

[STUNNING AUTHORSHIP REILLUMINES RAMAKRISHNA](#)

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"After 27 years of meditating on Sri Ramakrishna, I finally..." the 50-year-old philosopher, author, broadcaster and meditator stops, adjusts his Kashmir shawl and leans forward. "I recently met Sant Keshavadas and gave him a copy of Great Swan. He spontaneously said 'You should be called Ramakrishna Das for writing a book like this' I accepted it. Now when I take Great Swan to India in December I will have a Sanskrit name!"

Hixon beams and starts talking with the quick pace of a man on mission - his Yale philosophy degree and Columbia PhD erudition showing, but the bookishness softened by years of personal sadhana. As the Hindu world prepares to celebrate the centennial of Swami Vivekananda's dramatic 1893 sowing of the Advaitic vision in America, Lex Hixon points to the young sannyasin's guru, Bengali mystic Ramakrishna.

Hixon's gift to this celebration is a fresh portrait of that human glacier that fed the powerful stream of Himalayan teachings Vivekananda carried Westward. To this purpose, he has dedicated this fiftieth year of his life as an offering to Sri Ramakrishna, touring and reading from Great Swan, personally introducing the Hindu sage to others. Paramahansa is popularly translated "Great Swan," referring to the swan of Hindu folklore who, like a great soul, can separate out the milk (the sacred) from a mixture of milk and water (worldly life). But actually, hansa is the Anser Indicus, a high-flying goose, an ancient symbol of the sun. In scripture, it was used as a metaphor for the soul soaring to the Self.

Great Swan is a first-person, you-are-there dramatized literary doorway into 19th century India, directly into the potent recesses of the Dakshineswar Temple

Garden, and into the vital presence of a God-realized being. It is not, however, a literal rendering of Ramakrishna's riveting, terse, eloquent, but inextricably colloquial Bengali, nor a simple rehashing of other translations in which Ramakrishna speaks in Victorianized English. Great Swan is a daring and exciting departure from rule-book biographies - transposing Ramakrishna's cryptic Bengali into 20th century English idiom and tone. Lingual charms are forgivably lost but important meanings are saved. For instance, Ramakrishna repeatedly used the rich two-word Bengali phrase *kamini kanchan*. "To indicate the habitual drives of sexuality and possessiveness, his shorthand description for the entire conventional world," Hixon notes. But in the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Nikhilananda translated the subtle expression literally "women and gold," suggesting an indictment of womanhood hardly Ramakrishna's. Even Nikhilananda felt compelled to write a long footnote explaining the saint's metaphorical rather than literal meaning, "assuring the reading public that the Paramahansa worshipped women rather than rejecting or denigrating them." Hixon ably hurdles these linguistic pitfalls.

"The book is based," the author continues, "on eyewitness accounts of Ramakrishna both from *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and from the more recent *Ramakrishna, As We Saw Him*, containing reminiscences that before had existed only in Bengali or obscure, out of print English journals. Both were used to enrich the details."

As for inspiration, "it comes from 27 years of meditation on Ramakrishna. I feel that Ramakrishna's subtle body merges with the subtle body of anyone who receives his mantra in direct initiatory succession, which I did in 1965 from Swami Nikhilananda. On the other hand, I feel that my main source of guidance was my years of study with Swami Nikhilananda, all the scoldings he gave me and all the corrections he very kindly gave in order to get me on the right track."

Despite the reluctance of the venerable Ramakrishna Mission to identify itself with Hinduism per se, Great Swan delights in Ramakrishna's Hinduness. "The reader will begin to encounter and meet this Divine being in all his Hindu particularity, his dancing, his singing songs of Ramprasad about the Goddess Kali, all of those rich Hindu qualities become vibrant, and no universality is lost," says Hixon. "We don't have to worry about Ramakrishna's primary devotion to Goddess Kali; we don't have to keep that hidden in a closet someplace. We can bring it out - particularly now because the women's movement has become so strong and the sense of the Goddess is penetrating everywhere."

