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Book Reviews

Interpreting Ramakrishna

by Dr. Kusumita Pedersen, New York

Interpreting ramakrishna: kali's Child Revisited by Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana is an account of Jeffrey Kripal's 1995 book Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life of Ramakrishna and the storm of controversy it raised. Drawing on the ideas of psychoanalysis, Kali's Child seeks to show that Ramakrishna was a conflicted homosexual who had been sexually abused as a child and as an adult also had traumatic sexual encounters. It views Ramakrishna's samadhi as a kind of defense mechanism and finds sexual meanings in many of his visions, words and actions.

Kripal states that "Ramakrishna's mystical experiences were constituted by mystico-erotic energies that he neither fully accepted nor understood," and his interpretation of Ramakrishna's "secret" serves as a case study that Kripal sees as confirming his strongly held views on the continuity of mystical experience and sexuality. It should be added that any assessment of Jeffrey Kripal's thinking on this broad topic cannot be based only on Kali's Child, his first book, but must take into account his entire body of work, which is now extensive (and most of which does not concern Ramakrishna).

Interpreting Ramakrishna is the result of more than ten years of research and analysis by two senior monastics of the Ramakrishna Order. The book is written with an exemplary combination of civility, deep feeling and concern for accuracy. It is painstakingly thorough as well as probing and reflective. Interpreting Ramakrishna is an indispensable work for anyone concerned with the Kali's Child debate and how Ramakrishna is understood, and is of interest for the study of mysticism more generally. Also, it should take a significant place in the record of how India and the West have understood one another--or failed to do so.

It begins with a history of Ramakrishna scholarship from the earliest source texts to the present and continues with an initial overall critique of Kali's Child and its author's approach. This is followed by a summary of reviews of Kali's Child and the debate following its publication. Next a chapter is devoted to three central themes in this cross-cultural interpretation: the relation of mysticism and sexuality; the symbolism of the linga and yoni; and allegations that Ramakrishna disliked and feared women (here the restoration of the voices of women who knew Ramakrishna well, passed over in Kali's Child, is especially welcome). The nature of Tantra and Vedanta, and their relation, are also addressed.

Another chapter describes in detail problems of documentation in Kali's Child. Interpreting Ramakrishna deals throughout with issues of mis-translations, "spun" translations and paraphrases, cultural and religious mistakes, factual errors and the tactic of building an argument by introducing a point as speculation and later repeating it as fact. When questions of translation or construal are examined, the original Bengali passage, the authors' translation and Kripal's translation are all given. The book concludes with a chapter on the future of Ramakrishna studies, commenting on the ways any interpretation is affected by worldview, identity and motivation and expressing hopes for dialogue and the emergence of "postwesternism" (a phrase coined by Richard King).

At a book launch organized this past October by the Dharma Academy of North America (DANAM) at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, the scholars who spoke praised the meticulous scholarship, substance and balance of Interpreting Ramakrishna and also asked that the next step be taken, beyond critique. They called for ongoing constructive thought on Ramakrishna by "insiders" in vigorous exchange with "outsiders," showing why Ramakrishna is important in the twenty-first century. A final thought from this reviewer: the time has come for an entirely new critical and fully annotated translation of the Sri-Sri-Ramakrishna-Kathamata, the key primary source on Ramakrishna (the record of his sayings and events in the final years of his life by Mahendranath Gupta, known as "M"). It will be much needed in the next phase of Ramakrishna studies, to which Interpreting Ramakrishna has already made a most important contribution.

Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's Child Revisited, by Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, July 2010, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 410 pages.

www.interpretingramakrishna.com

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Youth Course Released

The bala vihar teacher's handbooks were developed at the request of Chinmaya Mission head Swami Tejomayananda by Gaurang and Darshana Nanavaty, Acharya teachers of Chinmaya Mission Houston. These are manuals intended for the teachers, not to give to the children. Within the Mission, their use is supplemented with intensive teacher training courses. However, a parent could, with effort, put the books to good use. Each is a set of 40 lessons. Presently in print are kindergarten, grades 1, 2, 3, 4 (in two volumes), 7 and 8. The course is planned through grade 12. The books convey the Chinmaya Mission's Vedanta philosophy within the Smarta tradition of Hinduism.

A teacher's handbook is a bit like an computer repair manual. For a technician, it is easy to follow; but to the inexperienced amateur, possibly an insurmountable challenge. The books are written for the teacher experienced with following lesson plans, setting up class projects, leading chants and bhajans, storytelling and all the other skills and tasks necessary for a productive hour with Hindu children. An index would have been a welcome addition to navigate the complex compilation of material.

