



# ANAHATA CHAKRA SATSANGA

## Nine Gates Course Lessons

### *Vidyanta* / End of Apprenticeship / Third Degree

#### **Introduction to the Rank**

In lessons 3.1-3.3, you will finish with the outer circle of the Satsanga and prepare yourself for entry into the second of three circles. You will learn the key teachings of the gurus of the lineage and undertake purifications for higher study. The marks of the rank are humility and understanding. The gemstone for the rank is yellow sapphire.

#### **Lesson 3.1 Ramakrishna and Sarada Maa**

The modern history of our lineage begins with Shri Ramakrishna, the preeminent saint of Kālī devotion who also took time to realize the highest principles of Christianity and Islam. Many books have been written about his life and teachings: here a basic outline will be provided, along with an introduction to Sarada Maa, his wife and an incarnation of the Divine Mother. This chapter follows the account of Shri Ramakrishna by a disciple named M. in the *Gospel of Ramakrishna*, translated into English from the Bengali by Swami Nikhilananda. The materials on Sarada Maa come largely from *Sri Sarada Devi: Her Teachings and Conversations*, also translated by Nikhilananda. Of course, these two must be considered together, for they became the male and female aspects of divinity for their devotees, the most famous of whom was Swami Vivekananda, who went on to bring the teachings of yoga to the United States and lead the Ramakrishna Order of renunciates. Our own living Mother, Shree Maa of Kamakhya, received the teachings of Ramakrishna as a young girl and felt an intense attachment to him. Shree Maa and Swamiji have also written a book, *The Nectar of Eternal Bliss*, centered around the teachings of Ramakrishna.

The biographical details of Ramakrishna's life should be subsumed under the overarching principles by which he lived. He saw the Divine Mother everywhere: in his own wife, in the female devotees, in a stray dog, in a tree growing in the courtyard. He talked to Her as though face to face: he was not afraid to be labeled crazy in order to behold the vision of her form. The lines of one of the hymns of the *Chandi*, the Athārgala Stotram (The Praise that Unfastens the Bolt), comes to mind, "rupam dehi, jayam dehi, yasho dehi, dvisho johi," which is translated, "Give us your form, give us victory, give us welfare, remove all hostility." Ramakrishna lived in order to behold the female divinity, in order to bring her victory, and in order to remove the sting from daily life. He taught that one could access her through intense longing (bhakta) and through inquiry into the nature of the Self (dhyana). He was naturally intelligent but used very simple examples drawn from the scriptures and daily life to get his points across. People of all social classes from east and west came to him for advice, which stuck to familiar themes of overcoming attachment and egotism in order to perceive the divine more clearly.

Ramakrishna was born as Gadadhar Chatterji in the simple agricultural village of Kamarpukur in West Bengal. He took twelve years of basic education and could read and write: he learned the epic poems and Puranas from wandering holy men. After the death of his father, Ramakrishna's older brother, Ramkumar, took a job as a Sanskrit instructor in Kolkata to support the family. The wealthy businesswoman, Rani Rashmoni, appointed Ramkumar as a priest at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, the holy site that she established with her own funds. Ramakrishna, as Ramkumar's assistant, had the job of dressing the deity, and he frequently fell into ecstatic moods while dressing or feeding the idol or while wandering around the temple compound. Fearing that spiritual practices would drive Ramakrishna to madness, his family found Ramakrishna a young bride, Saradamani Mukhopadhyaya, whom he married in 1859. Ramakrishna worshipped Sarada Maa as the goddess Kālī, and she revered Ramakrishna as her guru. Though formally married, they remained celibate and practiced the spiritual life. With the death of Ramkumar, Ramakrishna became the priest at Dakshineswar, and followers soon flocked to his feet. He had devotees of the Bhrahmo Samaj, a rationalist, progressive, and wealthy sect, but he also had many common Kālī devotees come for blessings and conversation.

