecedented is Sri Ramakrishna's own practice of Hindu, Christian, and Islamic faiths, on the experiential basis of which he proclaimed the harmony of all the world religions.

IV. Beyond “Neo-Vedānta”: Implications of Sri Ramakrishna's Philosophy of *Vijñāna* for Discourse on Modern Vedānta

The remaining seven chapters of this book will explore the far-reaching implications of Sri Ramakrishna's unique standpoint of *vijñāna* for cross-cultural philosophy of religion. However, Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta also has major implications for a number of other fields, including religious studies, Hindu studies, and Indology. While it is beyond the scope of this book to elaborate these implications in detail, I will indicate briefly in this section how Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta helps challenge one of the dominant hermeneutic paradigms for understanding modern Vedāntic thought.

Many scholars apply the label “Neo-Vedānta” to the Vedāntic philosophies of modern Indian figures such as Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Sri Aurobindo.⁷⁵ I would argue, however, that the category

74. It is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna's statement about a *bhakta's* realization of the “*nitya sākār*” form of God suggests that Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi* is not necessary for spiritual salvation.

75. Paul Hacker was the first to apply the label “Neo-Vedānta” to the views of Swami Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Sri Aurobindo. Significantly, however, Hacker did not



of “Neo-Vedānta” is misleading and unhelpful for three main reasons. First, a vague umbrella term such as “Neo-Vedānta” fails to capture the nuances of the specific Vedāntic views of different modern figures. For instance, the term occludes the important philosophical differences between Sri Ramakrishna’s Vijñāna Vedānta, Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Vedānta, and Radhakrishnan’s ethically oriented Vedāntic philosophy. We can better honor the distinctiveness and specificity of different modern Vedāntic views by resisting the impulse to lump them all into a single catch-all category.

Second, the term “Neo-Vedānta” misleadingly implies novelty. Indeed, some scholars even imbue the prefix “Neo” in “Neo-Vedānta” with a normative valence by implying that modern Vedāntic philosophies represent a deviation or break from traditional Vedānta.⁷⁶ However, as I have shown in this chapter, the aim of at least some modern Vedāntins—including Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo—was not to promulgate a *new* Vedāntic philosophy but to recover and revive the original Vedānta embodied in traditional Indian scriptures such as the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.⁷⁷ Of course, one might question the success of these interpretive efforts and even try to show how these modern thinkers sometimes imposed their own views onto the scriptures. However, it would be both unrigorous and uncharitable to presuppose from the outset that the

consider Sri Ramakrishna to be a Neo-Vedāntin. See Paul Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism,” in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 229–56. More recent scholars who continue to use the framework of “Neo-Vedānta” include Wilhelm Halbfass and Andrew Fort. See Wilhelm Halbfass, “Introduction, an Uncommon Orientalist: Paul Hacker’s Passage to India,” in *Philology and Confrontation*, ed. Halbfass, 8–9, and Wilhelm Halbfass, “Research and Reflection: Responses to my Respondents, III: Issues of Comparative Philosophy,” in *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and Its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, ed. Eli Franco and Karin Preisendanz (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 307. See also Andrew Fort, “*Jīvanmukti* and Social Service in Advaita and Neo-Vedānta,” in *Beyond Orientalism*, ed. Franco and Preisendanz, 489–504. As indicated in note 13 above, both Swami Tapasyananda and Jeffery Long refer to Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy as “Neo-Vedānta,” although neither of them uses the term in Hacker’s sense. Satis Chandra Chatterjee also refers to the philosophies of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as “Neo-Vedantism” in his article “Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedantism and Its Practical Application,” in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 255–80.

76. See, for instance, Fort’s argument about Neo-Vedānta in “*Jīvanmukti* and Social Service in Advaita and Neo-Vedānta.”

77. See Maharaj, “Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*,” which examines Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the *Gītā*, and Maharaj, “*Asminnasya ca tadyogaṃ śāsti*,” which discusses Swami Vivekananda’s interpretation of the *prasthānatrayī*. See also Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s interpretation of the *prasthānatrayī* in works such as the following: “The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads,” in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 106–220; *The Bhagavadgita* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, [1928] 2010); and *The Brahma Sūtra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960).



Vedāntic philosophies propounded by modern Indian thinkers are not, in fact, continuous with traditional Vedānta. Therefore, the “Neo” in “Neo-Vedānta” is presumptuous at best.

