

## THE MEANING OF RAMA

M. Ram Murty<sup>1</sup>

Long before Plato composed *The Republic*, describing the ideal state, an ideal king, the poet-sage Valmiki wrote the epic *Ramayana* doing just that. Written more than 3000 years ago, the *Ramayana* is the story of Rama, as an ideal human being, an ideal monarch, the ideal philosopher-king. Even today, people in India refer to *Ram rajya*, as a fair, and just rule of a country.

*The Ramayana* contains more than 20,000 verses. It is larger than Homer's *Iliad* which contains 8,000 verses or Virgil's *Aenid* which contains 4500 verses. In length, it is exceeded by *The Mahabharata*, composed by the sage Vyasa, which has more than 100, 000 verses and believed to be the longest poem ever written by a single human being.

The mind is like a sponge. It absorbs any idea or thought put in front of it. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, "the mind is like a laundered cloth. It takes on the colour of the dye you dip it in." We are all according to our thoughts.

This important psychological principle was foremost in the minds of the ancient sages. That is why, in their infinite wisdom, they composed epic poetic works exemplifying the lives of great spiritual personalities.

But why poetry? Because poetry conveys feeling. Poetry inspires. Poetry is easily remembered. Poetry is also music. It stirs and activates the deeper chambers of the mind. Poetry energises the being.

In his essay, 'The Absolute and Manifestation', Swami Vivekananda writes, "In the old Upanishads, we find sublime poetry; their authors were poets. Plato says inspiration comes to people through poetry and it seems as if these ancient sages, seers of Truth, were raised above humanity to show the highest truths through poetry. .... Music came out of their hearts." (Vol. 2, p. 140)

Legend has it that the great sage Narada was visiting the forest hermitage of Valmiki. Valmiki welcomed him and asked, "Tell me, O Narada. Who among the heroes of the world is the highest in both virtue and wisdom?"

And Narada replied, "Rama is the hero you are inquiring about. Descended from the line of *Ikshvāku*, he is self-controlled; greatly heroic, possessed of brilliance, firmness, and restraint, wise and just, skilled in speech, knowing the right, true of promise and devoted to the welfare of his subjects. He is *the* philosopher king. He is Rama."

And then, Narada recited the story of Rama's life. So impressed was Valmiki by this story that even after Narada left his ashrama, the greatness of Rama was revolving in his mind. As he was pondering thus, and proceeded to the river for his morning bath, he saw two birds sporting and singing in their joy of life and suddenly the male bird fell down shot by a hunter's arrow.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the text of talk given on April 9, 2000 at the Vedanta Society of Boston.

Seeing this, Valmiki hurled a curse to the hunter. Recovering himself from this burst of emotion, he was surprised by the rhythm and cadence of his words. His sorrow was transformed into verse; from *soka* sprang *sloka*. Then and there, through the power of meditation, Valmiki composed the Ramayana, the story of Rama. And he wrote, this story will last as long as the mountains stand and the rivers flow. Such was his conviction of its timeless quality. Such is the greatness of this oldest literary work known to humanity, that Valmiki is said to be the inventor of verse.

We all need examples. “It is by appreciation of spirituality that spirituality is gained,” says Swami Vivekananda. When the life of a great person shines luminously in our consciousness, we grow into that image. Devotion is genetic to all of humanity. Love is inherent in all of us. We normally put that love in the wrong places and thus come to grief. However, if that love is placed at the altar of a noble ideal represented by a spiritual personality, then we grow into that image. We evolve into that image. The *bhakta* reflects *bhagavan*. As Sri Ramakrishna would say, “the devotee is God’s drawing room.”

Having a spiritual ideal makes our life meaningful. True, we may not all be able to live up to the high standard, but at least we can try. And if we fall or stumble, we can get up and continue to try again. “Perseverance will finally conquer,” says Swami Vivekananda. “We must have the highest ideal. Unfortunately in this life, the vast majority of persons are groping through this dark life without an ideal at all. If a man with an ideal makes a thousand mistakes, I am sure that the man without an ideal makes 50,000. Therefore, it is better to have an ideal. And this ideal we must hear about as much as we can, till it enters into our hearts, into our brains, into our very veins, until it tingles in every drop of blood and permeates every pore in our body. We must meditate upon it. ‘Out of the fullness of the heart, the mouth speaketh,’ and out of the fulness of the heart, the hand worketh.” (Vol. 2, p. 152 in *God in Everything*.)