Hixon adds with a mix of pleasure and relief, "I've gotten a letter from the General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission saying that 'Great Swan is a fruit from the hundred year old tree planted by Swami Vivekananda in Chicago, and that Great Swan is a gift from America to India.'

I cautiously ask consummate eclectic Hixon what he thinks about the Ramakrishna Missions's declaration as non-Hindu. He responds, "It is peculiar that people deny the roots of their own tradition...RK Mission calls it Vedanta, which is just Hinduism if you want to be really honest about it."

"I think the Hindu community will be overjoyed to see the quintessence of their culture and their spirituality - embodied in Ramakrishna - being reintroduced with depth and sensitivity," Hixon muses. "Society has been changing and transforming. For 50 years the figure of Ramakrishna has been percolating through American culture, affecting many people in a subtle way, so the atmosphere is just right for Ramakrishna to come dancing in, whirling, calling out Mother Kali's name."

Disciple

Inside a stuffy hall, a crowd of 7,000 list under the deluge of heady speeches by a parade of international delegates. Chicago, 1893, World Parliament of Religions. Suddenly a young Indian monk mounts the podium:

"Brothers and sisters of America..." The greeting unnerves the audience. They burst into two minutes of applause. When the excitement subsides, the cool, brilliant mind of one of Hinduism's greatest spiritual figures delivers an historic vision of Hindu spirituality so potent and persuasive it has virtually become the sruti note of Hinduism in the West.

Americans at once fell in love with 30-year-old Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's foremost disciple. Those weary of a "saved and doomed" mentality flocked to the radiant Asian soul. Christian preachers eager to trounce the "invader" in argument eventually shied away from his razor-sharp intellect and disquieting Hindu pride. Vivekananda stormed across America with meteoric intensity, traveling tirelessly,

delivering scores of lectures, destroying misconceptions, and instilling a new respect for India, "the land of spirit."

Devotee

"RAMAKRISHNA DAS"

Lex Hixon first stumbled upon The Gospel of Ramakrishna in 1963, after graduating from Yale with a degree in philosophy. Entranced, he tracked down the book's translator. Swami Nikhilananda, "a direct disciple of Sarada Devi, the wife of Ramakrishna," Hixon shares. Lex and his wife became disciples, serving, traveling, and living with the Swami for the last 7 years of his life.

At his guru's urging, Hixon earned a PhD, from Columbia University for his dissertation on the Gaudapada Karika, the very same "radical philosophical text that Swami Nikhilananda had translated from Sanskrit into English as a young monk-scholar in India during the 1920's." Hixon also studied classical Indian music, founded Free Spirit magazine, and for 13 years hosted a celebrated weekly radio program interviewing famous spiritual personalities of all traditions. It was during this magical time that Hixon matured into working form his own highly eclectic path, an approach to the Divine he feels is thoroughly "grounded in Ramakrishna."

"There are four traditions with which I have an initiatory connection - Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the Khalwati-Jerrahi (Dervish) Order of Islamic Sufism, the Vajrayana Tantric Buddhist tradition of Tibet, and Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada's transmission of what I call Hindu Tantra."

Pursuing simultaneously sadhanas from several religions can be a treacherous ascent to the Divine, but Hixon manages this approach with uncanny dexterity and resolve. "Ramakrishna himself didn't advocate anything. He saw the karmic tendencies and the predilections of a person and he encouraged them along their spiritual way. I encourage people with a laser beam concentration to remain concentrated like that in their tradition. Others I encourage to go forward and not to feel like they have to sacrifice one tradition in the name of another." Of his own

four children, one is an Eastern Orthodox Christian, one a Vedantisi, and two are Tibetan Buddhists.

And does Lex Hixon consider himself a Hindu? "I haven't received the samakaras and taken the sacred thread, so I don't think I could culturally be called a Hindu in that sense, but Ramakrishna embodies the fullness and the mainstream of Hindu culture and spirituality, and I've absorbed that entirely, so in that sense. I think I am."

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