Third, and most problematically, the term “Neo-Vedānta” is indelibly colored by the German indologist Paul Hacker’s polemical use of the term. According to Hacker, Neo-Vedānta is an outgrowth of what he calls “Neo-Hinduism,” an ideology espoused by modern Indian figures as diverse as Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, and Mahatma Gandhi. Neo-Hinduism, Hacker argues, is not an authentically Indian tradition but an ideology tacitly shaped by Western values.⁷⁸ In Hacker’s view, Neo-Hindus mistakenly clothe what are essentially Western values and ideals in superficially Indian garb in order to promote Indian nationalism.⁷⁹ While Hacker does not consider Sri Ramakrishna to be a Neo-Hindu,⁸⁰ he contends that figures such as Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo did have a Neo-Hindu agenda.⁸¹ Hacker claims, for instance, that Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita* has many tacitly Western elements which he may have borrowed from the Neo-Hindu Baṅkimcandra Cattopādhyāy, whose ideas were themselves shaped by Western values.⁸² Similarly, Hacker argues that Vivekananda’s derivation of a humanitarian ethics from the Upaniṣadic teaching “*tat tvam asi*” was inspired by Paul Deussen’s interpretation of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.⁸³

This is not the place for a detailed critical assessment of Hacker’s highly controversial theses about Neo-Hinduism and Neo-Vedānta. Moreover, several scholars have already identified major problems with Hacker’s conception of Neo-Hinduism, many of which can be traced to his own Christian agenda.⁸⁴

78. Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 251.

79. Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 251.

80. See Hacker’s brief discussion of Sri Ramakrishna in “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 234–35.

81. Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” and Hacker, “Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics,” in *Philology and Confrontation*, ed. Halbfass, 273–318.

82. See Hacker’s discussion of Sri Aurobindo in “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 238–39.

83. See Hacker’s Neo-Vedāntic interpretation of Swami Vivekananda in “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 239–41 and in “Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics.”

84. Criticisms of certain aspects of Hacker’s theory of Neo-Hinduism can be found in Halbfass, “Introduction,” 8–9, and Andrew Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 187–88. See also the following recent critiques of Hacker’s Neo-Vedāntic interpretation of Swami Vivekananda: Andrew Nicholson, “Vivekananda’s Non-Dual Ethics in the History of Vedānta,” in *The Life, Legacy, and Contemporary Relevance of Swami Vivekananda: New Reflections*, ed. Rita Sherma and James McHugh (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming), and James Madaio, “Rethinking Neo-Vedānta: Swami Vivekananda and the Selective Historiography of Advaita Vedānta,” *Religions* 8 (2017), 1–12.



I will only indicate briefly how Sri Ramakrishna's Vedāntic perspective problematizes Hacker's understanding of Neo-Hinduism and Neo-Vedānta, key aspects of which continue to be defended by a number of scholars.⁸⁵

Hacker's telling concession that Sri Ramakrishna was *not* a Neo-Hindu, I contend, undermines his own thesis about Neo-Hinduism in general. If we can establish that key philosophical doctrines of some of the modern Indian figures Hacker considers to be Neo-Hindu were significantly influenced by Sri Ramakrishna, then Hacker's sweeping argument about the Western provenance of Neo-Vedānta collapses. Hacker's Neo-Hindu thesis is especially shaky in the case of Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, whose views were strongly shaped by Sri Ramakrishna.

Since Hacker presents absolutely no evidence of Bankimcandra's influence on Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, Hacker's Neo-Hindu interpretation of Sri Aurobindo rests on little more than baseless speculation. By contrast, there is abundant evidence that Sri Ramakrishna strongly influenced both the life and thought of Sri Aurobindo.⁸⁶ More specifically, I have argued in a recent article that Sri Aurobindo's basic hermeneutic framework for interpreting the *Bhagavad Gītā* derives from Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna*.⁸⁷ Contrary to Hacker, then, there is substantial evidence that Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* was influenced much more by Sri Ramakrishna than by Bankimcandra.