This idea is echoed in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In Chapter 2, verse 48, Sri Krishna defines ‘yoga’ in the following way:

*Yogasthah kuru karmani*  
*Sangam tyakva dhanamjaya*  
*Sidhya sidhyoh samo bhutvã*  
*Samatva yoga ucyate.*

Fixed in yoga, do thy work, abandoning attachment, with an even mind in success and failure; for evenness of mind is called yoga.

That is, fix your mind upon a spiritual ideal and work, with a detached attitude. Don’t despair when things go wrong; don’t get excited when things go right; try and maintain equanimity in all that you do because equanimity of mind is called yoga.

Rama represents equanimity in the midst of action. We cannot control the events of life, but we can choose not to lose our peace of mind. In that equanimity, we give proper value to everything. Without equanimity, we become too judgemental, too cynical in our evaluations.

There is one more verse of the Gita that we should keep in mind as we survey the life of Rama. This is:

*Yad-yad acarati sresthas  
Tad-tad deve taro janah  
Sa yat pramānam kuruté  
Lokas tad anuvartaté.*

Whatsoever a great man does, the same is done by others as well. Whatever standard he sets, the world follows.

We may think that this verse does not apply to us. Well, we are not ‘great people’, we think. The verse is emphasizing that in an interdependent society like ours, we are exemplars, whether we know it or not. The children, for example, look to the parents for guidance and example. The students look to the teachers. The people look to their leaders for guidance. In modern times, this may be a mistake!

The parents may think that the children are not watching. But they are! Maria Montessori, in her book, ‘The Absorbent Mind,’ writes, “Language is an instrument of collective thought. ... And the sounds of it in themselves are senseless. ... The only thing that gives sense to these sounds is the fact that people have agreed to give them a particular meaning ... Other groups may agree on different sets of sounds to convey the same ideas.” Then, how does the faculty of language which is a complex faculty, get acquired by the child? she asks. “The child absorbs the language. The child is around people who speak the language, and these are naturally the parents. ... This is not the result of conscious work. It is something done at an unconscious level in the mind. ... By  $2\frac{1}{2}$ , a child has only 200-300 words in his/her vocabulary. By 5, they know thousands. And all this happens without a formal teacher. It is spontaneous acquisition learned by example. And we, after he/she has done all this, send them to school and offer as a great treat, to teach the alphabet!”\*

Valmiki’s Ramayana begins with a description of the ideal state, ruled by King Dasaratha in the capital city of Ayodhya, which is in modern-day Uttar Pradesh, in northern India. The king never had the idea that he was a ruler of his people. Rather, he viewed himself as a custodian of the land, a protector of the people.

Dasaratha had three wives, but none of them gave him a successor. So, according to the custom of the time, Dasaratha and his wives went on a pilgrimage barefoot and performed austerities so that they may have offspring. Thus, in course of time, four sons were born to them. The foremost was Rama, then Laxmana, then Shatrughna, and then Bharata. When reading the Ramayana, one distinctly gets the theme of brotherly love and mutual respect as its main message.

The great sage Vasishta came forth to instruct the four sons. The instruction is again another classic by Valmiki and it is called the Yoga Vasishta. In fact, the Yoga Vasishta is longer than the Ramayana and contains 32,000 verses. It is quite similar to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita but in fact, a more detailed treatise in psychology. It is an elaborate analysis of the workings of the mind. Its main message is that the entire world is really in one’s own mind.

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\* The Absorbent Mind, p. 119.

Vasishta begins his teaching by telling Rama (and the other brothers): “In whatever company he finds himself while performing the duties of life, the wise man is always watchful of the movements of his own mind. It should not be engaged in the worries of the world, nor employed in distracting thoughts. It must not be allowed to roam over the extensive field of outer enjoyments, nor dwell on sense objects or sensual actions. It must rest in buddhi (or intuitive reason) alone. The wise man is even-minded, under all circumstances.” Why is Rama worshipped as God today? It is because, he realised this teaching of Vasishta.