Ramakrishna's first guru was Bhairavi Brahmani, a female tantric adept, who took him through the texts and rites of the "left-hand" path, though largely tempered by bhakti Vaishnavism. He absorbed the Brahmani's teachings and soon took a second guru, Totapuri, a wandering monk who taught him the more austere philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. He perfected this path as well and went on to study the key teachings of Islam and Christianity, achieving the highest mystical states in each religion that came across his path. He spent his days in worship of the Divine Mother, conversation with devotees, and occasional musical and theatrical performances centered around the divine dramas of India. The disciple 'M' (Mahendranath Gupta) left a complete record of the daily life and conversations of Ramakrishna, almost as though one could experience this beloved Master's life in real time. He died of throat cancer in 1885 with the name of Kālī on his lips. Sarada Maa went on spreading his message, and the Ramakrishna Math and Mission became a large movement with monastic and lay devotees worldwide.

To get a better sense of Ramakrishna, one need only turn to some of his stories and sayings. Take for example this little teaching:

It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love him and feel attracted to him. Don't you know that God is the Inner Guide? He sees the longing of our heart and the yearning of our soul. Suppose a man has several sons. The older boys address him distinctly as 'Bābā' or 'Pāpā,' but the babies can at best call him 'Bā' or 'Pā.' Now, will the father be angry with those who address him in this indistinct way? The father knows that they too are calling him, only they cannot pronounce his name well. All children are the same to the father. Likewise, the devotees call on God alone, though by different names (August 13, 1882).

This passage comforts students of the Sanskrit language, who may not know how to pronounce the names of God correctly! It also manages to express Ramakrishna's religious pluralism, which remained one of his key convictions throughout his life and teaching. Ramakrishna prioritized the inner, religious

feeling over having the “correct” forms of worship or theology, even though he was born into an orthodox family.

Many passages in the Gospel reflect this personal, intimate approach towards the deity. Ramakrishna saw everything around him with the attitude, the devotional feeling (*bhāva*) of faith (*shrāddha*):

God cannot be seen with these physical eyes. In the course of spiritual discipline one gets a ‘love body,’ endowed with ‘love eyes,’ ‘love ears,’ and so on. One sees God with those ‘love eyes.’ One hears the voice of God with those ‘love ears.’ One even gets a sexual organ made of love’ (August 24, 1882).

The devotional feeling would spill over into a deep *samadhi* sometimes during meditation or sometimes right in the middle of a conversation with devotees! It was as though the two sets of senses coincided in Ramakrishna, but the inner senses had a greater strength than they do in most people. This is due to his constant devotional practices, his simple way of life, and his familiarity with scriptures from a young age.

On many occasions, Ramakrishna entered Samadhi upon viewing a theatrical performance or hearing bhajans. He went into ecstatic dance upon hearing the disciple, Narendra (later known as Swami Vivekananda), sing these lines from a traditional bhajan:

Upon the sea of the world unfolds  
the lotus of the New Day,  
And there the Mother sits  
enshrined in blissful majesty.  
See how the bees are mad with joy,  
sipping the nectar there! (October 16, 1882)

This passage is reminiscent of the dance of Mirabai, the Vaishnava bhakti saint, except with the Divine Mother instead of Krishna or Rama taking preeminence as the deity. Ramakrishna did not hesitate to put himself in the feminine position as a lover of God, however, when the deity was male, even wearing a *sarī* and bangles to get into the role of Rādhā. He sanctioned the five traditional devotional roles: the devotee may be a *friend* to the deity, a *lover* to the deity, a *parent* to the deity, a *servant* of the deity, or a *contemplator* of the deity. Although Advaita teaches that the soul and God are not-two, Ramakrishna warned against seeing the self as a god, as this might work at cross-purposes with the goal of finding liberation.

