

Sreeh

## ACHARYA RAMANUJA

*(A brief life-sketch and outlines of his philosophy)*

[SRI SATYAMURTHI IYENGAR, GWALIOR.]

Ramu and Krishna, two middle-aged young men, the former, a vedic scholar, well-versed in the Sastras and the latter, an eminent scientist with academic honours, met one afternoon in the cool shade of a park and had a pleasant exchange of thoughts, as follows. Indeed, Krishna, the man of science, felt refreshed and elevated when he acquired a clear insight into the science of man, thanks to his erudite friend, Ramu. As usual, the ebullient Krishna, the eminent scientist that he was, with a keen intellect, opened the dialogue with a forth-right query, "May I ask you, Ramu! what is really wrong if I assert that Man has always been and is still his own sovereign Master and that there is, therefore, hardly any need to bind him to a God-like unto the feudal Lord, especially in the present age of scientific reasoning, which is fast displacing all out-moded practices and beliefs of our forebears?"

*Ramu:*— Well, Krishna! the superficial observer, without the backing of sastraic knowledge, will readily endorse your views and summarily dispense with God, as a mere fanciful superfluity. He might also be inclined to feel that man, with his intellectual equipment and discriminatory faculty, should certainly be able to achieve all the things needed and aspired for by him, in the exercise of his own free will. But then, as you are well aware, material science, pure and simple, has not so far succeeded in establishing for men, a peaceful and joyous way of living. Despite the marvels of science, man has no answer to the ravages of the elements and weakly succumbs to them. The history of man is but a sad story of greed, exploitation, malice and hatred, leaving hardly any room for the achievement of the happiness longed for, by the individual. Verily it is a sick world around, in mad hurry, reaching nowhere. The unpredicted march of events puts scientific determinacy on sore trial. No doubt, man, as an individual, endowed with intellect, free will and the power of reasoning, plans well ahead and utilises the best in him to achieve his ends, but he is brought up against failures, betrayals, puzzles and denials. Perforce, he then realises the truth of the dictum, 'Man proposes, God disposes' and is led on to the study of the hidden hand, the superior Power, lying beyond. The remedy, therefore, lies in the blending of the secular and the sacred Science and Religion. And so, Krishna! you should embark on a Study of 'Man', in depth, the perception of the soul within

*Krishna:*— Ramu! I agree that the material science, dealing with the world of external objects, the physical and chemical laws, has passed through several vicissitudes, one theory being exploded by another and so on. I also admit that floods, fire, earth-quakes etc., take their merciless toll of human lives and property and even modern Science, in spite of tremendous advance, could do very little to arrest the fury of the elements and the ravages that result. But then, what is this God you talk of and the soul inside every individual and their inter-relationship? Please enlighten me.

*Ramu:*— I am indeed in a happy position to throw adequate light to the subject, right now, thanks to the 'Visishtadvaita' philosophy, whose chief exponent was Ramanujacharya, that illustrious Saint, who flourished in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (1017 to 1137 A. D.) The great Saint has not only postulated Brahma, (God) as the highest reality, Omni-potent, Omniscient and Omni-present but, at the same time, revealed to us that this God is full of compassion and love and is the repository of innumerable auspicious traits. Even more important and more humanising is the recognition, by his system of philosophy, that Souls, as Individuals, possess reality, that 'chit', what perceives (the intelligent beings which have the power of sense-perception) and 'Achit' which does not perceive (inert matter, devoid of the faculty of sense - perception), Soul and matter, respectively, form, as it were, the body of Brahman. All these three entities, God (Super-Soul), Jiva (Individual souls) and Matter exist in an inseparable union or combination. This inseparable union, known, in philosophical language, as Visishta Advaita', unity with attributes or triune monism, has for ever existed and will never cease to exist, not having been brought about at any intermediate period, at a given point of time. 'Brahman' (God) is however, the only independent reality; the other two entities, 'chit' and 'achit', though real, are wholly dependent on 'Brahma', like the sun and its sheen, gem and its lustre, substance and its qualities (colour, odour, size etc.). God is said to be everywhere in that He resides in all (and all things and beings reside in Him); He permeates everything like unto the soul permeating the body, like the ghee which remains latent in the fresh-drawn milk.

*Krishna:*— Ramu! your method of approach is quite interesting. I would, however, like to have a clear idea of this body-soul relationship and how this spiritual mechanism operates. I shall also be grateful to you if you could let me know the various activities of Saint Ramanuja, which stamp him out as a great religious leader, a Mahatma.