The essence of Yoga Vasishta is that keeping the mind under control is the secret of life. “It is the mind that creates the world and stretches it out in its own imagination. The best way to guard the mind from delusion is first, to absorb the teachings of this philosophy, second, to practice detachment, and third, seek the company of the good, the holy, of others who are leading a moral and spiritual life. These three lead the mind to purity.”

“In the gateway to liberation, there are four doorkeepers. They are tranquility, enquiry (*vichara*), contentment, and association with virtuous people. These should be employed with perseverance. Even if one of them comes under control, all the four become obedient. By attaching to any one of these, you are ushered into the gate of liberation. By enquiry or reflection, the intellect becomes sharp and perceives the supreme state. Reflection is the great medicine for the prolonged disease of worldly existence.”

“The man of enlightened mind who is active in the world and the illumined sage who sits in his hermitage are both alike in their spiritual calm and have realised the highest state. ... The man of pacified mind views the bright and beautiful buildings of cities in the same dispassionate light as the trees of a forest. ... He is not disturbed wherever he lives whether in the midst of luxury, at home or in a hermitage in a forest.”

In this great treatise, we find the secret of Rama’s self-discipline, his tapasya. You can live anywhere as long as the mind is under control. And the technique to control the mind is the practice of detachment, or *pratyahara*, as stated in Raja yoga. This is the checking of the outgoing powers of the mind and freeing them from the thralldom of the senses.

This is the essence of education that Rama (in fact, all the four brothers) received from the sage Vasishta during their childhood. How to tame the mind, how to channel the emotions, how to redirect the outgoing energies, to humanise them, this is the essence of education. But what do we do? We cram the brains of children with useless facts; we confuse information with knowledge. Real knowledge is self-knowledge, knowing your own being and how to consecrate our energies at the altar of a noble ideal.

Swami Vivekananda writes, “If I had to do my education over again and had any voice in the matter, I would not study facts at all. I would develop the power of concentration and detachment and then with a perfect instrument I could collect facts at will.” (Vol. 6, p. 38 of Complete Works)

As Swami Sarvagatananda has taught us, the mind has four faculties (or four muscles) as it were: thinking, feeling, willing, and restraining. The four yogas are designed to train this four-fold aspect of the mind.

So if Rama got the teachings of raja yoga and jnana yoga from the sage Vasishta, he learned karma yoga and bhakti yoga from the sage Viswamitra.

The story is that Viswamitra was once a king, who admired the genius of Vasishta and very much wanted to be like him. But he could not control his passions. He got angry very easily. However, he knew his shortcomings through introspection. This awareness helped to bring about some control. But he knew he had to go deeper. Through superhuman tapasya, he finally achieved the state of illumination. Viswamitra is probably the first king in history who becomes a philosopher sage. Himself once a king, he had balanced his strength with mental equanimity in the midst of action.

Thus Viswamitra came to Dasaratha and said to him that he needs the help of Rama and Laxmana for the completion of an urgent task. The sage Vasishta, seeing that this is an opportunity for Rama and Laxmana to learn the yoga of action, advises that they should go. Dasaratha, Rama's father, reluctantly agrees.

On their way through the forest, Viswamitra would tell Rama and Laxmana the spiritual significance of each place; how some sage in the past performed tapasya (or austerity) there. He also told them how they must know the kingdom they are protecting (not ruling mind you).

In this part of the Ramayana, we find the story of Rama's bow, and how Rama, Laxmana and Viswamitra arrive at the kingdom of Janaka, and the king announces that whoever can string the six-foot bow of Siva will be married to his daughter, Princess Sita.

Now the bow of Siva is a very heavy bow that no one can lift, let alone string. Tradition had it that one must be extremely pure in character to even lift it. It is said that Sita could lift it. Many people tried but couldn't do it. And so we find Rama and Laxmana at the palace of Janaka.