Another important point in the Master’s teaching is the extreme energy and effort one must pour into devotion. He used the example of Dhruva in the *Bhagavata Purana* to show the kind of fervor the devotee must have. Ramakrishna said to a devotee, “[O]ne must force one’s demand on God. One should be able to say: ‘O God, wilt Thou not reveal thyself to me? I will cut my throat with a knife.’” (March 9, 1883). The knife part should be taken to mean that the devotee must reach his or her

breaking point, to say, "I will not let go until I have heard from God." The story of Jacob wrestling the angel in the Hebrew scriptures (Gen. 32:22-32) comes to mind. The vision will not dawn until we are satisfied with nothing less than the vision. If we practice devotion only incrementally, only when we have sufficient leisure time, the experience will fall flat. The true bhakta does not stop with meek, half-hearted practice. Ramakrishna quotes from an unknown devotional song or poem, which reads, "Lighting the lamp of Knowledge in the chamber of your heart, Behold the face of the Mother, Brahman's embodiment." (April 8, 1883). This phrase has become a motto of the Anahata Chakra Satsanga. We should practice *with knowledge*: that is, according to the injunctions of guru and scriptures. We should practice in the heart center in addition to the mind, that is, *with great feeling*. And we should practice *with great intensity*, until the vision of the Mother dawns.

The senses and feelings are harnessed to the divine objective. We will continue to have the normal human emotions until samadhi occurs, and, when the experience fades, we have to come back down to ordinary experience. These ordinary human feelings are with us as long as we have bodies, so, in order to purify our human feelings, we must:

Direct the six passions to God. The impulse of *lust* should be turned into the desire to have intercourse with Ātman. Feel *angry* at those who stand in your way to God. Feel *greedy* for Him. If you must have the feeling of *I and mine*, then associate it with God. Say, for instance, 'My Rāma, my Krishna.' If you must have *pride*, then feel like Vibhishina, who said, 'I have touched the feet of Rāma with my head; I will not bow this head before anyone else (May 2, 1883).

In yogic philosophy stemming from the *Bhagavad Gita*, these six passions (arishadvarga) of mind are kama (lust), krodha (anger), lobha (greed), moha (attachment), mada or ahankar (pride) and matsarya (jealousy). By taking these passions and turning them towards divine objects, we conquer them. Attachment dulls and suppresses the kundalīnī energy, while letting go of attachment increases the Shakti and moves it up the spinal column. By fixing our minds on everyday objects as the divine play, the chakras are naturally opened, and the whole tenor of life is made more *sattvic* and hence conducive to liberation.

Does this mean that one must pursue a celibate life in order to advance to enlightenment? No. We find in *Bhagavad Gita*, ch. 18, a thorough description of two paths, that of the *sannyāsin* and that of the *tyāgī*. The *sannyāsin* does, in fact, renounce sex and householder relations, while the *tyāgī* renounces inwardly, regarding all activities as acts of worship. To what degree one indulges in sensuality is not as important as the *frame of mind* in which one practices either abstinence or libertinism (or, most likely, something in between). If one remains in the present moment, focusing all thoughts on the divine, renouncing the fruits of action, one is making progress towards liberation, regardless of what life may look like outwardly. Many people who appear saintly are actually quite egotistical, while others who may not fit the ideal of a yogi may be quite realized. The trouble with actively seeking to avoid sin or actively seeking to be a saint is that we are always bound by our mental constructs: we may end up as shallow, narrow-minded hypocrites rather than realized sages. To that end, Ramakrishna counseled his devotees to avoid thinking too much about sin and simply concentrate on the Mother.

Speaking of the Mother, Sarāda Maa was an important teacher in her own right. She survived the Master by almost 24 years and would go on propagating his legacy after Ramakrishna's death, giving advice to devotees and playing a part in the formation of the Ramakrishna Mission. Ramakrishna instructed his followers to make no difference between him and her, and, both before and after his *mahasamadhi*, many devotees took *darshan* of Sarada Maa as the Goddess herself. The stories about her are endless, but, as with Ramakrishna, we may look directly at her teachings—thanks to Nikhilanandaji's record—to get an idea of the woman and her thoughts.

She grew physically distressed at half-hearted devotees, as she regarded it as her mission to care for them and yet could not bring them around to *tyāgī*:

Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'One seer of milk mixed with five seers of water! It is so difficult to thicken such milk. My eyes have become swollen by constantly blowing the fire to keep it burning. Where are my sincere children who are ready to renounce everything for God? Let them come to me. Let me talk to them. Otherwise life is so unbearable.' These words are so true. Please move the fan, dear child (August 6, 1918).