*Ramu:*— As a rule, the body is one owned, that is used for enjoying the fruits of particular actions and the performance of further acts, supported

and directed by an individual, to whom it stands in an entirely subordinate position and without whom it cannot exist. In chapter 10 of the Bhagavad Gita, the Lord said, "Oh, Arjuna! I am the Self (the Supporter, Director and Owner) of all beings (Individual Souls) and things, seated inside them all, I am the cause of emanation, sustenance and absorption of all things and beings (with bodies), at all times". He then proceeds to mention quite a few prominent things and beings, which constitute His bodies. When He says that He is the Sun (Adityaanaamaham Vishnuh), He means that He, as the Self within the Sun, owns, supports and directs both the Self inside and the outer body of matter, which we call Sun. Thus, when we pay homage to the Sun, it is not for the physical sun but to Surya-Narayana, the In-dweller, the great Being of solar splendour and hue (Adityavarnam), beyond darkness and delusion (tamasah parastaat). All living beings and things have their being in Him alone and, therefore, all names connote Him, directly in some cases and indirectly through the self concerned, in others. That is how the Lord describes Himself as Indra among the Devas, Sama Veda among the Vedas, Sankara among the Rudras and so on.

*Krishna:*— Excuse me for interrupting you Ramu! if God is the one and only one directing and supporting us all, how do you account for the vast disparity among His subjects, some looking healthy and happy, while others are sick and miserable, so on and so forth? Things being what they are, how can God escape the charge of partiality and a calculated display of cruelty, in the case of the teeming millions, sunk deep in the bottomless depths of perpetual sorrow?

*Ramu:*— Let me tell you, Krishna! such charges cannot be laid at the Lord's door, because He creates only on the basis of the 'Karma' (acts, good and bad) of the Individuals and with an eye on their welfare, like unto a mother, who inflicts a deterrent punishment on the young one, indulging in the unhealthy habit of swallowing mud. The inequalities, we see around us, are the direct results of the actions of the individual souls and their sufferings are intended to chasten them and cure their ills through a cleansing process. No doubt, creation is meant to provide repeated opportunities to the individual souls, through a process of purification, trials and tribulations, being the cathartic agents. As knower (Jnaatha), doer (Karthā) and enjoyer (bhoktha) the individual Soul possesses a consciousness, which expresses itself in such states as thinking (Jnaana), desiring (chikeersha) and striving (Prayatna). But these states are controlled by the Lord, without whose assent the thinking etc., cannot blossom into action. The individual doership is therefore, dependent on the Lord.

*Krishna:*— In that case, why should the Individual at all be affected by merits and demerits of such acts?

*Ramu:*— Quite a pertinent question indeed. But let me hasten to tell you that this freedom to act is the Lord's gift to the Individual Soul, so as to enable him or her to utilise it for his/her good. Creation actually means that the Lord makes the non-sentient matter undergo changes of state and endows the individual souls with bodies and sense-organs, capacitating them for a career of gainful activity. 'The Lord as the 'Antaryami', the universal Controller, residing inside every soul, remains neutral or passively quiescent in regard to the initial effort of the Individual in the exercise of this gift of freedom of action. Thereafter the Lord not only watches approvingly the progress of the Individual and makes him prosper in his earnest endeavours (i.e.) those which conform to the Scriptural decrees and injunctions, but also infuses in him, in an ever-increasing measure, the relish for doing good acts. On the other hand, when the individual moves in the retro-grade direction, the Lord visits on him, His displeasure and disapproval in the form of punishments (sorrows and sufferings), thereby giving him a chance to correct himself and tread the right path. Thus, you see that the so-called punishment, inflicted by the Lord, is but a form of justice and Divine justice is always tempered with mercy, maximising the reward and minimising the punishment. Surely, but for the Lord's mellowing grace, filial love and kindness, we would be very much worse off.

*Krishna:*— Ramu! I am indeed beholden to you for this lucid exposition, which has enabled me to appreciate the Lord's great role, in relation to the entire cosmos, with its vast variety of contents. Of course, I have not failed to perceive the greatness of Ramanuja's system of philosophy, so neat, clear and compact. And now, let me hear about this great Savant, his attainments and achievements.

*Ramu:*— Sage Vyasa explained hundreds of Upanishads, through many an aphorism, known as Brahma-sutras, which he once again expounded in 'Thiruvaimozhi', reborn as Nammalwar; the great sage incarnated once again as Ramanuja for effecting a proper synthesis of these two Vedantas, namely, Sanskrit Vedanta and Dramida Vedanta, through appropriate reasoning, and reflecting 'Brahma' therein, like a mirror. Ramanuja is also believed to be an incarnation of Adi-Sesha, specially commissioned by Lord Sriman Narayana to come into this world of dark nescience, from the heavenly abode to quell all heresies, put the study of Vedanta on a sound and stable footing and thus illumine the dark corners of human mind.