Valmiki's poetic genius gives a beautiful description of the scene. "Rama approached the bow and lifted it effortlessly as if it were a garland of flowers and resting one end of it against his toe, he bent and strung it and drew the string back with such irresistible force that the mighty bow snapped with a crash like a clap of thunder." Thus he won the hand of Sita, who was pure and immaculate in character.

In the ancient mythologies, we find a recurrent motif of archery. The spiritually strong were also considered skillful in archery. The psychological meaning of this is clear. When negative ideas invade the mind, we must take aim and fire the arrows of spiritual thought to destroy them.

In the Mundaka Upanishad we find:

*Dhanur grhitvopanisadam mahāstram*

*Saram upāsānisitam sandhayīta*

*Āyama tad bhāvagatena cetasa*

*Laksyam tadevaksaram somya viddhi.*

Taking hold of the bow, that is the great weapon familiar in the Upanishads, one should fix on it an arrow, sharpened with meditation. Drawing the string with a mind absorbed in Its thought, hit the target that is the Immutable.

And then we find:  
*Pranavo dhanuh saro hyatma*  
*Brahma tallaksyam ucyate*  
*Apra mattena veddhavyam*  
*Sara vatanmayo bhavet.*

Om is the bow; the soul is the arrow and Brahman is called the target; it is to be reached by an unerring man. One should become one with It just like the arrow that merges into the target.

The yogi should be a master archer. He should carry the arrows of spiritual thought in his quiver and when negative thoughts come, he should take aim with a concentrated mind and strike them down by the arrow of spirituality. This is the psychological significance of the theme of archery that pervades the ancient mythologies.

“Ram nām is Ram bhān” Mahatma Gandhi would say. That is, the name of Rama is the arrow of Rama. Gandhi was very much impressed by the ideal of Rama. He lamented at the fact that he never had a formal guru so he took Rama as his guru and the name of Rama as his mantra.

Getting back to the Ramayana, we find Rama, Laxmana and Sita returned to Ayodhya. At this point, Viswamitra leaves the scene. His role as teacher is over. The king Dasaratha is pleased at the growth and maturity of his sons, and he wanted to make Rama, the new *yuvaraja* or the future king.

Now it so happened that long ago in battle, when Dasaratha was wounded, his third wife, Kaikeyi had driven his chariot skilfully out of the battlefield, removed the arrows from his body and revived him back to consciousness. (As a parenthetic remark, this shows that in those ancient days, women and men were both on the battlefield, with the women perhaps as charioteers or medics to care for the wounded.) In gratitude, Dasaratha said he would grant her two wishes to which she said that she would ask for them later. Kaikeyi had forgotten all about it but her malevolent maid reminded her of it. At first Kaikeyi did not respond but the seeds of jealousy were successfully planted by the maid that they slowly began to sprout.

So when Dasaratha came to her, she demanded that first, her own son Bharata should be made yuvaraja, and second, that Rama should be sent into exile into the forest for 14 years.

Dasaratha could not believe his ears. Did he marry a human being or a serpent, he thought. Then, she reminded him of his promise. There was a mental tussle in Dasaratha, and he fainted.

When he regained consciousness, he thought to himself, “Rama is not bound by my promises. I will tell him of my promise. He doesn’t have to follow it. How I wish he were disobedient! How I wish that he overthrows me and takes over the kingdom! ... No, I know Rama! He is ever faithful to me. He will say ‘Yes’ to my request. Then, what will I do? Then, I will say, ‘Now, son, think it over again! You are not bound by my promises!’” Thus musing, he fainted again, when Rama came to him.

Then, Kaikeyi herself told Rama of the two promises that his father was bound by. When she told him that he is banished for 14 years, there was not the slightest tinge of sorrow nor cringe of uncertainty on Rama's face. Smiling, he said to her: "Is that all mother? Surely, the king's promise must be fulfilled. I shall wear bark and go this very day to the forest. Would I not be happy to give anything to Bharata? Even if no one asked me, I would cheerfully give him my all."

It is important to note that Rama was spiritually prepared for this event. First, at the feet of sage Vasishta, he got the highest philosophy and was taught the yoga of knowledge. Then, at the feet of sage Viswamitra, he learned the yoga of action.