The devotee fans the Mother as the Mother fans the flames of devotion, as though the whole enterprise were in danger of falling into torpor. Sarada Maa has a restlessness and anxiety for her children, as though assuming the burden for their spiritual lives. Like any mother, she loses sleep over those who don't write and don't call, agitated over what trouble might await them. The little bumps along the way do not so much bother her. To these little troubles she would say, "Ah, my daughter, can one experience such delight everyday? Everything is real. Nothing is untrue. The Master is all—he is Prakriti, he is Purusha. Through him you will achieve everything" (March 30, 1920). Devotion to the Master became the milk that would sustain the devotees as they crossed the waters of *samsara*. She cared for them tenderly, even though some were diligent and others were lazy. She could not abide willful wrongdoing, but human weakness she treated with compassion.

Sarada Maa saw her mission quite clearly due to the words of Ramakrishna himself, regarding her life as the continuation of his teaching. He had personally entrusted her to oversee his legacy, as she recounted:

When the Master passed away, I also wanted to leave my body. He appeared before me and said, 'No, you must remain here. There are many things to be done.' I myself realized later on that this was true; I had so many things to do. The Master used to say, 'The people of Calcutta live like worms swarming in darkness. You will guide them.' He said that he would live for three hundred years in a subtle body in the hearts of the devotees. He further said that he would have many devotees among white people (from chapter 3, sometime in 1909, Jayambrati, from a monastic disciple's journal).

The Anahata Chakra Satsanga represents the fulfillment of the Master's vision that he would have devotees in the West and of the Mother's sense that she would be the caretaker over them. Even now, she guides and protects those who reverence her. She is Durga, the reliever of difficulties, and Lakshmi, the true goal of life.

Sarada Devi spent much of her life in a small room in the *nahabat*, fasting and doing spiritual practices. She unfailingly listened to the complaints and entreaties of the devotees who came to her, and yet she still partook in the daily affairs of running the ashramas where she took up residence. One morning, as she was husking rice, a devotee asked her, “Mother, why should you work so hard?” “My child,” she replied, “I have done much more than is necessary to make my life a model” (1909, Jayambrati). Not only did she carry out all of Ramakrishna’s instructions, she also went above and beyond them to inspire others to live as she lived. Those who follow in her steps become divine as she was divine, so that the vision of Ramakrishna expands beyond Dakshineswar and India to encompass the whole world. Indeed, the initiations into Shiva-Shakti begun by the Master continue to this day, and those who are reading these lines or just being born will carry the legacy forward, even surpassing what these great gurus achieved.

The temptation can be great to make Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Maa into figures in a wax museum, to memorialize them in the negative sense of preserving a legacy. We honor Ramakrishna and Sarada Maa best not only in praying to them or in keeping their images but when we are least conscious of doing so. We honor them when we creatively and spontaneously celebrate the divine in everyday life, when we enact our own dance of devotion. These beloved gurus want to see their children fulfilled, and that happens when we bring the tradition forward into our time and circumstances. This means that each devotee will have a different way of becoming holy, of manifesting Shiva-Shakti.

**Assignments. Complete these activities on your own. You need not submit any written feedback.**

1. Did any of the life events or teachings of Ramakrishna or Sarada Maa inspire you? If so, why?
2. Which of the six passions (*arishadvarga*) listed above give you the most trouble? How could you turn these difficult passions toward realization?

**Questions for Self-Reflection. If you are interested in moving through the formal system of ranks of the Satsanga, please forward your answers to the General Secretary of the Society or to your appointed preceptor.**

1. Say at least three malas (three sets of 108 repetitions) of the Ramakrishna mantra, “Aum namo bhagavate shri ramakrishnaya namo namah,” the Sarada Maa mantra, “Aum shrim sarada devyai namo namah,” or the guru mantra, “Aum shri gurave namah.” Write a short paragraph about the devotional feeling that arises.
2. Procure a picture of one of the gurus of the lineage and meditate silently on the picture for 20-30 minutes. If you wish, you may engage in an inner conversation with the guru after the period of silence. You may use this time to ask questions and hold dialogue, but don’t force things if nothing seems to be happening. Did any interesting discoveries come from this experience? If not, write about that as well.

**Works Cited / For Further Reading**

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