Ramanuja-divakara did, therefore, excel the physical Sun, we see, day in and day out, dispelling only the darkness outside. Born in Sriperumbudur, near Madras, in April 1017 A. D., the great luminary flourished in this world for one hundred and twenty years. After his initial study of the Vedas, the young Vedic Scholar, with a special halo about him, proceeded to Thirupputkuzhi, in the vicinity of Kancheepuram and studied under Yadava-prakasa. The young disciple seldom hesitated to draw the preceptor's attention to the heretical doctrines propounded by the latter, now and then and matters came to a head when the obdurate Yadava-prakasa, who felt eclipsed by the shrewd disciple of enviable intellect, thought in terms of doing away with the inconvenient disciple altogether, by plotting against his very life. It was in the fitness of things that providence lent a helping hand to the young Ramanuja, with a great mission ahead and retrieved him from the sinister designs of Yadavaprakasa. Tradition has it that the Divine Couple, Lord Deva-Raja and Goddess Perundevi, enshrined in Kancheepuram, went in the disguise of a fowler couple and escorted Ramanuja to a place of safety, near about Kancheepuram, covering in a single night, hundreds of miles. Well, the great prodigy that Ramanuja was, he undertook a deep and intensive study of the various other doctrines also and sorted them out, till he finally alighted on the great truths unfolded by the Visishtadvaita philosophy. It is significant that it was only in his thirty-second year that he severed his connection with his heretical preceptor, Yadavaprakasa and incidentally, let me tell you that the great Bhagavatpada Adi Sankaracharya lived in this abode only for 32 years. Even as Ramanuja switched on to the study of the sastras in the light of Visishtadvaita philosophy, at the feet of Maha-Poornar, at the age of thirty two, it is not improbable that Sankara too might have trodden this very path, if only he had lived beyond that short span of 32 years. As a matter of fact, Yadava-Prakasa himself joined the fold of Ramanuja, later on, realising the hollowness and futility of the doctrine propounded by him earlier. Even the redoubted Yajnamoorthy, the mighty exponent of Advaita, the doctrine of monism, who seemed unconquerable, was won over and came to be known later as Arulalapperumal Emberumanar (Devaraja Ramanuja).

Apart from his vast learning and deep erudition, Ramanuja was full of compassion for the suffering humanity. The contents of the great 'Tirumantra' the sure recipe for the attainment of Moksha, were made known by him to the public, literally under the very nose of his Guru, by whom he was initiated under an oath of strict secrecy, after putting him to severe tests. When the irate preceptor demanded the explanation of the disciple for his intransigence and violation of the former's command, the latter elucidated, much to the delectation of the Master, that it was the public weal, the

salvation of the men around, that prompted him to divulge the great secret, even if that entailed him drudging in hell for the transgression of the Master's injunction. Indeed, only men of such melting tenderness of heart can tread the path of Bhakti (God-love). This earned him the appellation of "Emperumanar" (our master) from the preceptor. You will thus appreciate that the great Savant reformed the contemporary world, both by precept and practice, his illuminating discourses and exemplary conduct.

No wonder, the Saint had a large following, including as many as 700 ascetics who formed an integral part of his entourage. Well, the Saint traversed the entire length of this sacred 'Bharata Varsha, end to end and propagated his system of philosophy, rooted in loving adoration of a personal God (Saguna Brahman), an inexhaustible fountain of bliss. Even remote Srinagar (Kashmir) was visited by him twice and the 'Sarada Peeta' over there is associated with this great Savant. Conquest had to be necessarily followed by consolidation of the gains. This, the illustrious Saint did mainly through propagation, treatises, discourses and institutions, set up for this purpose, besides safeguarding Vaishnavism from erosion by other religionists, followers and advocates of other faiths, such as Saivism, Jainism etc'. The Jeeyars, the Sri Vaishnava ascetics, attached to temples, in quite a number of pilgrim centres, particularly, Srirangam, the chief stronghold of Vishnu theology, Thirumalai, Alvar Thirunagari and Srivilliputtur were ushered in, by Sri Ramanuja, only against this background. Great in knowledge and liberal in understanding the Supreme Lord to be the 'Be-all and End-all' of all existence, showing to one and all, in quest of truth that the Lord is the one and only Giver, bestowing on us all, His inalienable subjects, not merely all things sought for, but also 'Moksha' (i.e.) liberation from the terrific bondage of birth and rebirth, nay Himself, the Saint fully answered to the description of 'Mahatma' within the meaning of Sloka 19 of Chapter VII of Bhagavad Gita the one fondly looked for, by Lord Krishna. And then, there are the monumental contributions of the Saint, the magnum opus being 'Sri Bhashya', the commentary of unrivalled excellence on the Brahma Sutras. In fact, he had already earned the appellation of Sri Bhashyakara, from no less than 'Sarada', the Goddess of learning, during his visit to Kashmir. His other works are: Vedanta Deepa, Vedanta Sara, Vedartha Sangraha, Gita Bhashya, Saranagati gadya, Srirangagadya, Sri Vaikunta Gadya and Nitya Grantha. With great foresight, he set up a panel of seventyfour hand-picked disciples out of the thousands of his followers and entrusted to them the task of keeping the flame of knowledge alive in unbroken succession.

*Krishna:*— I cannot adequately thank you, Ramu! for the fund of knowledge you have imparted to me in such lucid terms and in quite a short space of time.