Now Laxmana was standing at the door and had heard everything. He said, he would go with Rama to the forest. When Sita learned of the banishment of Rama, she too said her *dharma* was to be by Rama's side. Then, with the blessings of Rama's mother Kausalya, the three of them went barefoot into the Dandaka forest.

Valmiki's description of this is beautiful and poetic: "The three took leave of the aged king. In the streets and on the balconies were crowds of people looking on ... They saw Rama, Sita and Laxmana walking barefoot like the poorest in the land. And there, Sita walks, the people thought. Can she bear the heat and the rain of the forest?"

Entering the great Dandaka forest, Rama, Sita, and Laxmana saw a cluster of hermitages belonging to sages who had dedicated their life to the study of divine knowledge and meditation. And there they lived for almost 10 years serving those sages, protecting them from wild beasts and demons.

The sage Agastya told them of the river Godavari (in modern day Andhra Pradesh) and how conducive and delightful it is to sit on its banks and meditate there. So they went there and built their own hermitage. Valmiki writes, "Rama, with his senses under control, lived happily in that leafy arbour, along with Laxmana and Sita." Until one day, a demoness, Supranka by name, came to taunt Rama, attracted by his handsome features. She said to him, "Be my husband. Sita is not fit for you. I alone am suited for you. Look on me as your wife." When she was speaking thus, Rama said to Laxmana, "Please get rid of this woman(?)." And Laxmana thought it is not right for a warrior to kill a woman so he just maimed her slightly so that she would retreat.

Retreat she did. The demoness was the sister of Ravana, the king of Lanka. So she went to Ravana and told him what Rama and Sita had done to her. She also told him of the beauty of Sita and so Ravana thought that he should add her to his harem. He turned to his sage Marici for advice and Marici said, "Rama is indeed the embodiment of righteousness. There is no greater sin than taking another man's wife. You already have thousands of women as your wives. Be content with that. If you battle with Rama, I see only destruction for you."

Then Ravana said, "Marici, you are my servant. I will kill you if you do not do as I say. Using your yogic power, transform yourself into a golden deer, and Sita will be lured by your beauty and at that point, I shall seize her."

Here we see a divergence of the kind of rule that was in place in Ayodhya. Here we see abuse of power. The king sees his advisors as his servants, not helpers. They should tow his policy and offer arguments to support his perverse cravings.

Marici was Ravana's slave. So he transformed himself into a golden deer as Ravana instructed and went to the forest. There Sita saw the golden deer and told Rama to procure it. When Rama went to chase the deer, he told Laxmana to protect Sita. Rama realized that it was Marici in disguise so he shot an arrow at the golden deer. As Marici lay there dying, he imitated Rama's voice and cried out, "Laxmana, help me." When Sita heard this, she felt Rama was in great danger and so commanded Laxmana to go to his aid immediately.

The symbolism is perfect. We often run after many 'golden deers' in life only to come to grief. In our mad pursuit, we also cross all boundaries.

So after Laxmana went to help Rama, Ravana appeared in the guise of a mendicant asking for alms. Since it is her duty to feed monks, Sita went into the hut and brought him the alms. As she was giving it, Ravana grabbed her and flew away. Sita started crying, but no one could hear her, except Jatayu, the vulture. And Jatayu came forth, to battle Ravana, but Ravana took out his sabre and slashed off the wings of Jatayu. The vulture dropped to the ground.

When Rama and Laxmana returned to the hermitage, all they found was the dying body of Jatayu who told them how Ravana, in the guise of a mendicant had come and kidnapped Sita.

So following the path of Ravana indicated by Jatayu's dying message, Rama and Laxmana began wandering southward, in the direction of Lanka. Seeing them, Hanuman, the leader of the monkeys, came forth to help them. Hanuman became the obedient servant of Rama. In fact, under Hanuman's direction, all of the monkeys came forth to help Rama. Most of the monkeys had seen Ravana taking Sita to the island of Lanka across the sea.