In a recent article, Andrew Nicholson has challenged Hacker's Neo-Hindu interpretation of Vivekananda on similar grounds. Nicholson makes a convincing case that the chief source of Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics was not Deussen's Schopenhauer, as Hacker alleges, but Vivekananda's "beloved teacher Ramakrishna."⁸⁸ According to Nicholson, Sri Ramakrishna taught a "world-affirming Advaita" that has much greater affinities with medieval Indian *bhakti*-oriented Advaitic traditions such as Śaiva and Śākta Tantra than with Śaṅkara's world-denying Advaita Vedānta.⁸⁹ As Nicholson puts it, it was the

85. Halbfass, for instance, seems to accept the descriptive aspect of Hacker's theory of Neo-Hinduism and Neo-Vedānta, while rejecting Hacker's normative claims about the "inauthenticity" of Neo-Vedāntins. See Halbfass, "Introduction," 8–9, and Halbfass, "Research and Reflection," 307. Fort also employs the framework of "Neo-Vedānta" in a manner similar to Hacker in "*Jīvanmukti* and Social Service in Advaita and Neo-Vedānta."

86. For details on Sri Ramakrishna's influence on Sri Aurobindo, see section I of chapter 4 and Maharaj, "Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*," 1211–14.

87. Maharaj, "Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*."

88. Nicholson, "Vivekananda's Non-Dual Ethics in the History of Vedānta," 5.

89. Nicholson, "Vivekananda's Non-Dual Ethics in the History of Vedānta," 6.



“second millenium understanding of Advaita, combined with non-dual tantric traditions, that together shaped both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda's thought.”⁹⁰

Nicholson has gone a long way toward refuting Hacker's Neo-Hindu interpretation of Vivekananda's Vedāntic philosophy. However, we can make Nicholson's case for Sri Ramakrishna's influence on Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics even stronger by taking into account Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna*. I have contended in this chapter that Sri Ramakrishna's world-affirming Advaitic philosophy was shaped primarily by his own diverse religious practices and spiritual experiences, particularly his unique experience of *vijñāna*.

Tellingly, on one occasion in 1884, Sri Ramakrishna was explaining to his visitors—including Narendra, who later went on to become Swami Vivekananda—that one of the main religious practices of Vaiṣṇavas is “showing compassion to all beings” (*sarva jīve dayā*) (*LP II.ii.131 / DP 852*). Suddenly, just after uttering this phrase, Sri Ramakrishna went into a deep state of *samādhi*. After a while, he came down to a semicstatic state and said: “How foolish to speak of compassion! Human beings are as insignificant as worms crawling on the earth—and they are to show compassion to others? That's absurd. It must not be compassion, but service to all. Serve them, knowing that they are all manifestations of God [*śivajñāne jīver sevā*]” (*LP II.i.131 / DP 852*). From the standpoint of *vijñāna*, God actually manifests in the form of human beings, so one serves God by serving others. Sri Ramakrishna's teaching affected the young Narendra so deeply that he took his friends aside shortly thereafter and explained its profound ethical significance to them:

What Ṭhākur [Sri Ramakrishna] said today in his ecstatic mood is clear: One can bring Vedānta from the forest to the home and practice it in daily life. Let people continue with whatever they are doing; there's no harm in this. People must first fully believe and be convinced that God has manifested Himself before them as the world and its creatures [*īśvarī jīva o jagat rūpe tāhār sammukhe prakāśita rohiyāchen*]. . . . If people consider everyone to be God, how can they consider themselves to be superior to others and harbor attachment, hatred, arrogance—or even compassion [*dayā*—toward them? Their minds will become pure as they serve all beings as God, and soon they will experience themselves as parts of the blissful God. They will realize that their true nature is pure, illumined, and free. (*LP II.ii.131 / DP 852*)

90. Nicholson, “Vivekananda's Non-Dual Ethics in the History of Vedānta,” 8.

Here we have strong evidence that Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics of serving God in human beings was directly inspired by Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based ethical teaching. Moreover, the fact that Narendra arrived at this ethical insight in 1884 definitively rules out Hacker's thesis that Vivekananda developed his Vedāntic ethics only after he met Deussen in 1896.

In this brief section, I have begun to show how Sri Ramakrishna's framework of Vijñāna Vedānta can help motivate a more nuanced and hermeneutically sophisticated paradigm for interpreting modern Vedāntic thought than Hacker's reductive paradigm of Neo-Vedānta. In the remainder of this book, I will explore how Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* makes available compelling new approaches to central issues in cross-cultural philosophy of religion.