Grade 1 is called Bala Ramayana and takes the students through the entire story of Lord Rama. There is throughout the course a strong emphasis on Sanskrit. Each of the 40 lessons opens with the Sanskrit prayer, saha navavatu...., and then ten minutes of memorization of another sloka. The handbook next summarizes one part of the Ramayana, for example, the capture of Sita by Ravana. The teacher doesn't read this directly to the class, but is expected to render the story in his or her own dramatic fashion. There is a coloring page to fill in for each class, and a game that is related to the story. The games are a unique feature of the course. They are, according to the Nanavaty's, the result of years of development, and quite clever in conveying a religious principle or spiritual concept.

Grade 8 is called Yato Dharmah Tato Jayah, "Where there is dharma, there is victory," a famous statement of Bhishma in the Mahabharata. Several chapters cover

the yamas and niyamas, the traditional Hindu restraints and observances such as purity, truthfulness, nonstealing, forgiveness, etc.

Many chapters are based on a famous section of the epic, the Yaksha Prasna in which a yaksha, a celestial being, poses a series of difficult questions to Yudhisthira, eldest of the Pandavas. In Lesson 21, for example, the yaksha asks, "O king, you please decide and tell me how does one become a brahmin--by heritage, conduct, study or by listening to the scriptures?" Yudhisthira responds, "Not by heritage, not by study nor by listening to the scriptures one becomes a brahmin. Only through conduct one becomes a brahmin, I have no doubt about it." Other chapters discuss excerpts from the Bhagavad Gita, referencing Swami Chinmayananda's commentary.

In addition to summarizing the story of the Mahabharata in Grade 8, many other traditional Hindu tales are used to illustrate a point. There are also charming quotations from Swami Chinmayanada, for example: "People say, 'God has forsaken me!' Is there an ornament forsaken by gold? Can a mud pot be forsaken by mud? In every experience of yours He is ever with you. How far is water from the waves? How far is the waker from the dreamer? So far is God from you!"

At \$75 each, the books are expensive, but this is a typical price for a teacher's guide. The books are a priceless resource, the result of decades of work and experience by the Nanavatys. The couple were early graduates of the Chinmaya Mission's two-and-a-half-year Vedanta Course, both of them setting aside their careers to participate. Since then, they have been based in Houston where they are key movers behind the Chinmaya Mission's successful Bala Vihar program at centers across the United States. Some exercise books for the students are available now, with a complete set being prepared.

Bala Vihar Teachers' Handbook, ISBN 978-1-880687-41-3 (Kindergarten),
Chinmaya Publications, 560 Bridgetown Pike, Langhorne, PA, 19503 USA, 9
volumes, \$75.00 each, www.chinmayapublication.com

Deftly Introducing Our Hindu Religion

This newest publication from the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, led by Sri Pramukh

Swami Maharaj, is a marvelous summary of the entire spectrum of the Hindu tradition in all of its grand diversity. *Hinduism, An Introduction*, by Sadhu Vivekjivandas, in two full-color volumes is a worthy addition to any Hindu's library.

So often in books on general Hinduism one philosophy is given as if it and it alone is what all Hindus believe. One Deity is mentioned as if all Hindus only worship Him or Her. *Hinduism, an Introduction* takes a different view: "Hinduism is a grand mosaic of many sampradayas [traditional teaching lineages], philosophies, rituals, festivals, mandirs [temples], holy places, sadhus and shastras, and is often referred to by many scholars as a family of 'religions.' Within these rich diversities, one can perceive common threads that bind Hinduism into a fascinatingly profound religion subscribed to by nearly one-sixth of humankind."

Notably, the set shows the reader many facets of modern Hindu temple worship--again a topic commonly ignored in introductions to Hinduism. The scriptures upon which the ceremonies and architecture are based, the Agamas, are well detailed. The centrality of rituals in Hindu life is succinctly stated: "Rituals form an integral part of worship and have been practised from generation to generation in countless homes and mandirs. They are deeply embedded in the Hindu culture. Hindus believe that the Deity is present in the sacred murti [temple image]."

Though presenting the multiplicity of Deities in Hinduism, the book stresses that Hindus all worship a one Supreme Being. Chapter Two begins: "The traditional defining principles of most Hindus are the belief and faith in one Supreme Divine Reality or Paramatma... (who) manifests in various forms. The belief in one Supreme God is called Ekeshwaravada." This is a helpful counter to what is unfortunately still encountered in many introductions to Hinduism which is that Hindus believe in a trinity of Gods: Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

Hinduism, an Introduction, by Sadhu Vivekjivandas; vol 1, ISBN 978-81-7526-433-5, 368 pages; vol 2, ISBN 78-81-7526-434-2, 314 pages; Swaminarayan Aksharpath, Amdavad 4, India; www.swaminarayan.org/publications (US\$20.00/set)