So Hanuman said that he will go first and see if Sita is still alive and take her a message from Rama. Rama gave him his signet ring, and so Hanuman chanting the name of Rama crossed the ocean in one leap. [Well, this is what is called poetic licence. I am sure Hanuman had a running start!] In Lanka, Hanuman saw a city full of mansions, and he could not believe its opulence and wealth. He found Ravana's palace and there he saw hundreds of beautiful women moving about. But there was no Sita there. Just as he was about to give up his search, he saw seated under an asoka tree, Sita, clad in a tattered yellow cloth, devoid of ornaments, her face full of tears and her mind fixed on Rama.

Then Hanuman approached Sita and gave her Rama's signet ring and told her that he was a messenger from Rama. He then told her that Rama could come with an army and conquer Ravana and recover her. However, if she wished, he would take her on his shoulders and with one leap, clear the ocean and reunite her with Rama. But Sita could not bear the idea for she was chastity itself and could not bear the idea of touching another man except her husband. She however gave Hanuman, a jewel from her hair to carry to Rama and with that Hanuman returned.



With the return of Hanuman, the monkeys were mobilized to build a bridge connecting the mainland of India to Lanka. Even the woodland creatures came to help, like little squirrels. One of the squirrels was rolling himself in the sand and running backwards and forwards on to the bridge shaking himself. Thus, in his small way, he was working for the bridge of Rama, by putting in the sand. The monkeys laughed, for they were bringing boulders and uprooting trees for the bridge - so they laughed at the little squirrel. But Rama saw it and said, "Blessed is the little squirrel; he is doing his work to the best of his ability and he is therefore quite as great as the greatest of you." I think we can all identify with the squirrel.

When the bridge was finished, Ravana was killed and Sita was rescued. By that time, the period of Rama's exile was over and Rama, Sita and Laxmana went back to Ayodhya where Rama was made king.

The meaning of Rama has to do with the psychological symbolism in the Ramayana. Rama represents the Pure Consciousness, the Divine Self. Sita represents the Divine Energy, the energies of our being. Ravana is often described as the ten-headed demon. The ten heads are five organs of perception and the five organs of action. The fact that Ravana abducted Sita means these ten organs have seized our energies. Lured by gold, as Sita was lured by the golden deer, the divine energy is taken away by our outgoing senses.

The monkeys are really our thoughts. They flit about randomly. However, the way to stop our outgoing energies from being dissipated is by mobilising our spiritual thoughts. Hanuman is the foremost spiritual thought. He represents the power of the divine name, the thought of God, the thought united and faithful to Rama, the Pure Self. The fact that Hanuman mobilises the monkeys to build the bridge means that when we gather all of our thoughts and focus them on a spiritual ideal, the energies of our being that are drained away by the outgoing senses become united with the Pure Self.

All the animals come to help. That is, all our animal tendencies can be directed towards a spiritual goal. Then, these animal energies become our friends.

There is also an important message relevant to the modern context. Lanka was a highly advanced technological state. But it had used it to intensify and heighten sensate life, just as we are doing now. If we cannot bring the spiritual ideal into our life, society is bound to collapse under the weight of gross materialism.

Rama represents life according to moral and spiritual principles. He never swerved from them. He was the ideal husband since he was always faithful to Sita. And Sita herself embodies purity. Laxmana and Hanuman embody devotion and its power to overcome obstacles.

The name 'Rama' means that which delights. It also indicates Pure Awareness. In the Indian tradition, 'Rama nama' or the repetition of Ram's name awakens spiritual consciousness. At present, if we analyse ourselves, we find our mind is always repeating useless things. It is always some commercial jingle, or some song you heard or something or other. The idea is to put an end to this wastage of mental energy and direct it towards the recollection of Pure Awareness.

Rama is the luminous example of the spiritual ideal. Many examples shine like stars on the spiritual firmament. Our Swami has told us the greatness of each: Rama nama, Krishna tattva, Buddha dharma, Jesus prema, Mohammed Brhad tattva and Ramakrishna samanvaya satsat kara (harmony of all spiritual ideals).

May we imbibe the high ideal represented by the life of Rama, his equanimity and serenity, his enthusiasm for proper action, his devotion to duty and responsibility, his love for all beings and grow spiritually. That is my prayer.